

# Music and the Mouse

An award-winning travel writer shares his knowledge of Walt Disney and Florida’s musical history.

**F**or decades, Gary McKechnie explored Florida and the United States as a travel writer. Then he decided to explore the world—this time as a speaker aboard cruise ships and ocean liners, where he talks about musical icons as well as American history and destinations.

Back on land, McKechnie is one of the newest members of the Florida Humanities’ Speakers Bureau, a diverse group of scholars and historians whose presentations range from archaeology and Cuban immigrants to famous Florida women and Florida folklore. McKechnie’s presentations, “Sunshine State Soundtrack: Famous Musicians of Florida” and “What in the World: How Walt Created Disney World,” reflect his lifelong passion for music—and his love of Walt Disney.



Gary McKechnie

Born and raised near Orlando, McKechnie is intimately familiar with Walt Disney World. He worked as a cast member while a student

at the University of Central Florida and again after a post-grad hitchhiking trip across Europe. Among the roles he played, which included ferryboat pilot, steam train conductor, hotel desk clerk, and comedic street performer in EPCOT’s Italy pavilion, he has a clear favorite. “The Jungle Cruise,” he says emphatically. “All I had to do was tell jokes and make people happy.”

A distinct advantage was his weekend gig as a writer and performer at an Orlando comedy club. Not only was this a rich source of new material for “Gorilla Gary” (his Jungle Cruise alter ego), he says, it sharpened his skills as a public speaker.

But he took a side trip into advertising before finding his way to travel writing.

“I was at a crossroads in my writing career when my wife, Nancy, asked me, ‘What are

you passionate about? What will you start and not stop until it’s completed?’ It took me months to puzzle things out, but I finally realized if I tackled one major project, it would be exploring America by motorcycle and writing about it.”

So that’s what he did.

He and Nancy spent close to a year on the road, and the result was *Great American Motorcycle Tours*, which became the best-selling book of its kind, winning a prestigious Lowell Thomas Award. He won the award a second time for his feature titled “Prairie Hog,” about a journey across Nebraska and Kansas for Harley-Davidson’s members’ magazine.

Today he is a popular corporate speaker and seagoing presenter. Each spring he travels to Washington, D.C., to teach visiting students lessons on civics, history, democracy, and government.

He joined the ranks of the Florida Humanities Speakers Bureau last year, with his presentation on Florida musicians including historical facts like these:

- FSU student and future Doors frontman Jim Morrison appeared in a promotional film for the university in 1964.



Gary McKechnie as “Gorilla Gary” on Disney’s Jungle Cruise.

- Tom Petty’s decision to become a rock star was influenced by an encounter with Elvis during the Florida filming of “Follow That Dream.”

- After hitting dead ends at a variety of Florida nightclubs, Ray Charles asked a friend to look at a map and find the city farthest away from Orlando. Soon after, Charles headed to Seattle.

Equally fascinating are facts he shares about the creation of Walt Disney World.

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Travel writer Gary McKechnie, a leading authority on Florida popular music and Walt Disney World, is among the 30-plus authors, experts and storytellers that offer more than 60 engaging programs through the Florida Talks speakers program—one of Florida Humanities’ longest-running public programs.

Speakers cover topics ranging from Florida’s Indigenous people and Spanish explorers to civil rights, the environment and popular culture.

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In addition to the extraordinary steps the company took to keep the project under wraps, McKechnie points out little-known details about Walt's association with Florida. For example,

- On January 1, 1888, Lake County issued its first marriage license, which was signed by newlyweds: Flora Call and Elias Disney, Walt's parents.

- While Disney was flying over Florida to choose the site for Walt Disney World, President John F. Kennedy was flying from Fort Worth to Dallas. It was November 22, 1963.

“What continues to fascinate me about Walt is that at an age when most people would be racing into retirement, he was just getting started. He also had incredible vision. If you or I walked into a Florida

swamp or through scrub pine, we would have no concept of what Walt imagined,” McKechnie says. “But on land the size of San Francisco he could see it all in his head. That was pure genius.” ■

***For more on Gary McKechnie and others on the Florida Humanities Speakers Bureau roster, visit [floridahumanities.org/speaker-directory/](http://floridahumanities.org/speaker-directory/)***

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