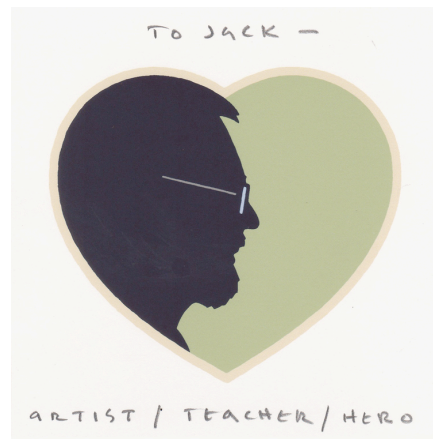


When All Your Heroes Are Gone

By Trisha Turner

Illustration by Michael Schwab



I was devastated to hear about the passing of Jack Unruh, your monthly illustrator for “*The Texanist*.” When I would get my copy of *Texas Monthly*, I always started at the back page first – something I’m sure was not the intended path for most readers *unless* they had seen and knew his work. If you enjoyed those articles and even more, the hysterical imagery that accompanied them, you’d understand. If you saw a “show of hands” who followed this same trek through the publication, it surely would come closer than you can imagine to the total number of circulation.

I bonded with Jack first 'cause he was a Service Brat. His dad was a pilot in the Air Force, so was mine. He went to many different schools growing up – me, too. I went to 15 different schools but I think his was even more. My dad’s name was Marion, so was his. My husband Terry and I did many annual reports, as did Jack, and sometimes we would even compete for projects. We had a studio not far from his so periodically, we’d get together for lunch. I had done nothing but catalogs for years and wanted to get back to more of the fine art side of advertising so I decided to take one of his illustration classes in the mid 70s.

He was an excellent teacher but he was hard - no nonsense – get your projects done by next class. I was pretty seasoned when it came to deadlines but the “kids” in the class didn’t pay too much attention. Halfway through the class, he alerted us that we needed to keep files on illustrators styles and reference. He had always said, “Find someone whose work you like, study it and then take off on your own style.” His assignments were typical of what you would experience in the field: Short deadlines and be ready for corrections.

The next class, I brought in my illustrators’ file I had been keeping since about 1967 - my first being a Bart Forbes done for Seventeen magazine. I must have had 60 file folders in there: Richard Amsel’s TV Guide covers, Seymour Chwast’s posters, various works from Mark English, Marshall Arisman – the list goes on. But there was also a “Jack Unruh” file and he curiously opened it up. As I worked on my assignment, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him drag over a trashcan and he started dropping pages in. I immediately sprang to my feet to retrieve the victims and asked him what he was doing. He said these were old and he didn’t think they were any good. I went back to my seat but you can bet when he went to the john – I got every one of them out of the trash and returned them to their proper location (in secret, of course). Off to the side, he had stacked at least six annual reports. He said he didn’t have copies of them anymore and if I let him have them, he would let me come to his studio and get samples of whatever I wanted. I took him up on this and arrived at the agreed time. He was on the phone so he directed me into a room and opened the drawers. So many beautiful illustrations of proposed restaurants, hotels or industries, all done in his elegantly, detailed and fluid style. He could make an illustration for mosquito pesticide look like an Arthur Rackham childrens’ book. So when he got off the

phone, he came in to check on me. I told him that I had a lot of these already but I was looking for the “kinky stuff.” He paused and looked at me as if truly confused. He asked me what I meant. “You know, the armadillo riding a unicycle wearing cowboy boots - the girl with the frizzy hair, whip, black boots and bra with spikes on it – THAT stuff.” He leaned over and opened a *different* drawer. I honestly got the impression he was unaware that he had another persona doing THAT kind of work.

In class, I put down my first assignment in front of him for a critique. To this day, his words *still* sting. “Girl, you need to get you some books on anatomy – these fingers look like kneaded erasers” he bluntly observed. I wrote down all his comments in the margins and still have it. His delivery may have been a bit brusque but he was spot on and it would make all the difference in your outcome. One of our assignments was to do a billboard so I did one for a zoo. As I presented my sketch, I was raving on and on about endangered species, horrible poachers and hunters when I realized everyone in class was staring at me. Then he said very slowly, “Well, I'm a hunter.” Opps! Years later, I heard through the grapevine, he had a successful hunting trip and had shot a moose. So, I made him a clay-bake sculpture of a moose head but with eyelashes, lipstick and earrings. It also had a little plaque attached that said “Moosealvia Vermomica. Murdered off the coast of Bullchitka.” He loved it but told me “females don't have antlers” but I told him I thought they all “looked the same except for the makeup and jewelry.”

Other than Terry, no other person had so much influence on my art than Jack. He taught me to work on a grid. He taught me to see water in a whole new way. When I drew a background tree he would ask me what *kind* it was. Hell, I didn't know – *IT WAS A TREE* for Christ's sake - *Spermatoffita meyoungum* - I dunno! He made me realize how different they *all* were. “You never just draw a tree.” He taught me to go so much deeper into illustrations. He taught me about research and how important your reference is.

I left Dallas after 15 years as an art director to be a caregiver for my parents but always gave Jack a call on his birthday. When I moved back to Texas, I called him about some pin points I found in my hoard and wanted to know if he wanted them. I remembered he always used Gillott pin points – not Crow Quill, not Rapidographs. He said for me to “send them on” and a few days later he called to thank me. “Where did you get these?” I told him at some garage sale. The boxes were of two different sizes, with hundreds still in each. “I can't find these anywhere. One size was great and the other is too big.” I told him the chances of finding them now was probably going to be slim since they assuredly came from a clean-out of some “granddaddy's attic” and last manufactured in 1956.

Jack always had an overall sparkle and a twinkle in his eye. He had a delicious sense of humor and robust laugh. You saw all of this and more when you were with him. I was never more amazed at what he had on his drawing board or what he had just done. I lost my “Jack Unruh” file to Hurricane Isabel and would later, sit down at garage sales, looking through old National Geographics for the ones he illustrated. I've even been watched suspiciously at a Brass Pro Shop if I lingered way too long over a *Field & Stream* article they had displayed with his artwork.

I'll forever be looking for pages to refurbish my “Jack Unruh” file I will continue to say to myself, “How would Jack draw this?” No one else will ever capture the incredible beauty of his work. Only now and sadly, there is a beginning and an end.

Thank you, Jack, for helping us all to see the world in a totally different and beautiful way. I was so lucky to have had a chance to be near to one of the greats - as an artist, a person and a friend.

Trisha Turner