

In Remembrance of My Friend, Jim Redden

By Jeff Cowart

“The aim of every artist [writer] is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life. Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move.”

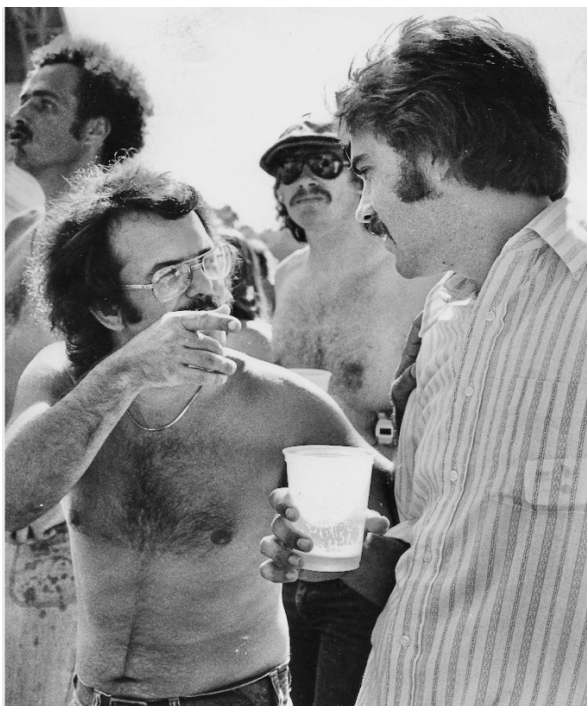
– William Faulkner

I first met Jim Redden 49 years ago as a young journalist arriving to take a job at the Sun-Sentinel in Fort Lauderdale. We bonded instantly, two southerners in a sea of not-so-southern snowbirds and relocated far-northerners. When we met he was fresh off of extended front-page reporting of a dramatic murder case and I remember thinking when I read his stuff, “This guy’s a hell of a writer.”

To look at this native of West Virginia, and to talk with him over a beer, with his odd vocal cadence and disheveled style and an honest strain of “aw shucks, fellers” persona rooted naturally, one might guess that the beauty and lyrical flow of the published words could not have been pounded out on the typewriter by such a presence. Jim was always underestimated that way, which may be part of the reason why he was such an effective reporter and a great journalist. Jim and I worked together, played together, marched to our own distinctive rhythms of soundtracks created by Charlie Daniels, Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd. And, unknowingly at the time, we built a stalwart framework for what would become a lifelong, and remarkably close, friendship.



Jim and Jeff on Fisheating Creek in Florida



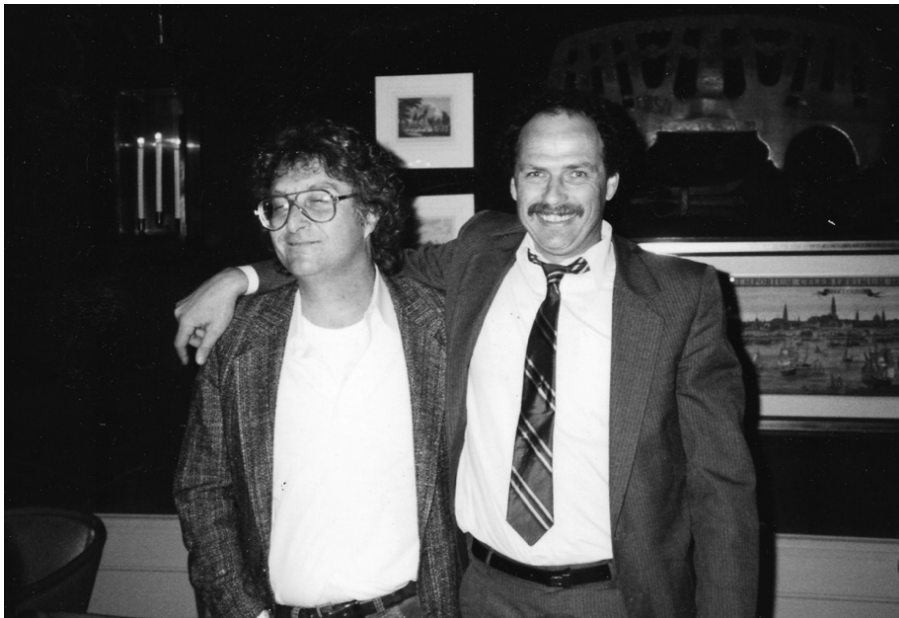
***Journalists Jim (left), Mikey, Jonesy, and Jeff
at a Skynyrd Concert in Miami in 1976***

In the concert photo above, I like to think that Skynyrd was rocking deeply into Free Bird, one of our adopted anthems of the time, which endured with me and Jim, and that in a couple of next frames Jim would be busting out into one of his signature air guitar solos, arched backward, lips pursed, rock-face grimace, fingers flying everywhere. Too bad we missed that shot. And, I would love to have a shot of that time when Jim talked rodeo producers into letting him ride a bucking bronco (for real) as a journalist for a story and I was his tie down man. Nobody thought he would go through with it, but he did, and, after the real cowboys took over my job and tied him down, the bronco ran straight to the center of the ring, bucked once and sent Jim flying and crashing to the ground. He was unhurt but earned and leveraged major bragging rights, wrote a great story about it and became a Sun-Sentinel legend that likely now is long forgotten, except by those of us who were there.

