

# Any fans of vocalist Laine need to sing out

**I**t's the stuff of a tear-jerker ballad belted out by a Big Band-era crooner: Craig Cronbaugh of Des Moines



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## VIDEO

See Craig Cronbaugh pound out rhythms on his drum kit in his man cave and talk about his lifelong appreciation of singer Frankie Laine in a video at **Des Moines Register.com**.

has searched in vain for decades to find just one other Iowan who's as dedicated a fan of Frankie Laine as he is.

At this point Cronbaugh would settle for seven older residents of the Des Moines metro willing to give Laine a casual listen.

Seven is the enrollment threshold for Cronbaugh's new class at the Senior College of Greater Des Moines, "Remembering Frankie Laine." Without seven students signed up by Sept. 27 to pay the modest \$48 tuition, the class isn't viable.

Cronbaugh has scrounged among the memberships of AARP, the State Historical Society and various Facebook fan pages, all to no avail. Zero students so far.

# MUNSON

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Probably more than any other American, Cronbaugh, 57, a fixture at our State Capitol for 17 years, has carried the torch for this late, fading 20th-century icon whom he befriended in the 1980s.



Frankie Laine

"Frankie Laine was as famous as Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole and Billie Holiday and Dean Martin and Tony Bennett and all those people—just as famous if not bigger than all those," Cronbaugh sighed.

Yet today the general public that remembers Laine tends to frown on him.

Sinatra had swagger and an Oscar-winning film career. Bennett still sings duets with the likes of Lady Gaga.

Rest assured that if Cronbaugh tried to rally fans of Neil Diamond there would be a wild, multigenerational stampede to the Pappajohn Education Center in downtown Des Moines for the class.

Laine tends to be pegged — as he was in many of his shorter obituaries in 2007 when he died in San Diego at 93 — as the Italian-American from Chicago who sang the theme to "Rawhide," the 1959-65 Western series starring Clint Eastwood.

Yet Laine scored a string of other pop and country hits, sang numerous movie and TV themes (including 1974's "Blazing Saddles") and was the host of his own TV variety show. He sold some 250 million albums around the globe.

Cronbaugh's basement, thick with the scent of cigar smoke embedded in the sofa cushions, includes six trunks stacked against the wall full of Laine music and memorabilia.

In this man cave it's all about F.L., not the NFL.

"Some guys like model trains," Cronbaugh said. "Some collect stamps. Some collect butterflies. I like Frankie Laine."

This is the guy who wrote the book on Laine. Really: It's titled "Reaching for a Star," a 209-page memoir self-published in



Craig Cronbaugh is trying to persuade Des Moines-area residents to sign up for a Senior College class on Frankie Laine, his favorite singer. Cronbaugh is shown in his basement in front of trunks full of Laine memorabilia. KYLE MUNSON/THE REGISTER

## SENIOR COLLEGE

For more information on the Senior College of Greater Des Moines, go to [myseniorcollege.com](http://myseniorcollege.com) or call 515-244-0631. This semester's classes run into November.

2005.

By day, Cronbaugh is director of the nonpartisan Legislative Information Office at the Capitol. He helps to compile and dole out information on state lawmakers.

So he's a detail guy. He's already assembled his four-session syllabus for "Remembering Frankie Laine," which is among more than two dozen offerings from the Senior College of Greater Des Moines.

The nonprofit, volunteer-staffed college founded in 2005 caters to the 50-plus crowd, President Helen Grattan said, with an agenda of "no tests, no stress."

This fall's classes range from beginning mah-jongg to the bioethics of aging.

Unlike the Laine offering, classes on Iowa connections to the JFK assassination and behind-the-scenes peeks at both Des Moines International Airport and the Iowa Culinary Institute already have filled up.

Cronbaugh knows what he's teaching when it comes to a working musician like Laine. Before his Capitol Hill career, Cronbaugh earned his living behind a drum kit — the same drum kit that still sits in the corner of his man cave.

Cronbaugh dived into music the way millions did: He got hooked on the Beatles circa "She Loves You."

But instead of following the Fab Four into psy-

chedelic rock and so on, Cronbaugh traced Ringo Starr back through Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich and discovered that he preferred the more elegant Big Band era.

As a kid in Urbana, Ia., he tape-recorded an Ed Sullivan musical retrospective. While listening to it with his dad, he marveled at the sound of the powerful voice singing "Jezebel." That voice turned out to be Laine's.

Less than two years after graduating from high school in 1974, Cronbaugh was a drummer working seven nights a week in Chicago — five nights in a strip club on Rush Street.

He later toured with an Elvis impersonator.

Back in Cedar Rapids, his band Nite Moves imploded when Cronbaugh and the bassist got into a rolling-on-the-floor brawl in the middle of a gig. (Don't worry: They're great friends today.)

Cronbaugh strung together odd jobs when necessary. He tarred flat roofs, cooked for restaurants, swept railroad cars, cleaned industrial chicken cages, etc.

He was living in Cedar Rapids when he heard a radio DJ recite Laine's mailing address so that fans could send get-well cards after the singer's quadruple heart bypass.

Cronbaugh eventually ended up buying a bus ticket to San Diego and spent a day there with his idol. At one point Laine plopped down on the couch for a nap and told Cronbaugh to browse through his record collection.

The friendship endured, even though Cronbaugh abandoned his own music career. The turning point in his life was a September 1990 car wreck in

which he and his daughter (asleep in the back seat) survived what was nearly a head-on collision with a drunken driver.

After Cronbaugh spent a month in the hospital he found his way to a communications and broadcast degree via Kirkwood College and the University of Northern Iowa. He worked in newspapers and eventually landed a job at the Capitol.

Cronbaugh and his wife of the last 12 years, Marlene, attended Laine's 90th birthday party and, eventually, the singer's 2007 funeral. Cronbaugh stood over Laine's casket with his head full of "all these visions of him on 'The Ed Sullivan Show,' him singing with Frank Sinatra..."

The finale of Cronbaugh's class (assuming he entices seven students) will be an over-the-speakerphone Q&A with Laine's widow, Marcia, in California.

Cronbaugh marvels that in this centennial year of Laine's birth there aren't a handful of people out of the 500,000 or so in the Des Moines metro who are curious enough to share 20th-century entertainment history through the lens of Laine. The drummer wants to preserve the memory of what he considers a classier era of pop music that knew nothing of Miley Cyrus or twerking.

"I can just see all these great stars rolling over in their graves because of stuff like that," he said.

Rollin', rollin', rollin'....

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