

Professor Sha Na Na

For Founder of the '60s Group, After Woodstock Came Forensic Linguistics



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Monday, May 8, 2006; C03 Robert Leonard, professor at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., lectures to students in April; inset, as a member of Sha Na Na in 1969. (By Ed Betz -- Associated Press)

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y. -- As he walks to the stage of a Hofstra University lecture hall, Robert Leonard looks every bit the college professor: blue blazer and shirt, charcoal slacks, yellow tie, glasses.

He's a long way from the summer of 1969, when the uniform of the day was a gold lamé jumpsuit. Leonard, 57, was a founding member and bassist for Sha Na Na, a zany doo-wop group that played one of its first gigs at Woodstock.

Leonard's specialty today is forensic linguistics -- employing the science of language to help identify the writers of ransom notes, threatening letters and other correspondence. Leonard directs Hofstra's forensic linguistics program and consults for law firms, advertising agencies, TV networks, police and government agencies.

"To understand law, one must understand language," Leonard told a gathering of law enforcement officials at a Hofstra seminar on his techniques.

People who try to disguise their identity in ransom notes or threatening letters are usually done in by their own words, Leonard says. The way people speak or write often reflects their age, gender or upbringing.

"Even when people try to disguise their speech, there are still characteristics of their own speech," Leonard says.

Sha Na Na, which later went on to have a TV variety series in the '70s and appeared in the film "Grease," was formed by Leonard and classmates who performed with the glee club at Columbia University.

"He, as much as anyone, personified these Ivy League guys doing this theatrical thing," says "Screamin' " Scott Simon, who still tours with Sha Na Na. "Robby performed songs like 'Teen Angel' and 'Tell Laura I Love Her,' and he really toed the line between satire and playing it straight."

Leonard says the invitation to play at Woodstock was engineered in part by one of the festival's biggest stars. The group was performing in early 1969 at Steve Paul's The Scene, a New York City club where bands such as the Doors and Pink Floyd played. Jimi Hendrix was a regular visitor.

"The whole place was like a small living room, and I look up and there's Jimi Hendrix 10 feet away from me, standing on a chair waving his arms, going, 'Great, great,' " Leonard recounts. "He got us booked to Woodstock out of that."

The band, which played just before Hendrix closed the show in the early hours of an August Monday, also appears in the Oscar-winning documentary about the festival.

Like many of his generation who attended the legendary festival, Leonard's recollections of the weekend are mixed.

"It was muddy, it was messy, it was awful," he says, quickly adding, "But it was really wonderful because what they were so proud of at the time, and it's very true, is they had all those people there and there was no violence."

He spent two years with the band before being offered a fellowship at Columbia. It was a difficult decision.

"I wanted to do both, but I was afraid if I stayed in the group I couldn't do Columbia," Leonard recalls. "So I said, 'I'll retire at 21 from the music business.' I've been on the Johnny Carson show, what more do I need? I've been at Woodstock, I've drunk with Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix."