

Reference Notes

Volume 1, Issue 5

May 2017

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LaRuth Martin & Suzanne Horton, Editors

The Filmmaker's Journey to *Star Wars*

Forty years ago, in this very galaxy, George Lucas introduced audiences to Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Han Solo and Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. These characters were so richly imagined it seems they must have emerged fully formed from Lucas's imagination, but his journey to bring *Star Wars* to the silver screen was not a straight path.

Lucas's first science fiction movie was *THX-1138*, based on a short film he made while a student at the University of Southern California. Robert Duvall starred as a rebel trying to escape a dystopian society in the 25th century.

Lucas switched gears after *THX-1138* and delved into his memories of growing up in Modesto, California to co-write and direct *American Graffiti* in 1973. The film tells the story of recent high school graduates on the last night of summer in 1962 as their lives are about to veer off in different direc-

tions. *American Graffiti* was a big success earning \$140 million in theaters around the world. Lucas was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director and the movie was nominated for Best Picture, although neither won their respective categories. Most importantly to *Star Wars* fans, the film marked the first time that George Lucas worked with Harrison Ford, who would bring the smuggler and scoundrel Han Solo to life a few years later.

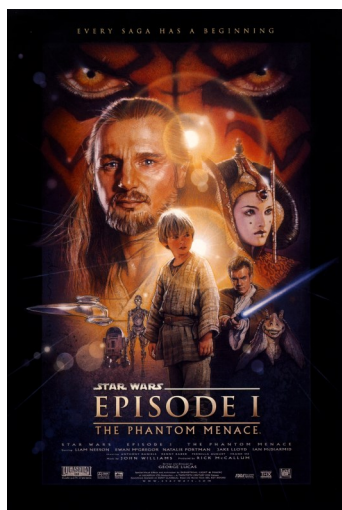
Despite the great success Lucas achieved with *American Graffiti*, he was unable to bring his dream project to life. He wanted to create a movie based on *Flash Gordon*, the King Features comic strip created by Alex Raymond and brought to movie screens in the 1930s and 40s in short episodes called "serials." In *Flash*

Gordon, a trio of heroes attempts to free the universe from an evil emperor, a concept that would find its way into *Star Wars*. When Lucas approached King Features about acquiring the rights to make the film, he learned that the company already had plans to produce a movie by award-winning Italian director Federico Fellini. As a child growing up in Mussolini's fascist Italy, Fellini found that reading the *Flash Gordon* comic strip gave him hope, so he seemed to be a natural choice to bring Flash back to cinematic life, but he eventually declined to direct the project. Ironically, it took the success of *Star Wars* in 1977 to jumpstart a new *Flash Gordon* movie into production in 1979.

Since he could not make a *Flash Gordon* movie, Lucas decided to create his

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own space adventure. However, *The Star Wars*, as he first titled it in May 1973, was very different from the film that premiered in 1977. Luke Skywalker appears in the story outline, but he is a battle-hardened general rather than a naïve teenager. A year later, Lucas wrote the first rough draft which shifted the point of view from General Skywalker to young Annikin Starkiller, son of a Jedi-Bendu master. Annikin becomes Skywalker's apprentice and meets an early version of Princess

Leia. Their relationship in this draft became the basis for the feisty flirtations between Princess Leia Organa and Han Solo in *Star Wars*. In January 1975, Lucas retitled the script *The Adventures of the Starkiller (Episode One): The Star Wars*. Luke, a young man whose sheltered life would be changed by galactic conflict, became the protagonist in this draft. The script went through more revisions until March 1976 when filming began on *The Adven-*

tures of Luke Starkiller—As Taken from the “Journal of the Whills” (Saga I): Star Wars. Luke's surname was changed to “Skywalker” on the first day of production and the title of the film was shortened to *Star Wars*.

The dystopian society of *THX 1138*, the coming-of-age stories of *American Graffiti*, and the thrilling adventures of Flash Gordon and his allies all paved the way for George Lucas's journey to *Star Wars*.

The “Filmmaker's Journey to *Star Wars*” Pathfinder

[eBooks, movies and comic books available through Hoopla Digital courtesy of MCCPL](#)

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[Further Enjoyment](#)

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Feature Article & Pathfinder written by Matt Williams, Librarian I, Pike Road Branch Library