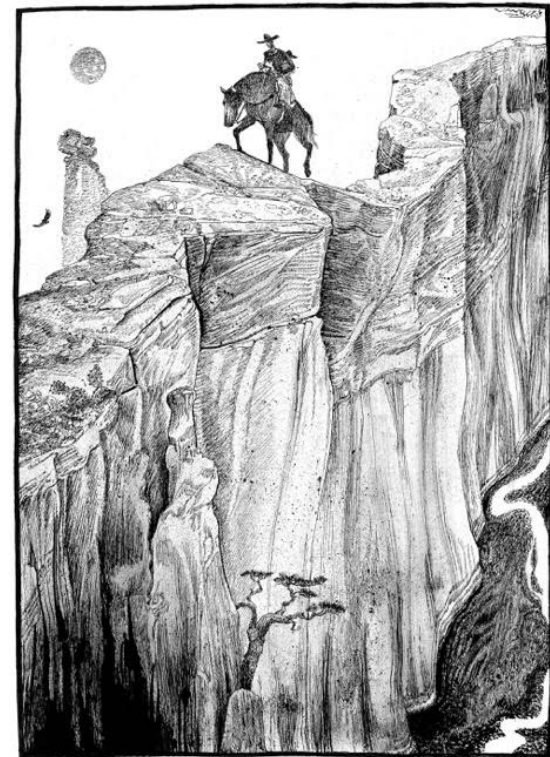


Jack Unruh



DJ Stout is a partner in the Austin, Texas, office of Pentagram. He was art director of the *Texas Monthly* from 1987 to 1999.



*Jack Unruh died last week, leaving many in the illustration and magazine worlds fondly recalling his big-as-Texas talent and generosity. I count myself among them. Here is an excerpt from an essay I wrote for my recent book **Variations on a Rectangle**. A selection of Jack's work from *Texas Monthly* and some of the books he illustrated appear below.*

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As I crested a hill on Stemmons Freeway in my little lime-green clunker, I could make out the hazy blue buildings of the Dallas skyline on the horizon. All of a sudden I could see myself sitting

in one of those shiny glass towers in the distance, the expressway curving like a multilane yellow brick still think back to that moment every time I drive that stretch of highway. I was in high spirits; I had just landed a job and about to report for my very first day as a graphic designer.

It didn't start out like that though. When I graduated from Texas Tech University in the spring of 1981, my original plan was to drive to New York City to try my luck in the center of the known magazine universe. I said goodbye to my college buddies and headed to Dallas for a short visit with my uncle before making the long drive to the Northeast. It was late May, hot as hell in Texas already, and my cheap Chevy Loser didn't have air-conditioning. My Uncle Harold operated a linotype press at a printer in Dallas, and he said he'd make some introductions for me. By the time I got there, I was already having car problems, almost out of gas money, and exhausted from the heat, so I decided to stick around a bit longer than I had originally planned. It turned out that my uncle had only one or two contacts and they were hesitant to set interviews up with me, so I picked up the phone and brazenly called Jack Unruh, my college illustration mentor and hero. To my surprise, Jack answered the phone on the second ring and told me to come on over.

When I knocked on the door at Jack's studio, a refurbished old house on Fairmont Avenue he shared with illustrator Bart Forbes and designer Jack Summerford, a voice from afar instructed me to show myself in and find my way upstairs. When I got to the top I spotted Jack, tall, bearded, and bespectacled, sitting at a short drawing table and he was erasing like his life depended on it. He was flushed and sweaty, with shards of rubber from his super-charged automatic eraser stuck to his face and arms. He called me over without looking up, and when I got to his drawing board I could see the fruits of his labor. He was erasing large chunks of an elaborate pen-and-ink drawing of downtown Dallas. Jack was clearly agitated. He had been drawing and redrawing the labor-intensive, bird's-eye composition for weeks, his air-conditioner had gone on the fritz, the snake-bit project had fallen behind schedule, and the final piece was due in less than two hours—and now here was a damn kid pestering him to look at a student portfolio.

In my youthful ignorance I didn't think to excuse myself or offer to return on a less stressful day. Jack quickly explained the situation and asked me to wait on a couch on the other side of the studio. After a while he called me back over to look at my book. He slowly leafed through my clunky oversized portfolio, seeming to listen to every word as I thoroughly over-explained each project. The majority of my portfolio was made up of my own illustrations. Illustration was my minor in college, and I tended to use my own paintings and drawings for my design assignments. I was still a bit confused about how it all worked. I didn't understand why a designer couldn't also do all his own illustrations and photography rather than commissioning that work to freelancers.

When Jack got to the end of my book, he paused and looked thoughtfully toward the window behind me, the eraser shards, still stuck to his face and beard, glistening in the afternoon light. Then he looked me in the eye through his round grimy glasses and he asked me an insightful, and career-altering, question: "Do you want to be a designer or an illustrator?" I wasn't sure. I thought about it for a minute but before I could answer, he told me in his gentle, steady Texas twang, that he thought my illustrations were "interesting" and with practice and a daily routine, I could surely



improve. But he thought that my ideas were good and much stronger than my ability to draw them. Maybe it seemed obvious, but that simple observation gave me a moment of clarity. It dawned on me that I didn't have to rely on my ability to draw or paint. It was a turning point.

As I look back at that moment, a fairly insignificant sequence of events in Jack's life, I realize the gift that I was given and the incredible generosity and patience that he extended to a young, confused kid. I know the pressures of deadlines now and the hassles of running a studio, and even with a fully functioning air-conditioner, given the same scenario, I'm pretty sure that I would have sent me, and my big floppy portfolio, sailing right out the door of that little house on Fairmount.

This story was originally written and posted by Design Observer.

