

John Frederick Houser

Died: April 9, 2007

Jack Houser died on Monday, April 9, 2007 in Houston, Texas. He had two daughters, Anna Margaret and Rachel Houser. He was 67 years old.

Jack was raised in Shaker Heights, Ohio, went to high school there, and was on the glee club, swimming team, and student council. At Dartmouth he majored in English, and was a member of Kappa Sigma.

After graduating, he served in the Army “for a few months using an English degree being a truck driver.” That’s the way he described it in our 25th Reunion Yearbook.

He then began a 16-year career in sales, marketing and management with a rapidly growing manufacturer ... in plastics. (“The Graduate” had come out just about then, in 1967.) With that company he held different positions in Cleveland, Boston, Detroit, Baton Rouge and Houston.

The plastics business got bought out after he moved to Houston, so Jack tried putting together an oil field equipment brokerage business, which seems to have gone bust when the oil fields did. The same fate befell other companies Jack affiliated with. He shifted into consulting.

Divorced, but near his former wife and two daughters, Jack wrote in 1986 that, “I live just down the road from them with a Labrador and a car.” He wrote that he spent his time hunting and fishing, cooking fantastic Cajun food, “and surviving in this Houston economy.”

Somewhere along the way here, as classmate Tom Conger writes in WWW in January 1991, Jack “discovered his real calling: after strumming his six-string for forty years, he just picked it up again and wrote a dozen songs, country and otherwise, about a month ago, and they have been hailed as good enough to copyright.”

Still in Houston, Jack became active in the corrosion control industry, and by 2001 was, nominally at least, on the board and part owner of Corrensics, Inc., which he said “holds some extremely important patents in surface preparation of metals and concrete.”

Despite having one foot in business, in Jack’s account of his life for our 40th Reunion in 2001 he said he had retired from a day job in 1999, was writing songs, had moved around some, and had recently trained his fourth Lab pup (“so I get my share of ducks”). Cooking was still his passion, he said. A girlfriend at the time, he said, “keeps me fooling with a lot of goofy musicians.”

In writing to his classmates in 2001, Jack said that the 15 years between our 25th and 40th Reunions “had been a great ride; my favorite expression continues to be ‘God, it’s a great country!’ ”

Jack’s 2007 death brought forth remembrances and comment that eclipses the narrative of his biography. Dogs, songwriting, guitar picking, and cooking seemed to be among Jack’s pleasures and the pursuits for which he was best known.

Our classmate Stu Sheldon wrote about Jack’s death shortly after he passed away to Jack’s brother Jim, and then for Jack’s classmates sent what he wrote back then for inclusion here.

“As Jack and I talked about many times,” Stu wrote to Jack’s brother Jim, “friendship is one of the truly enduring relationships. Ours goes back to 1957, and for the past 50 years we have shared fun times and sad times — from a 1961 canoe trip to the loss of a grandchild. No matter how tough life was, Jack maintained his sense of humor and positive spirit. His death leaves a big hole in my life but I am thankful for these 50 years of great friendship.”

In an “In Memoriam” he wrote, John Hagaman, Jack’s fraternity brother and our classmate, said of Jack that “I will never forget him and his favorite expression — ‘Who loves you, boy?’ ”

Tom Conger in May 2010 wrote his own take on Jack. “Jack the Rat was a wordsmith, songwriter, guitar picker, and would-be rascal,” Tom wrote. “At a bar drinking stingers, he’d write country songs on a napkin (‘one draft, in ink’) that were sometimes so good I referred him to Willie Nelson on Maui. Unlucky in matrimonial love, he adored his daughters - even the wayward one, shared my deep love for dogs, and raised horses for jumping. He never owned a computer nor a cell phone, smoked too much, drank too much, loved too much—and wouldn’t have had it any other way. His stepbrother, Hank Greer ’60, is certain Kris Kristofferson wrote this song [“The Pilgrim — Chapter 33,” a portion of which is quoted below] about Jack:

‘He’s a poet, he’s a picker, he’s a prophet, he’s a pusher,
He’s a pilgrim and a preacher, and a problem when he’s stoned,
He’s a walkin’ contradiction, partly truth, and partly fiction,
Takin’ every wrong direction on his lonely way back home.’”

