



Lecturer Clive Young, at Rockville Centre Public Library, refined a talk on local rock and roll landmarks to focus on Billy Joel because there was so much interest.

Nostalgia trip to the library

Lecturers on the circuit take fans behind the scenes of classic movies, theater and music

BY BARBARA SCHULER
Special to Newsday

Just where is the village green?" asked Clive Young, challenging his audience during a recent presentation at the Rockville Centre Public Library to show off their knowledge of Billy Joel.

No one was quite sure — which was the appropriate response, said Young, 55, of

Rockville Centre. The village green, referenced in Joel's "Scenes From an Italian Restaurant," is most likely in Hicksville, possibly the front of a shopping center or maybe a small park, he said. But no one's certain.

The audience, numbering about 50, couldn't get enough of these factoids, and with good reason: Joel's music is the "fabric of America, especially on Long Island," said Young. "This is his backyard."

Young is one of many Long Islanders who have parlayed their specialized knowledge — from the history of opera to a deep dive into famous movie stars, past and present — into a thriving side business or post-retirement gig giving lectures around Long Island.

One of the more popular speakers on the lecture circuit these days, Young said he has bookings planned into early next year. Other local speakers are also busy, as libraries,

senior centers and the like find growing audiences for entertainment-based programs discussing everything from Rita Hayworth and Luciano Pavarotti to The Beatles and Patti LuPone. (There are many other types of speakers as well, who focus on topics ranging from art and history to current events.)

Entertainment programs are so popular because they blend education with inspiration, said Susan Finck, assistant

director of the Rockville Centre library. Beyond that, said Finck, 57, of Massapequa, the programs "provide a sense of community and foster social interactions."

That was certainly the case at Young's recent talk, where the audience couldn't wait to start throwing out questions. "People love this stuff ... it's a nostalgia trip," said Young. Whenever he presents the

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A blend of 'education with

LECTURERS from E15

program, he said, audiences "bring their own stories to it . . . and I always learn something new."

Some people feel a deeply personal connection to the stars. "Billy Joel is the soundtrack of my life," said attendee Carolyn Stone, of Rockville Centre. Describing herself as a "huge fan," Stone said she was in her 20s when the album "Glass Houses" came out in 1980, and hearing Joel's music "takes me back to those times."

Her sister, Marianne Stone, of Lynbrook, chimed in. "I've been a fan for decades, his music's great," she said.

