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John Solie

It's an incredible story: Young man from small city in the Midwest, hired to help out in a Hollywood studio art department, ends up doing portraits of Katherine Hepburn, Julie Andrews, Mary Tyler Moore, Michael Douglas, and Elvis. And soon his work is seen by millions!

But that's the story of John Solie. Born in La Crosse in 1937, graduated from Aquinas High School in 1955, a couple years at State University at La Crosse, a move to California, further study at the Los Angeles Art Center, and voila! Well--not quite! He started out as a free-lance artist. A friend talked him into applying for a job at Columbia Pictures, and he couldn't turn down their offer.

From Columbia he went on to New World Pictures, doing posters for their low-budget movies, such as, "Star Crash," "Tidal Wave," "Elvira's Movie Macabre," and some of the Shaft movies, the illustrations often lurid and melodramatic. Sometimes the deadline for the poster preceded the filming of the movie, and his illustrations seemed to have little to do with the story. Solie admitted as much concerning the 1973 movie, "Savage."

In an article in the La Crosse Tribune in 1984 he told the story of doing a poster involving a rendition of Michael Douglas for the movie "Romancing the Stone." The movie executives didn't like the picture of Douglas, so Solie worked on changing it to their tastes. Then Douglas saw the new—and the old—and preferred the old version—and that was it. Solie had captured the image.

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Of course all of the above is not the whole story because it glosses over the key ingredient—his exceptional talent in capturing the “dead-on likenesses” of his subjects. And he didn’t stay at that level long. He was soon doing mainstream movies, and in all he has painted over 200 movie posters. Soon he was doing cover illustrations for popular magazines and portraits of the stars themselves.

He did a painting of Kathryn Hepburn for the cover of The Saturday Evening Post and another of Julie Andrews for the same magazine. Eight of his paintings have been featured on the covers of TV Guide. And he has done cover illustrations for other magazines, such as People Magazine, Golf Magazine, and Reader’s Digest. He has also done record jackets such as Caddyshack, Smokey and the Bandit, and Caravan.

It’s easy to identify Solie’s work because of his unique signature. He nearly always puts his name, then draws a bird in flight, a dove, unusual because he sketches it with one line, in and out and around. He learned the logo from his grandfather, Paul Kaulfuss, who used to fascinate his grandchildren with the feat. And John adopted and copyrighted it for his own.

He has done a number of paintings for book jackets, too. For Louis Armstrong: Jazz Ambassador by Ruby Wilson, he did the cover and inside illustrations. And he has done covers for nearly 200 book covers, books such as Delta Star by Joseph Wambaugh; Family by Herbert Gold; Joshua’s People by Alan Caillon; Deseret by Eric Alter; Hanover Heritage by Lynn Furstenberg-Forbes.

The last three are of interest because at least one of the persons illustrated in each is a member of the Ed Sullivan family. Sullivan, who for years ran Sullivan's Supper Club near Trempealeau, grew up with Solie, and they continued their friendship over the years. Solie gave him several original paintings he had done, and Ed featured them on the walls of his restaurant, alongside two other Solie paintings, one of Ed and his wife, Sally, and another of their three daughters.

When Solie returned for a visit to La Crosse in July, 1984, one of the first places he headed for was Sullivan's where his paintings were always on exhibit. For him the Coulee region is home, and at one point he considered moving back, but after staying six months, long enough to experience the extremes of our seasons, he decided against it. He now lives in Tucson, Arizona, where his paintings are on exhibit at a local gallery.

But he is more than an illustrator; he is also a portraitist of reputation. He has painted a number of Hollywood stars, of course, Sean Connery, Debra Winger, Bill Cosby, James Garner, Carol Burnett, Ron Howard, and many more. He has also done portraits of past celebrities, such as Jackie Gleason, John Belushi, Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and others.

Perhaps his most famous painting has become that of the shuttle crew of "Challenger." He was commissioned to cover aspects of the launch in 1988, and working from photographs of each astronaut, put together a montage of the seven who died on board the shuttle. It appeared first in Reader's Digest, then

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was picked up by the media and has been reproduced numerous times since. From that came his portrait of Christa McAuliffe, the first teacher in space.

Solie also has done sculpture. His most famous is a bronze bust of Walter Cronkite which stands in the lobby of the CBS headquarters in New York. He has done a bust of Richard Scobie, the commander of the ill-fated Challenger, and a full-length version of Macbeth, and a Mr. Bojangles.

His work is on permanent display at the Pentagon Art Gallery (two paintings of the Apollo Space Mission), the Kennedy Space Center and the Johnson Space Centers (Solie was a member of the NASA Art Team), the Cowboy Hall of Fame (Medora, North Dakota), and the Celebrity Wax Museum (Shingiku, Japan).

Most recently Solie has begun doing Western art, many renderings of individual Indians, and portraits of Buffalo Bill and Big Ned Kaulfuss, both in Western leather outfits. And he has a self-portrait on his web site.

For a Reader's Digest, article on Lt. Edwin Price Ramsey in 1992, Solie did a painting of the last war-time cavalry charge in United States history. It occurred during World War II as the Philippines fell to the onslaught of the Japanese. Lt. Ramsey escaped to fight again leading Filipino guerillas. When Col. Ramsey's book about the incident came out, it was evident that there were inaccuracies in the painting. So the U.S. Cavalry Association asked Solie to do another in consultation with Ramsey.

Solie's interest have been turning to Western art, and his work has been featured in galleries in Scottsdale and Tucson, Arizona. In January, 2013, he will be the featured artist at the Annual "Empire 100" Western Art Show and Sale to

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be held in Tucson. The write-up honoring him states: "The body of work that John Solie has created in a career spanning over 40 years is beyond impressive."

Not bad for a lad from La Crosse.