

**Ensemble Galilei
Neal Conan
National Geographic Image Collection**

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Review: 'First Person' an exploration of music, words and photos

By Chuck Berg September 14, 2008

I don't know about you, but for me, fifth and sixth grades still resonate largely because of stories drawn from the Age of Exploration in which Columbus, Magellan and the Cabots sailed boldly into uncharted waters in searches motivated by combinations of God, glory and gold intended to enhance the adventurers' European royal patrons.

On Saturday night at the Lied Center, "First Person: Stories from the Edge of the World" reanimated the profiles of courage of that first wave of European explorers. However, with the imprimatur of National Geographic, the sage voice of "Talk of the Nation" host Neal Conan and the Celtic airs of Ensemble Galilei, it was clear that the program was not going to be an uncritical reprise of the rise of Europe's colonial empires.

Instead, Conan's effectively crafted script took us to the four corners of the world, as well as to the bottom of the sea and beyond to the heavens, via excerpts from aptly chosen 19th and 20th century explorers driven by science. Here, we met Charles Darwin, Jacques Cousteau, the teams manning the Hubble Space Telescope and submersibles piloted by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute.

At the same time, the tragic letters of heroic adventurers such as George Mallory, who in 1924 attempted to scale Mount Everest, tellingly revealed that personal side of the explorative challenge incited by the romance of trekking off into the unknown. Also included were odes to exploration by writers such as Michael S. Glaser. As read by Conan and voicing partner Lily Knight, the texts came to vivid life. The segment called "It Possesses Me," drawing from the "Letters of George Mallory and Ruth Mallory," gave Conan and Knight an opportunity to embody the personas of a

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proud and loving couple clearly prepared for whatever outcome might result Mallory's ultimately fatal yet heroic quest.

Mallory's words, as well as those of seekers such as Matthew Henson, whose poignant narrative was taken from "A Negro Explorer at the North Pole" (1912), were given tangible immediacy in stunning photographic slides culled from the National Geographic Image Collection and other archives including London's National Maritime Museum.

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The presentational format of the tellingly titled "First Person: Stories from the Edge of the World" was, in a sense, a throwback to the 19th century slide shows of itinerant showmen who combined stirring narration, dramatic lantern-slides and action-packed live music to present their own thrilling explorations of exotic places and ports of call such as the American West.

But as Conan and his talented colleagues proved, the well-mounted slide show is an enduring form whose subtle thrills can still be both emotionally and thematically moving. Like Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World," Conan's far-reaching collage was an optimistic testament to the miracle of life, whatever one's personal understanding of its origins or ultimate meanings.

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