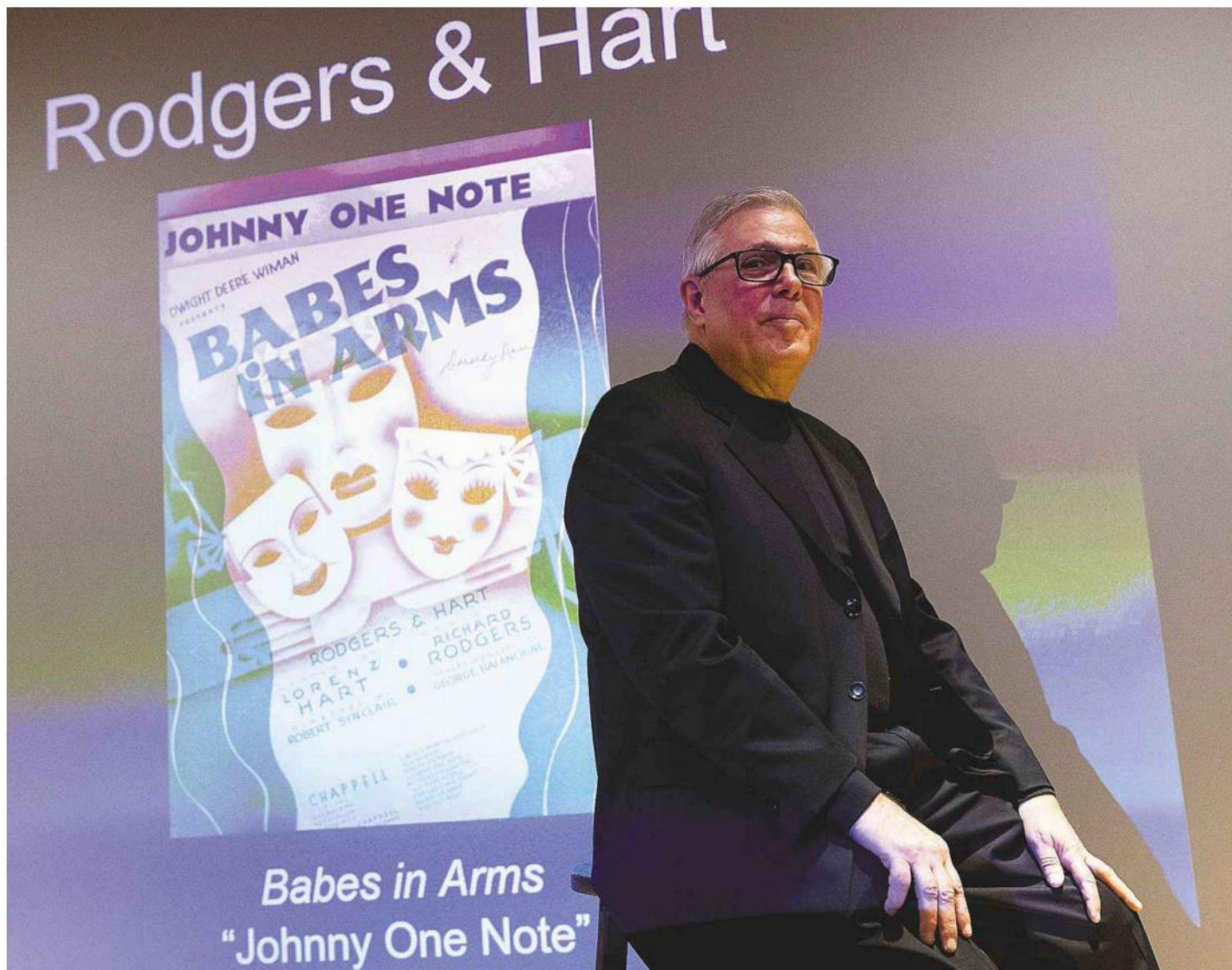
Young, co-editor of Mix Magazine, a trade publication about sound technology, said the Joel presentation evolved from a program called "Rock and Roll Staycation," which focused on rock landmarks in New York City and on Long Island. Topics included a Stray Cats album cover shot in Wampanoag (or was it?) and a bar called The Daisy in Amityville, one of the first places where Kiss played wearing makeup. "It's a parking lot now," he quips.

"People enjoyed the program, but the part everybody really paid attention to was the Billy Joel stuff," said Young — places he's lived, his love of motorcycles and which Italian restaurant he is singing about (more on that later).

"It's all very respectful," said Young, who won't talk about rumors or where Joel lives. "Everybody deserves a little privacy."

While the Billy Joel program is hot at the moment, Young said he can cover a number of other topics, like "1969 — The Year That Pointed the Way," and artists, including John Lennon and Leonard Cohen. "It's all stuff that I happened to know that other people didn't know," he said.

As to Joel, Young gets especially intense when he talks about the evolution of one of his most loved songs, "Only the Good Die Young." It started out as a reggae song, said Young, playing a snippet of that version during his recent presentation. It ends up getting a little crazy, he said, much to the delight of the audience. Work-



Marc Courtade at Half Hollow Hills Community Library in Dix Hills, where he gave a lecture on the musical theater duo Rodgers and Hart.

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— Lecturer Marc Courtade, of Freeport

ing with producer Phil Ramone ("one of the greatest producers on the planet," said Young), Joel created the version eventually released on his album "The Stranger."

SINGING OPERA'S PRAISES

It was a very different piece of music under discussion at a recent program at the Huntington Public Library, where Tanisha Mitchell, 40, of Lawrence, sang the aria "Vissi D'arte" from the opera "Tosca." Her

subject was "Halloween at the Opera," a talk that shed light on the witches, ghosts and one "deadly diva" who appear in well-known productions.

Mitchell said her business, Opera Talks, has consistent bookings, with as many as six lectures a month. Her approximately 30 programs range from specific operas and singers — "Madama Butterfly," "La bohème" and Maria Callas — to themes like love duets or operatic villains.

The goal, said Mitchell, is to take audiences behind the scenes, so they understand the workings of any given production. She acknowledges that opera can be a tough sell.

"I've spoken to so many people who tell me they don't like opera," she said.

Mitchell understands — she said it took her awhile to fall in love with the art form herself. Her first exposure was at age 9, she said, upon seeing an infomercial for a set of CDs by

opera superstar Jessye Norman. "There was this woman with flowing hair and a beautiful white dress," she recalled. "I was mesmerized by her, but I hated the music, I couldn't stand it."

