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# News + Opinion

## The whole world is still watching

PROJECT 1968 PROVIDES A DRAMATIC RE-IMAGINING OF THAT YEAR'S DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION

column COURTNEY HADEN

As the orchestrated pageantry of the 2008 Democratic Convention nears, it's worth going back 40 years to examine a convention where chaos took center stage and the pageantry was in the streets. Author and playwright Laura Axelrod, a Cullman resident and self-styled political agnostic, takes that trip every day online in an episodic narrative she calls a "docu-novel," adapted for the web from a stage play she began writing in 2004. Project 1968 recounts the events of that pivotal year through the experiences of two young women, Amy and Janine, who wind up in Chicago that fateful week.

**BIRMINGHAM WEEKLY:** What interests you so about this event that took place before you were even born?

**LAURA AXELROD:** Everything came to a head in '68. There was a tremendous sense of empowerment, that people had a say in government, in how people lived their lives. They wanted to do things differently. It was an idealistic time, and I think people were trying to live as authentically as possible, according to their values...

Everything crested and then fell apart because there were mistakes that were made that led to the chaos of the Chicago convention. I look at the rhetoric of the Yippies [Youth International Party radical activists] now and I think, could any of that have played out now? And I think people would disappear, quite frankly. [laughs]

A lot of the Eisenhower Commission reports I read in Austin at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library. They have a couple of boxes that are just filled with people's experiences at the convention — they were interviewed — and some of them are brutal. They took it from all different sides; people who were delegates, people who were just visiting from Europe, to protesters — really powerful stuff.

**BW:** At what point did you decide to change this story from the small focus of the stage to the broader panorama of a docu-novel?

**LA:** It was an interesting idea for a couple of reasons. One, American history should belong to everybody; why open it up just for people who can afford a ticket to a play? The second thing was the idea of blending fact with fiction to document my story. Based on my research, I think there are a lot of books out there that're historically inaccurate...

To map this out daily, it's like these characters are alive, so as I live my day, I think about how they're living their day.

**BW:** So, there are aspects of your own personality in Amy and Janine?

**LA:** Yeah. Janine reminds me of how I was

back when I was politically active in my college years. She's 18 and hopefully a little more naïve than I was.

**BW:** The last time you voted was the last time you attended a political convention.

**LA:** The first and the last time. I was a campaign worker for Jerry Brown [in 1992]. It was a cool experience to go to a convention like that, but to go as the unwanted — I mean, the attitude was, 'You're ruining our convention, you're ruining our party, go away.' We were really idealistic, but also artistic, so when we weren't on the convention floor, we were trading buttons.

**BW:** Why should we even have conventions anymore?

**LA:** '68 had all the markings of being out of control. [Chicago mayor] Richard Daley was trying to control every aspect of the convention and I think they learned a lesson there. That things have to be presentable, to make it seem like the party is presidential. If they can't control their own convention, how're they going to deal with the country?

Lester Maddox [segregationist governor of Georgia] had entered the nominating process and you get the feeling that the leadership of the Democratic party had no idea how to bring everybody back in line. When I look at the news these days, it's like, everybody has to get their ducks in a row, everybody has to fall into place.

**BW:** And yet Obama's people think it's a good idea to offer Hillary Clinton a roll call vote, which would seem to fly in the face of the idea that disharmony makes bad TV.

**LA:** The gut feeling I have is that a lot of women felt left out of the process and are really angry. Because of the sexism. From what I've looked at in the media, it's hard to ignore that...

That's part of the reason for *Project 1968*, to look at the role of women and how women's voices really aren't heard in the political process. Instead, we wind up talking about what a candidate wore, or her marriage...

I'm not sure who I support these days. Probably Eugene McCarthy [laughs]...

I personally say that this is a demoralized society. I heard that on a radio show and I believe that to be true. People just shrug and say, well, you can't fight City Hall... I wonder why the Baby Boomers didn't teach my generation — I'm probably effectively Generation X — how to become politically active, how to represent ourselves in politics. Maybe it had something to do with '68.

**BW:** Have you thought about a story arc for your characters beyond 1968?





PROJECT 1968, THE BRAINCHILD OF CULLMAN PLAYWRIGHT LAURA AXELROD, is an online "docu-novel" that centers on the chaos and pageantry of the Democratic Convention held 40 years ago in Chicago.

LA: Yeah, I pretty much have mapped them out through 1978. There may be a leap in the story at some point. The choices they make now [in 1968] determine how they live the rest of their lives.

BW: Much as the political choices made in 1968 still have ramifications far beyond that year.

LA: Right. Yes...

I'm trying not to let 1968 take over too much of my personal life. It's hard to explain to people that what happened 40 years ago, to me is currently happening, so it's kind of a weird alienation from the present.

The day-by-day experiences of Amy and Janine, replete with vintage reportage from national papers and new interviews conducted by Laura Axelrod, are yours to explore at [www.project1968.com](http://www.project1968.com).

Courtney Haden is a Birmingham Weekly columnist. Write to [courtney@bhamweekly.com](mailto:courtney@bhamweekly.com)

## ELECTORAL COLLEGE SCOREBOARD: Obama 287, McCain 251

by Mark Kelly

In this space two weeks ago, we took note of some trends in our rolling poll averages that suggested that John McCain might be poised to make up significant ground in the state-by-state race for electoral votes. Lo and behold, that swell has become a

of states categorized as "tossups" has increased from 12 to 14. McCain leads in 17 states, Obama leads in 19 and the District of Columbia.

Other major highlights of the McCain surge and other recent developments in the

— has slipped from leaning McCain into tossup status; anyone who wants to read significance into the fact that the only Democrat to carry the 49<sup>th</sup> state was Lyndon Johnson, and that Johnson's opponent was a semi-crazed U.S. Senator from Arizona, is

up support, than from Obama's level of support *dropping*. This suggests that, while McCain's relentlessly negative campaign tactics may be causing some voters to have second thoughts about Obama, they have not switched their allegiance; the Demo-