One day Jim just up and announced he wanted to relocate to Texas and I remember being with him on New Year's Eve when he pulled out the Editor and Publisher yearbook, the red book as we called it, that listed all U.S. newspapers, all the people who worked there and their jobs, like an old-style printed phone book. He opened the red book to the Texas section, started at the beginning of the alphabet with "A," looked up the editor in Amarillo, and called. Remarkably, the editor answered (journalists work on New Year's Eve and every holiday), and the editor told Jim to send him some clips (samples of stories that you literally cut out of the newspaper with scissors). As soon as the editor reviewed the clips when he got them by mail a few days later, he called Jim and hired him over the phone. The day before Jim was to take off in his old, white van that none of us figured would make it to Amarillo, we had to take Jim to the emergency room to get his graduation ring cut off his finger because he had kicked himself in the hand with the heel of his cowboy boot while dancing.

In Amarillo, Jim rented some kind of bunkhouse-like lodgings on a ranch and regaled us with stories of snow blowing in through the loose slats of his bedroom and piling up on the bed while he slept, of passing good times down at Dippy Lou's, and of the range of colorful characters (Jim included) who came and went through the ranches and oil fields and the Amarillo newsroom. Directly, Jim left Amarillo and moved to Houston, and remained a Texan for 48 years. We expect he has negotiated and reserved, in advance, a place for himself in the Lone Star sector of the Great Beyond.

Over the years, Jim wrote for newspapers, magazines, corporate interests, primarily about the oil and gas industry. That was the news beat he was assigned to when he went to Amarillo and in which he became an internationally known specialist, traveling all over the world to hang out on rigs with roughnecks. With his typical artistic flair, he humanized the voices of the scientists and engineers through his translation to the written word. I wish I had recorded the frequent calls when I said, "Hello," and he, in full laughter on the other end of the line, just launched straight into his story with: "You ain't going to believe what this guy said..." Those guys he translated from oil field to English loved him, by the way, as did most people who had the good fortune to cross his path. I still have the photo he sent me of the time he wandered into a bar in Amsterdam to have a beer, recognized the great musician Randy Newman, and he and Randy spent the evening together swapping stories over a few beers. Jim asked someone to snap a picture of the two of them and they had great, grinning faces and arms looped around each other. Jim also wrote three unpublished mystery novels in comedic western settings, was a dedicated and avid reader of both fiction and non-fiction and, of course, newspapers. He also wrote all kinds of stuff, all the time, every day.



Jim with Randy Newman in Amsterdam

Jim Redden was a writer... a storyteller *par excellence*.

Jim Redden was a journalist, which means he believed at the very basis of the core of who he was and why he was here that information needs to flow through the prism of journalism where the professional journalist sorts it out against a range of values that include accuracy, fairness, context, accountability, decency, compelling storytelling, to name a few. Jim and I lived in time when newspaper newsrooms, irreverent though they might be, were populated with journalists, not celebrities. This is one of the things that I believe bound us so tightly in a friendship that endured for nearly half a century. As true journalists, we shared an unshakeable and deeply rooted commitment to the preservation and advancement of common good values for the common man, the public right to know factual details about its government, its corporations, its institutions, and each other. Jim and I were bonded in understanding. Part of my great grief in his departure from this material world is feeling that a significant piece of my own identity departs with him since he knew, remembered and could tell the tales of a treasure trove of backstory details that define a segment of who I am and why I'm here.

As we mourn his passing into the other world, I know he would be most proud to have his stone engraved with just the single word, "writer," although he likely would not object to the word "journalist" being added as well because he remained until the end a deeply passionate believer in the sanctity of the professional craft. He and I remained the closest of friends, always in touch over the years. We were constantly texting as we became technology enabled, especially during college football season, him a fanatical Texas Longhorn and I a rabid LSU Tiger, and both of us aligned in our desire for doom for Alabama (and USC and Notre Dame and...)

Free Bird

*"If I leave here tomorrow
Would you still remember me?
For I must be traveling on now
'Cause there's too many place I've got to see."*

And, so many stories left to tell...

In the language of Faulkner, Jim arrested motion – life – every day through the power of the pen, as we still like to say, even though we're now mostly using keyboards. He was a true friend. An artist. A writer. And, even though we miss him terribly in this material space we still occupy in his absence, we know he is immortal because he arrested motion and he lives again each time someone runs across his writing, reads his words, tells his story.

Yes, Jim, we damn sure will remember you.

Won't you fly high Free Bird... And, show them angels how to play that air guitar...