It wasn't until high school, when a choir director told her she had an operatic voice, that Mitchell said she started to feel more kindly toward the music. She studied performance at Queens College with a track in music theory, and by the time

inspiration'



Tanisha Mitchell offers about 30 opera talks, from a Halloween-themed one to another on Maria Callas.

Mitchell finished her undergraduate work, she decided she wanted to focus on teaching. She got an internship at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City and was then offered a job doing outreach (she often gives the popular pre-opera talks at the Met).

For the Freeport Public Library, where she has worked since high school, Mitchell put together a program about opera basics, and was encouraged by her mother to see whether other communities might be interested. "My first program outside Freeport was in Garden City in 2015," she said, "and I haven't looked back."

Mitchell offers several levels of programming — virtual, a live multimedia presentation of photos and video clips from

the operas she's discussing, or a program like the recent one in Huntington, in which she sings an aria related to the topic. "People are always asking if I can sing more," she said, so she's working on adding a presentation that's more like a recital.

Mitchell said she is thrilled to be able to share her love of opera, which she called "otherworldly." It's special, she added, because it is "a combination of all the arts . . . these characters are relatable but also larger than life." Though Mitchell translates the words, she tells her audiences that it's not necessary to understand Italian or French to love opera.

"Just close your eyes," she tells them. "See how it makes you feel."

A BROAD REPERTOIRE

Marc Courtade had no such language barrier at his recent presentation on musical theater legends Rodgers and Hart at the Half Hollow Hills Community Library in Dix Hills. The audience of more than 100 was enthralled as Courtade traced the history of their partnership, then, along with two other singers, performed some of the duo's best known songs (the production was done in conjunction with the Long Island theater company Plaza Theatricals).

The audiences enjoy hearing about the history of these works, said Ruth Hill, who works in community engagement at the library.

"Everybody can remember all this," said Hill, of East

Tips on joining the circuit

Think you have what it takes to launch your own speaking career? Here are some tips for getting started:

■ "Speak about what you know," said Marc Courtade. "Your own experiences and interests make your talks unique."

■ "Learn as much as you can about your subject," said Tanisha Mitchell. And "triple check your facts," said Courtade. "Just because you find it on the internet does not make it true."

■ To apply for a speaking gig, Clive Young suggests sending the library's programmer a short email that suggests a program, explains why you are qualified to present it and provides references.

■ "Stay up on technology," said Mitchell. Every location has a different setup, she said. The more you know as a presenter, the better you'll be able to adjust if things go wrong.

■ "Attend talks at other libraries," said Courtade, and be sure to talk to attendees at your presentations. "They'll be ambassadors to help you get new gigs."

■ And support your local library, added Young. "They are incredible resources in every community."

— BARBARA SCHULER

reer in the not-for-profit arts world at the New York City Opera before moving on to Lincoln Center and eventually the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts in Brookville, where he worked for 17 years as a business manager.

Courtade's repertoire includes more than 100 potential subjects in the fields of musical theater (Michael Bennett, Stephen Sondheim), opera (Robert Merrill, Beverly Sills) and classical music (Leonard Bernstein, The Three Tenors). But the most expansive list is for great entertainers, from Clark Gable and Doris Day to modern performers like Emma Thompson and Denzel Washington (it would be easier to talk about who's not on the list). He also does programs for Frick Estate Lectures at the Nassau Museum of Art — next on that schedule is Voices of the Metropolitan Opera, starting Nov. 30.

"This stuff is fascinating," said Courtade, adding that audience reaction is wonderful. "Long Island is a smart crowd. They know this stuff, which keeps me on my toes. People are all too happy to tell you that you made a mistake."

But judging by the gleeful twinkle in his eye as he introduced another Rodgers and Hart song, he's having a fine time with all this. "It's a great retirement gig," said Courtade, who stresses he's not looking to make a lot of money. "It's a labor of love."

Young agrees that financially, this is not going to make him a rich man. With library budgets so tight, he said, "one program might pay for a trip to Target these days." Like Mitchell and Courtade, he's all about enlightening his audiences.

Which brings us back to that Italian restaurant. Everyone always wants to know where it is, said Young, and not surprisingly, there is significant disagreement on the subject. According to Young, a long-standing rumor started by Joel himself made a lot of people think it was Christiano's in Syosset (which closed in 2014). But no, Joel clarified on the 30th anniversary DVD of "Stranger" — it was Fontana di Trevi, across from Carnegie Hall.

Knowing these little details is probably the biggest draw, said Young. Long Islanders are fascinated, he said, mostly because "they're actually surrounded by the real stuff."

LINDA ROSIER