Thus writes Conger about Jack (who it should be noted had many nicknames — Tom calls him “the Rat,” but said Jack’s friends also knew him as Jackson, Ratski, and Little Rat.)

The “Pilgrim” lyrics excerpted above offer Kristofferson’s take on a certain type of personality many of us perhaps recognize. The image the lyrics craft was so apt, and to Jack’s friends so descriptive of him, that a cottage industry has sprung up around the

belief, that Greer echoes above, that Kristofferson actually wrote the song with Jack in mind. Research knocks this notion off the table, however. It just isn't so.

What appears certain, from classmates and friends with knowledge of the facts, is that Jack's nephew read a poem at Jack's funeral, crafting it as a take-off and in the spirit of Kristofferson's Pilgrim lyrics.

Herewith the poem written and read by Jack's nephew at his funeral:

Ode to the Pilgrim: Smilin' Jack

Let's raise our glasses and hold 'em up high
But let it be whiskey or let it be rye,
Let's goodbye the picker that's bid us good day,
And with a proper beverage, and in the proper way.

Yes we are sad at his untimely pass,
This prophet, this pusher, this pain in the ass.
The original pilgrim extraordinaire -
The wordsmith, the writer, full of hot air.

Oh the tales he would tell, and the jokes he would play,
The laughs he would laugh and the lies he would lay.
From sliding and gliding and smoking and joking
And all the fast women, and hearts he had broken.
Like Shauna and Broussard and Ol' Patsy B
And Margot and others we never did see.

Oh we heard all the lectures, we heard all the lies
From this preacher of sermons with his words for the wise.
This drinker of drinks, this problem of sorts;
This liver of life with all his cohorts.

Oh yes we'll miss him, this pilgrim we loved;
This crazy we chanced; this child from above.
Smilin' Jack, Smilin' Jack, laughing and grinning,
Drinking and driving and cussing and sinning.
A jumper of horses, a humper of women,
A master of words with a love for their spinning.

He lived hard to the end, a slave to the bottle;
With a hunger inside that no one could throttle.

Ol' bloody bull, the gorilla thumb;
An egg that's cooked right and the right kind of rum;
A good red-eye gravy, not too dark or too pale;

A great set of tits, a great piece of tail.

Pepper and Faubacher and friends that were fast;
Things that he clung to were things from the past.
Ducks and old dogs and faded blue jeans,
He didn't care much for fancier things.

Kristofferson, Cash, and Waylon and Willie,
It was songs that he loved
And he loved all that was silly.

A piece of work, a one and only,
A child at heart, who died so lonely.
Seldom proper and always picky,
He was funny, cute and tricky.

Smilin' Jack, Smilin' Jack, laughing and grinning,
Drinking and driving and cussing and sinning.
A jumper of horses, a humper of women,
A master of words with a love for their spinnin'.

So let's raise our glasses and let's say good night,
To this one that we loved, the great human blight.
And with a line from the past, with words learned from you,
We find ourselves asking, "Whatever shall we do."

Jack's friends all talk about Jack's love of dogs, so the final words perhaps fittingly go to Stu Sheldon, who channels the essential dog that must have lived inside Jack, and offers this poem in his memory, a poem he said, "that Jack loved as much as he loved all his dogs." It's entitled "Bishop Doane on His Dog:"

"I am quite sure he thinks that I am God--
Since he is God on whom each one depends
For life, and all things that his bounty sends--
My dear old dog, most constant of all friends;
Not quick to mind, but quicker far than I
To Him whom God I know and own: his eye
Deep brown and liquid, watches for my nod;
He is more patient underneath the rod
Than I, when God His wise corrections sends.
He looks love at me deep as words e'er spake:
And from me never crumb nor sup will take
But he wags thanks with his most vocal tail:

And when some crashing noise wakes all his fear,
He is content and quiet if I am near,
Secure that my protection will prevail.

So, faithful, mindful, thankful, trustful, he
Tells me what I unto my God should be."