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Reviving Cheerful Spirits in Kodachrome Holidays



Courtesy of Charles Phoenix
"Ed Wood Christmas, Covina, Calif., 1956," part of Charles Phoenix's "God Bless Americana: the Retro Holiday Slide Show" which he presents in theaters.

By **ERIK PIEPENBURG**

Published: December 10, 2003

“f someone's taking slides these days they're probably driving a 1981 Toyota," Charles Phoenix dryly notes. "They're out of it."

To Mr. Phoenix, those people are so out they're in.

That's because for the last 10 years Mr. Phoenix has amassed over one million slides of the birthday parties, family vacations and holiday celebrations of complete strangers. When not archived in his Los Angeles home, the images are assembled into traveling "retro slide shows," accompanied by Mr. Phoenix's tongue-in-cheek commentary.

His latest multimedia piece, "God Bless Americana: The Retro Holiday Slide Show," opened yesterday at the Pyramid Club Theater in the East Village, where he will perform on Tuesdays and Wednesdays as well as final performances on Christmas Day. (On Saturdays and

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Sundays, he flies back to Los Angeles to perform the show at the Egyptian Theater.)

The nearly two-hour event features wry observations on the small sampling of "orphaned" images Mr. Phoenix has collected of Christmas, New Year's Eve and other holidays, dating from the 1940's through the 70's.

"I talk about anything that's a little out of the ordinary," Mr. Phoenix said. "We're going to talk about a shocking lampshade. We're going to have a conversation about it."

Absent are run-of-the-mill images of forced smiles at the dinner table. Present is an image of a toilet paper Christmas tree.

"Millions of people have taken millions of pictures of millions of Christmas Trees," he said. "I have to pick out the most outrageous one."

Mr. Phoenix, 40, grew up in Ontario, Calif., where the tail fins on the used cars sold by his father started a life-long interest in midcentury design and vintage photography.

In 1998 he performed his first public slide show, "God Bless Americana: The Retro Vacation Slide Show Tour of the U.S.A.," at a Santa Monica bookstore. He still tours with the piece, which won an award for unique theatrical experience at this year's New York International Fringe Festival and which has been turned into a book.

To find his booty, Mr. Phoenix, combs the country's thrift stores and flea markets, painstakingly editing out anything unfocused, literally and aesthetically.

"You have no idea how repetitive amateur photographers are," he said.

Mr. Phoenix estimates that only one of every 3,000 slides he examines makes it into his mostly Kodachrome collection. And like a cinema purist bemoaning the switch from celluloid to digital projection, he grumbles about his potential losses — in quality and number — as America's amateur photographers go digital.

"Kodachrome is far more luscious than any digital medium," he said. "There's no romance in a projected digital image. When you see the reds and turquoises on slide film, it's unbelievable."

As he joyfully mines America's past through its fashion and design in a medium that's as alive as an 8-track tape, Mr. Phoenix taps into what he calls Americans' "collective memory of a certain sociology."

With a note of apology in his voice, Mr. Phoenix also admits that his shows revisit a history that reflects the cultural values of a middle-class demographic that could afford the once-costly equipment needed to shoot and project Kodachrome slides and the charges for development.

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Courtesy of Charles Phoenix

Charles Phoenix's traveling slide shows feature amateur slides of family get-togethers from the 40's through the 70's, like "Happy New Year, L.A." (1962).

"It's a discriminatory medium," he said. "You're only seeing through the eyes of people who had the means to own the camera. With all due respect, it's a treat to see an image of people who are poor. It's so rare."

If there is one slide Mr. Phoenix would love to get his hands on, it's a "drop dead" picture of Christmas in New York City. He respectfully blames the seemingly odd omission on a city that, with the possible exception of Times Square, "looks the same as it did years ago."

"To be in New York is magic," he said. "But how we've changed is much more interesting to me than how we've stayed the same."

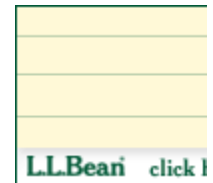
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