

VIDEO

Videotapes relive charismatic days of JFK

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John F. Kennedy was such a teen-age prankster that the future president was suspended from high school. His father, Joe Kennedy, produced B movies, including a short on female boxing. Lee Harvey Oswald, an embittered communist sympathizer, once handed out pro-Castro leaflets in New Orleans.

These are just some of the fascinating lesser-known tidbits buried in the dozen Kennedy videotapes having their premieres or being re-promoted in honor of the 25th anniversary of JFK's assassination Tuesday.

Among the new ones, CBS News has produced from its vast TV archives "John F. Kennedy — The Commemorative Video Album" (1988, CBS/Fox; \$19.98) and Reader's Digest has commissioned a three-part "John F. Kennedy: A Celebration of His Life and Times" (1988, Reader's Digest; \$69.98 each).

None of them breaks startlingly new ground, but all these titles enable us to relive the heady optimism and the sudden tragedy of JFK. Witty, handsome, wealthy, a war hero with a dazzling smile married to a woman who spoke French and wore designer clothes. What more could the country want?

Kennedy and his clan were anything but camera-shy, and the producers of these tapes had literally millions of feet of film and videotape to choose from. It's almost as though the Kennedys' home movies have become our nation's home movies.

A shirtless Kennedy playing touch football. The Kennedy brothers clowning around in tuxedos. A young Kennedy looking so cool in shades lounging in a sailboat. Certain powerful images occur over and over in almost all the tapes — massive crowds in Berlin shouting his name, the motorcade in Dallas, his funeral, John John saluting the coffin.

These videotapes vary in approach from cautious analysis to outright worship, and offer viewers



In now-famous pose, John F. Kennedy Jr. salutes at his father's Nov. 25, 1963, funeral in Washington, D.C.

a broad range to choose from. "Four Days in November" (1964, MGM/UA, 123 mins., B&W; \$29.95) ranks as probably the oddest and, to my taste, most impressive tape in the batch. This documentary, using "Dragnet"-style narration and melodramatic music, meticulously re-creates the days surrounding JFK's death in Dallas. The producers, who included David "Roots" Wolper, tracked down all the available footage, then supplemented it with real-life participants walking through and voicing over their roles. For instance, the cabbie who drove Oswald home after the crime takes viewers for that ride. News purists will probably hate it.

HBO Video also tried an unusual approach with its hourlong documentary, "Life in Camelot" (1988,

HBO; \$19.98). Wherever possible, the filmmakers used audiotapes of JFK himself to provide the narration for the various film clips. The end result is a kind of "lite" documentary, full of colorful home movies and clever news footage but lacking much historical perspective.

On the other hand, the CBS News tape seems to try to deliver a traditional two-hour documentary and authoritatively recount the JFK legacy in three parts: "The Presidential Years," "Four Dark Days" and "The Childhood Years." Unfortunately, it fails. Instead, the network wound up with a jumbled mess full of phenomenal TV sequences marred by lazy editing and a confused script.

The other newly minted JFK video fares much better. Reader's Di-

gest hired CEL Communications to create a three-hour upbeat profile appropriately called "A Celebration of His Life and Times." They have brought forth much rarely seen footage and combined it all into a nice, neat, orderly package perfect, say, for a high school class.

There is also an entry from ABC News, "JFK Remembered" (1983, Vestron; \$19.95). Produced to commemorate the 20th anniversary, this Peter Jennings-hosted special offers more political analysis than any other of the tapes. It carefully traces Kennedy's role in the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis, in widening American involvement in Vietnam and in civil-rights battles. It ends quoting the words of a French ambassador who described Kennedy as a "brilliant maybe."

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