

Cultural Daily

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He Was a Friend of Mine: Jack Slater

Eric · Thursday, May 21st, 2015

“Friend” is a word I value. I don’t use it lightly. As in “Facebook friend.” The word has more respect about it than that. At its core, it resonates with words like trust, loyalty and longevity. Because it also has substance about it, something Facebook and merely “acquaintance” simply don’t have.

And there is a beautiful song about friendship that I love. It’s called “He Was a Friend of Mine.” My favorite version was sung by Dave Van Ronk, the salty, crusty folksinger with the raspy voice who was sort of the Mayor of Greenwich Village back in the early bohemian 1960s. And sort of a mentor and godfather to Bob Dylan when he first arrived on the scene in 1961, still wet behind the ears, fresh from the red iron ore mines of Hibbing, Minnesota. You should listen to the song. After you’ve read this post. Or maybe even while reading it. I’m sure you can find it. But Dave Van Ronk, please.



Jack Slater in “Mad Dog Blues”, art by Margaret Van Biesen

My friend, Jack Slater, passed away over 9 years ago, in 2006, having undergone a heroic liver transplant to overcome his long battle with Hep C; a battle which he ultimately lost. Jack penned a Pulitzer Prize-nominated [newspaper series about his medical ordeal](#) for the Seattle Times, where he characteristically wrote, “The answer is there is no answer. Just suffering and, if you’re lucky, meaningful work, good friends, a few opportunities to love, and time to plant tomatoes.”

Jack is pictured here in a LA production of Sam Shepard’s “Mad Dog Blues”, posted by director, Darrell Larson, and created by his good friend, artist, Margaret von Biesen. Jack had a lot of friends, all of whom loved him madly. He always gave us a good time, whether it was in the theater doing a show with him, at Chavez Ravine, where he brought us to see his beloved Dodgers, or just about anywhere else. Jack had that gift. A *joie de vivre*, a passion for life, a moral compass for injustice, an enthusiasm for play, a voice to stand up and be heard.

Jack was from Florida and Michigan, and I first met him in Chicago in the early 1970s. He had signed up for a clown class I taught at our modern dance center, and he ended up joining the MoMing Bozo Ensemble as one of our most enthusiastic clowns. His clown name was Alf, and Alf, like Jack, was raucous, ridiculous, and risk-taking. There was no holding Alf back on the streets of the Windy City, where the troupe created a comic mayhem called Free Public Laughs.

I next saw Jack, almost a decade later, at his apartment on 15th Street in Santa Monica. I was

visiting LA for my first time, and I was his guest, sleeping on the same couch that he had generously offered to Ed Harris early in Ed's career. Jack was making a good living back then, employing his rugged, red-haired good looks to make lots of commercials.

And what did he do with his good fortune? Of course, he produced plays. Several Sam Shepards with Ed Harris. Several early John Steppings. Risk-taking, cutting-edge theater. Jack had an eye for talent and originality, and he was always generous, committed, and passionate about theater. About art. And politics. And ideas. That's also what we loved about him.

He asked me to direct his play, *THE SLATER BROTHERS*, which he co-wrote with Mr. Harris, and we created a dark, comic two-handed romp with Vincent Pandoliano playing a dumbed down Art Carney to Jack's dumber-downed Jackie Gleason. We ran it at 2 theaters simultaneously, at the Olio in Silverlake, and at the Powerhouse in Venice, where I was introduced to my earliest LA theater friends like Gilbert Johnquest, our set designer, along with The Mums, Rob Sullivan, Jan Munroe, and many, many others.

As he started aging and his rugged good looks turned craggy, Jack had to suffer the indignities of our heartless Hollywood. He turned to house painting and various odd jobs to make a living, still doing theater when he could. But this is when he met Deborah Swets, who became his life partner, and when they moved to Ballard, Washington, where Jack became a notorious and well-loved school teacher. And where he got into fine art painting & sculpture, as well as growing his tomatoes.

When Darrell recently posted Margaret's picture on Facebook, all these memories came flooding back to me. And I'm sure.... to many more of his many friends. Because perhaps that's what Jack did best.... be our friend.

We all miss you and love you, Jack.

R.I.P.

We know you are. Along with probably creating some rabble-rousing trouble... and laughs.... wherever you're now growing your tomatoes.....

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