

# FOUR SCORE AND MORE IMPERSONATE LINCOLN

16th president, his wife can draw a crowd — honestly — interpreters say. A3

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"WHERE THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS,  
THERE IS LIBERTY" II COR. 3:17

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## Honest, it's Abe, warts and all

Interpreters of 16th president Lincoln, his wife abound for anniversaries

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Abraham Lincoln impersonators, typically history-minded purists who prefer "interpreter" or "presenter" because "impersonator" sounds a bit Elvis, have been on a roll.

A number of milestone-level anniversaries have fueled interest in the 16th president — and presented opportunities for today's Lincolns. 2009 marked the 200th anniversary of his birth. 2013 brought the 150th anniversary of his Emancipation Proclamation and a Steven Spielberg blockbuster. This year marks the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's dramatic death and of the end of the Civil War, too.

Of course, today is Presidents Day. Danny Russel, who trained as an actor at the Chicago Actors Studio, had been scratching out a living before school groups and community groups as the early 20th century "Hoosier poet" James Whitcomb Riley. But in 2008 as the anniversaries approached he added Lincoln to his repertoire (at \$150 an hour and 55 cents a mile). Immediately Russel's income more than doubled, to \$20,000, and since then has nearly doubled again, to \$35,000, three-quarters of it coming from his Lincoln jobs.

For some interpreters like Russel, it's an honest day's pay for an Honest Abe's work. For others, a presidential pastime of sorts.

This year Russel, who lives in Indianapolis with his accountant wife and two young sons (and declines to give his age), has more than 200 Lincoln jobs lined up, compared with 150 last year. February is always a busy month for Lincolns, what with Presidents Day, but Russel's February 2015 is insane: 31 appearances, more than one a day.

"Well, Lincoln represents the best of America," explains Russel, who is

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naturally gangly like Lincoln but has to add the facial warts (and does). "Log cabin to the White House! That's where the appeal is."

It's unclear when men began dressing as Lincoln and delivering the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural and so on. Stan Wernz, Cincinnati, who was among the pioneers, started doing so nearly a half century ago.

The role started as a sort of rebellion. As a high school music teacher in Ohio in 1969 — back when beard-wearers tended to be hippies — he reacted to his employer's edict against facial hair by growing a beard. "About eight weeks later," he said in an email, "a student commented, 'You always acted like Lincoln; now you look like him.'" Soon he was donning a stovepipe hat and making appearances.

Later Wernz shaved in order to get a superintendent's job, got the job and grew the beard back. Today he's retired, bearded and president of the Association of Lincoln Presenters (ALP), a 501(c)3 nonprofit founded in the early 1990s.

The group has held an annual convention since 1994. In 2016 the Lincolns will meet up in Santa Claus, Ind., and visit the nearby Lincoln Boyhood Home National Memorial.

Some of the presenters backed into being Lincoln as Wernz did. Murray Cox of Wabash grew a beard one winter, and right away, he said, "I began to have people comment that I looked like Abraham Lincoln and was then asked to deliver the Gettysburg Address for a local Boy Scout Lincoln Pilgrimage." He gave the speech, and 30 years later he's still giving it.

For Cox and most of the other Lincolns, being Lincoln is a hobby, not a vocation. Some, such as 79-year-old Ted Bruzas of Avon, don't even charge.

Bruzas said he is Lincoln about 20 times a year, mostly at schools and retirement homes. "I have this personal feeling that I am helping Lincoln to relive his legacy with the emotional joys and agonies he experienced in saving the union," Bruzas said. "To share this close feeling with one of the great leaders in the world is special to me."

Among the ALP's some 160 members are three dozen Mary Todd Lincolns. Initially, wives of the Abraham Lincolns would sometimes suit up in Victorian costumes and accompany their

husbands but not say much, representing the troubled first lady mostly as window dressing. Later, though, Mary Lincolns became serious presenters.

Some, like Laura Keyes, make solo appearances — no Abes in sight. "I am focused on telling Mary Lincoln's story, which is very interesting on its own," Keyes, 32, Arlington Heights, Ill., said in an email. "One of the main reasons why people today are quick to label her as 'unstable' or 'crazy' is that they do not understand what she went through."

The big show, however, continues to be her husband. "There are other historic figures (presenters) out there," said Phil Funkenbusch, program director at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill. "George Washington is big. Thomas Jefferson is big. Louisa May Alcott. You've got a great Theodore Roosevelt right in Indiana. But Lincoln is by far the most widely interpreted."

It's impossible to know precisely why that is, but some interpreters point to his assassination, which guided his image the way actor James Dean's violent death gilded his image. But Lincoln freed the slaves, too, and preserved the union. Plus, Danny Russel notes, he had a hard-to-look-away-from appearance.

He was strange-looking, gaunt and drawn and somewhat unkempt and likely suffering from gigantism. At 6-4 Lincoln was nearly a foot taller than some of his generals. Russel is 6-2, which is taller than most Lincoln interpreters, but he doesn't rest there. Into his Lincoln boots are fitted 2-inch lifts to get Russel to authentic Lincoln level.

He keeps his hair longish so that it can look a bit wild, and of course he grew a beard. He keeps the beard trimmed into a sort of bushy chin strap. If he were living in 1969 he would appear subversive, but these days he looks like any other lumber-jacked-up young man. He looks like a thin Andrew Luck.

Professionally Russel has become dependent on Lincoln. Next year the anniversaries fade away. Does he fear a Lincoln hangover in 2016?

No, Russel said. "Lincoln is the most 'biographized' person since Christ, but we're still learning about him."

"We've not plumbed the depths of Lincoln."

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+ **IndyStar.com**: See a photo gallery of Abraham Lincoln interpreters.



ROBERT SCHEER/THE STAR FILE PHOTO

Indianapolis resident Danny Russel, as Abraham Lincoln, walks in Carmel's Fourth of July Parade last year.