

## A Lunch Break with Steven Josefsberg

“My wife really got me into bird-watching,” Steven says. “I guess you can now call me a bird-nerd.”

Steven Josefsberg and I are sitting on his back deck on a warm mid-September afternoon, watching birds feed on suet and seed from one of numerous feeders hanging close to the deck. He seems intent upon talking about downy and pileated woodpeckers and the Anna and Rufus hummingbirds. Steven had agreed to meet for an hour to talk about his life on the west coast as well as that of his father, the Hollywood comedy writer and producer Milt Josefsberg. Steven and his wife, Susan Seubert, a fine arts and travel photographer who shoots for National Geographic and The New York Times among other publications, live on Edgewood Road in Southwest Portland when they are not enjoying time in Maui, Hawaii. I had learned about Steven and Susan from another neighbor who also



**Steven Josefsberg, Man of Leisure**

told me about Steven’s connection to the Golden Era of radio and television.

As it sometimes happens, the paths a father and son take through life lead in different directions, in part because the tastes and interests of one generation can be radically different from the next. While Milt witnessed rapid and dramatic changes in the entertainment business, from vaudeville to radio to television, Steven took to photography early on in his career. “I wanted

to be a Playboy photographer,” Steven confessed.

Steven has always considered himself a west-coaster. He grew up in Encino in the San Fernando Valley and he remembers writers coming to their home to work on skits with his father. “I knew who they were but there was nothing particularly special about their visits,” he noted. I was hoping for ribald stories about oversized personalities telling jokes for the Josefsberg family but as I’ve often read, comedy writers can be deadly serious about their work. Growing up with Milt was a different matter. “There was always a lot of joke telling in the home when I was growing up,” Steven continued. “My father insisted that we learn how to tell a joke correctly. If we told a joke and he saw a way to improve our delivery, our father would correct us.”

Joke telling wasn’t to become part of Steven’s life, however. Photography was his passion early on. After being “kicked out” of the Art Center of Los Angeles (too commercial), Steven obtained his

MFA in photography from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1972 where he also taught. He was also self-taught by reading the books of other photographers such as Ansel Adams.

And yet, he “didn’t make it as a photographer” for reasons we didn’t go into. Instead, he trained himself to be a woodworker and designer, creating custom frames for high-end clientele in Los Angeles. Steven learned his woodworking craft by working summers at a frame shop in Los Angeles that he eventually took over while continuing to teach at the Art Institute. He was quick to point out to me the importance a sense of design is to both photography and woodworking. “They’re both crafts,” he added.

Steven took over the framing shop in 1983 where he designed frames for Hollywood stars such as Richard Gere, Meg Ryan, and Harrison Ford (who was also an accomplished woodworker before turning to acting). “The business was all word-of-mouth; it had no connection with my father’s line of work,” he said.

“When Jodi Foster first came into the framing shop through a big oak front door, she was wearing dark glasses and had a photograph of herself with her mother taken by the famous portrait photographer Annie Leibovitz. I didn’t recognize her until she had to give me her name for the frame she asked me to design. ‘Foster...Jodi,’ she told me. Suddenly I recognized who my client was,” Steven related somewhat sheepishly.

He continued his work for such luminaries over the next decade but after so many years in L.A., he was ready to leave and find a new home. Knowing that he wanted to stay on the west coast, he traveled its length and decided Portland was where he wanted to live. He left L.A. in 1992. It wasn’t long after he settled in Portland that Steven opened the S.K. Josefsberg Gallery in the Pearl District where he kept his framing shop in the back of the gallery. Most of his clients continued to ship their work to him. In his gallery he showed the work of the great photographers of the world such as vintage photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson, the father of photo-journalism, as well as that of Andre Kertesz, Edward Steichen, Herb Ritts, Dieter Appelt, and Herman Leonard.

“I took some flak from local Portland art critics who felt I should have shown more of the work of local artists, but I was trying to expose them to renowned artists to excite and inspire them. Still, I did represent a number of Portland photographers such as Stu Levy and Dianne Kornberg.”

Steven met his future wife, Susan Seubert, at an exhibit of photographers from around the world at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art. Susan was the only photographer from Oregon whose work was shown at the exhibit, hers being a series of photographs of household items used as bludgeons in domestic violence attacks. “I was drawn to her work,” Steven told me. They ended up marrying and have filled their home with an amazing array of photographs and other art.

We turned to the life of his father, Milt Josefsberg. Milt began his career in New York City where he was born in 1911. He began as a press agent for Walter Winchell, the famous journalist and radio gossip commentator who was one of the first commentators in America to attack Adolf Hitler and American pro-fascist and pro-Nazi organizations. He worked as a press agent until a humorous letter accompanied by some of his jokes that he had sent to Bob Hope had its intended effect. Hope called Milt in New York City and asked him to come to Hollywood to write for him. His starting salary was one hundred dollars a week. As the saying goes, Milt never looked back.



**Milt Josefsberg**

Shortly after Steven and I met, I listened to a 1981 radio interview with Milt on “Speaking of Radio: An Oral History of Radio’s Golden Age (<http://www.speakingofradio.com/interviews/josefsberg-milt-writer>) because I needed to hear his voice. I was not disappointed. During the interview, Milt speaks of his years writing for Bob Hope after which he joined the Jack Benny show as a comedy-writer in 1943. He stayed for twelve years with Benny and then moved on to television, writing and producing for Lucille Ball for the next eight years. The interview is laced with legendary stories about writing for The Jack Benny Show among others and the changes that occurred over the years in the comedy writing business. Towards the end of interview, Milt says wistfully, “Everything seemed better back in those days.” When asked if he would write for Jack Benny again if he had the opportunity, Milt didn’t hesitate: “I’d jump at the chance to work for Jack again!”

This confirms what son Steven told me when I asked him about Jack Benny and his father’s relationship with the comedy star. “My father had a soft spot for Jack Benny,” Steven said. “Jack Benny was a funny and kind man who supported the younger writers. He even once threatened to pull a show out of the deep south when the hotel where the cast was staying wouldn’t allow Rochester to stay “(Eddie “Rochester” Anderson was a black American comedian and actor who got his start on the vaudeville circuit, beginning his career in 1937 as Jack Benny’s valet “Rochester,” a role that identified him throughout the rest of his career). The hotel relented.

Milt continued to add to his writing and producing credentials after leaving The Jack Benny Program. He wrote for many television sitcoms including All in the Family, Here’s Lucy, The Lucy Show, Mork and Mindy, and Happy Days. His 1977 book “The Jack Benny Show” profiles the performers for whom he wrote: Dennis Day, Mary Livingstone, Don Wilson, and Rochester among others. He shared a primetime Emmy in 1978 with Mort Lachman for his work for “All in the Family” after having been nominated for his work in 1955, 1968, and 1977.



**Displaying Milt's Emmy**

The lunch hour was over and I needed to return to my day job. But one last question: I asked Steven how he remembers his father? “The epithet on my father’s grave says it all,” Steven concluded. “Milt Josefsberg—Funny Man.”

(Steven and Susan live four months out of the year in Hawaii where Steven spends “two months surfing and two months in physical therapy.”)