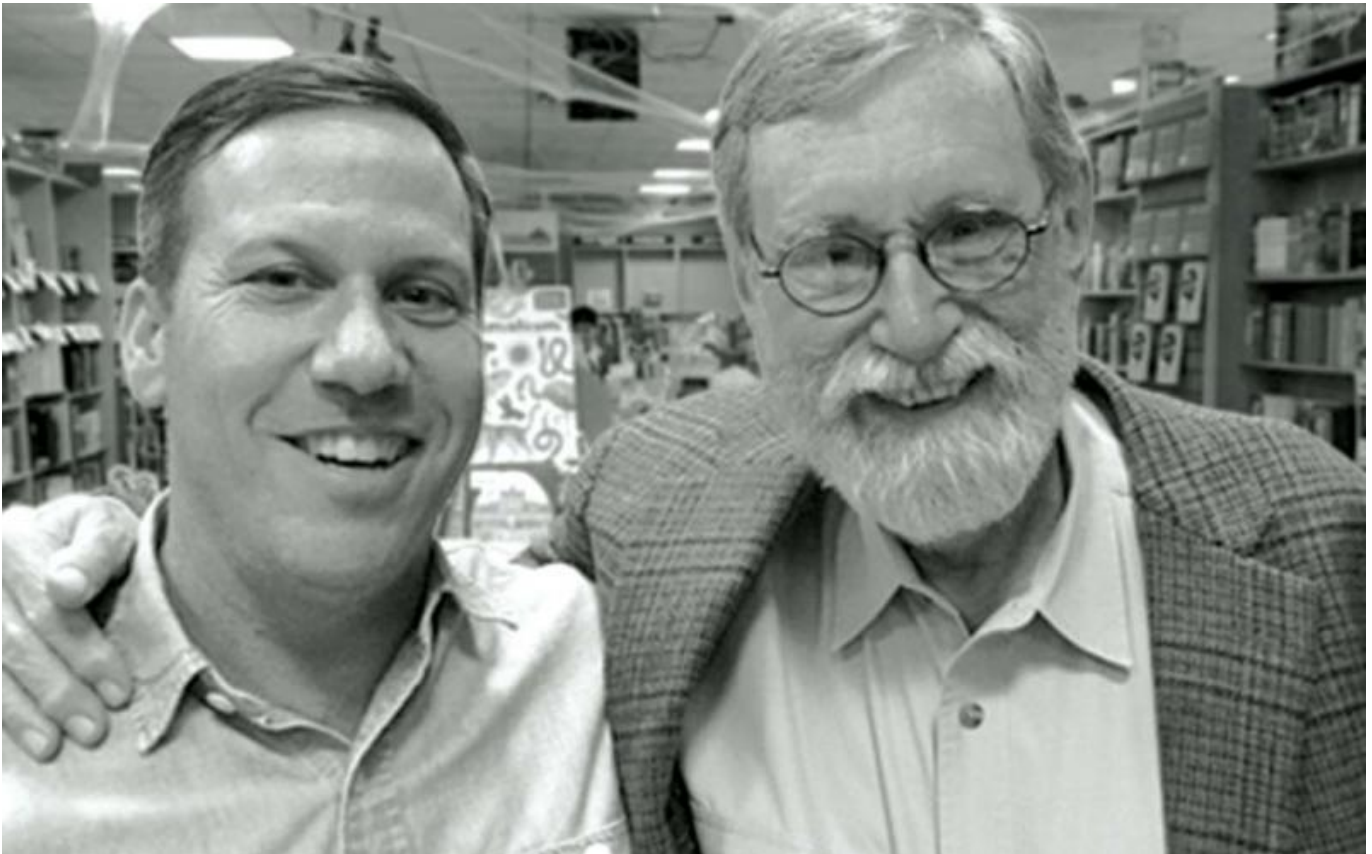


In Memoriam

What Jack Unruh meant to me.



By David Courtney | July 2016



Jack Unruh was a big damn deal. Over the course of a long career, his artwork appeared in *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*, *GQ*, *Field & Stream*, and *Texas Monthly*, among many other publications. One year before our paths crossed, back in 2007, he'd already been inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame, with the likes of Norman Rockwell, Al Hirschfeld, Maurice Sendak, and N. C. Wyeth.

His subjects were wide-ranging: Winston Churchill, FDR, JFK, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mark Twain, Muddy Waters, Bob Dylan, Lyle Lovett, Steve Jobs, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. As well as New York mobsters, Native Americans, cowboys, sportsmen, horses, cattle, fish, frogs, birds,

deer, rabbits—just about everything under the sun and moon. He once illustrated a translation of Pablo Neruda's *Art of Birds*.

And then, too, there was the Texanist. For the past nine years, Jack was tasked with portraying me in all sorts of ridiculous scenarios. At the beginning of each issue, I'd send him the question that was to be illustrated. He'd think on it for a while, send some sketches, and then request reference photos of my face: seething at the sight of broken bottles of Dublin Dr Pepper; violently sneezing, overcome with cedar fever; gleefully polishing off a barbecued rib. In total, Jack did a whopping 105 Texanist illustrations, each one full of whimsy, fine detail, and the imaginative genius that was his hallmark.

I regret that we met in person only one time. It was at a book signing for Bill Wittliff in 2014. Jack had contributed illustrations for *The Devil's Backbone*, Wittliff's debut novel, and he was in Austin for the event. Upon being introduced, without giving it a thought, I blurted out "Papa!" and we hugged. And I think we kissed. Up until that point, he'd seen me only in those reference photos. As I stepped back from our embrace, I noticed Jack intently studying me from various angles. It was as if Mister Geppetto and Pinocchio were somehow meeting for the first time. I think he was making mental notes on my overall mien, my skeletal structure, and every crevice and pockmark on my face. Had he gotten me right? He had, every time. Even when he drew me wearing a homecoming gown and tiara.

Jack died on May 16 at his home in Dallas after a mercifully short battle with esophageal cancer. He was eighty years old. A week later, his wife, Judy Whalen, graciously invited me to visit his studio. It was a beautiful space, a comfortable upstairs spot full of natural light, inspirational ephemera and curios, sketches, reference imagery, and lots of BB guns (for target practice on Peeps with his grandkids at Easter time, of course). There, next to a window, was his drawing table, just as he had left it. And there was the Texanist, in a pencil sketch that had the face precisely cut out and replaced with a slightly different expression. To the end, he was meticulous with his craft. The result of that effort, the illustration that accompanied June's Texanist column, was to be the last piece that he ever completed. I feel extremely lucky to be part of the superb and inimitable body of work he left us with. To borrow the sign-off he always used when we spoke, big hugs to you, Jack.

This story was originally written and published by *Texas Monthly* magazine.

[See a gallery of Jack Unruh's illustrations of the Texanist.](#)