

POINT OF DEPARTURE

THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY OPENS ITS SEASON WITH *THE FLIGHT OF LINDBERGH*, A WORK WRITTEN IN CELEBRATION OF “LUCKY LINDY” AND *THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS*. LINDBERGH’S HISTORIC FLIGHT HERALDED A NEW WORLD —BOTH TRIUMPHANT AND TRAGIC.

BY EDDIE SILVA



Charles Lindbergh and the *Spirit of St. Louis*

Even though Lambert Field was little more than an abandoned cornfield, Charles Lindbergh rented rooms in a boarding house as close to it as he could get. That cornfield had been purchased by Major Albert Bond Lambert, who had once run a school for balloon pilots during World War I. Although St. Louis is regarded as part of the vast Midwestern “fly-over zone” today, it was a promising environment for aviation pioneers. For those caught up in the dream of flight—there was a St. Louis Flying Club in the 1920s—Lambert’s makeshift runway was special. The major offered its use free of charge.

Already a veteran pilot, Lindbergh quickly got a job as an air-mail carrier based in St. Louis. He also barnstormed throughout the region, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, taking thrill-seekers for rides, showing off daredevil maneuvers for crowds—and even allowing one disgruntled citizen, for a price, to be taken up so he could urinate over his hometown.

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COURTESY OF THE MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Lindbergh meets the press.

Berg writes, “the city became more than a gateway to the west. It came to symbolize the portal of the future.”

St. Louisans supported Lindbergh in the pursuit of his greatest dream—to be the first to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, New York to Paris. With a vision of the flight’s possibility burned into his mind, Lindbergh found backers in St. Louis. They included members of a brokerage firm, a local bank, and the publisher of *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* newspaper—after the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* turned Lindbergh down (“To fly across the Atlantic Ocean with one pilot and a single-engine plane! We have our reputation to consider,” one editor told him.)

Lindbergh’s sales pitch: Such a fantastic achievement would show people what airplanes can do and advance aviation—and it would advertise St. Louis.

There is nothing that is unremarkable about Lindbergh’s achievement. His journey to cross the Atlantic actually began with a daring flight across the breadth of the United States. The single engine *Spirit of St. Louis*—its name a forerunner of contemporary branding—was manufactured in San Diego. His one stop on his way to New York was St. Louis, where—having just broken a record for nonstop flight—he landed for some sleep and a plate of ham and eggs.

ST. LOUIS “CAME TO SYMBOLIZE THE PORTAL OF THE FUTURE.”

—LINDBERGH BIOGRAPHER A. SCOTT BERG

The next time he landed in St. Louis, he was the most celebrated man in the world—indeed, the first world celebrity. Approximately 5,000 people waited in the rain to greet him at Lambert Field. The next day, half-a-million lined the sunlit streets of the city to catch a glimpse of the hero along the seven-mile parade route. The day after that, Lindbergh displayed his old barnstorming skills, performing a number of daredevil stunts to a crowd of 100,000 in Forest Park.

He remained in St. Louis, sifting through the 3.5 million letters he had



“And he is so innocent & unaware.”
—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

received, while pondering a life that had changed more drastically than he could have ever imagined.

Lindbergh had changed the world by diminishing space and time. He traversed the obstacles of sea and sky. The Old World and the New had been separated by days at sea. Lindbergh made the journey in 33-and-a-half hours. The expanse of the planet was suddenly smaller, and would be made smaller still. Distance had been proven as relative as Einstein had theorized time to be. The earthbound human was now champion of the skies, and Lindbergh was “Prince of the Air.”

Municipalities began investing in airfields, which became airports. Lindbergh was *the* high-profile advocate for commercial aviation and began serving on an advisory level to newly developing airlines such as Pan American and TWA. Lindbergh gained interest in Robert Goddard’s experiments in rocketry and served as an informal fundraiser for his experiments, thus extending the pioneering impulse into outer space.

Lindbergh had the vision to imagine such progress. He understood humankind’s insatiable appetite for adventure, exploration, and for the necessity of invention.

He lacked any understanding of fame. When he landed the *Spirit of St. Louis* at Le Bourget, blinded by the glare of light, he could not recognize the thousands of bodies racing toward him. His wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who became a beloved and prize-winning author, decades later saw this moment as a metaphor for his life: “Fame—Opportunity—Wealth—and also tragedy & loneliness & frustration rushed at him in those running figures on the field at Le Bourget. And he so innocent & unaware.”

Lindbergh awakened humankind’s insatiable appetite for celebrity, for invading the private life, for holding the imagined life of another human being like an icon. And Lindbergh’s fame provided the model trajectory of the tragic fall, when the imagined figure becomes all too real and fallible, and may be torn apart fiercely as any other false god.

Lindbergh caught in the glare of light. He and Anne’s first child was kidnapped, making the search for the “Lindbergh Baby” the stuff of tabloid fascination, even after the boy was found dead near the family’s home.

Another image reflects the rise of celebrity in the direct wake of Lindbergh’s flight: Bruno Hauptmann, the kidnapper and murderer of Lindbergh’s son, blinded by flashbulbs on his way to trial.

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