

Herman Surkis: 1945-January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Herman Surkis joined the Victoria Camera Club in September 2005 and left in 2018. Herman was a Vice-President and became President towards the end of the 2009-2010 year and for the 2010-11 year.

Herman was a noted professional photographer in Toronto between 1967 and 1983. He travelled widely and spent a short time residing in Costa Rica. By 1983 he had obtained a master's degree in psychology and then moved to Florida and Arizona where he worked as a psychotherapist for youth at risk. He returned to BC in 2000 and resumed his photographic endeavours at a slower and more personal level.



Herman was especially noted for his command of portrait photography and lighting. In his Toronto era he became known as one of the few Canadian photographers who photographed John Lennon and Yoko Ono during their “Bed-In” in Montréal. His forte at that time was photographing musicians with a long list of credits including Twiggy, Dionne Warwick, the Bolshoi Ballet, Gordon Lightfoot, Paul Butterfield, The Who, Neil Diamond (album back cover), Joni Mitchell, Buffy St. Marie, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Gerry Lee Lewis, Jimi Hendrix, the list is almost endless.

His work was not restricted to musicians but was wide-ranging and included “...industrial, product, fashion, portrait, weddings, publicity/publication. Pretty much some of everything, which is what it took to survive and pay your way through University.”

He said: “In those years ('67-'83) a friend and I had complete and open access to any venue including Massey Hall and the O'Keefe Centre, or any act that came through Toronto. What was interesting was our not even needing a special pass for 90% of the venues or events. You were just known, said 'hi', and walked in, and that included backstage, or even on stage. Try that now!”

Herman's images have been published in at least the following magazines: MacLean-Hunter Pub., Popular Photography, Gogue News, Canadian High News, RPM, Hit Parader, Jazz, Cream, Rolling Stone, RCA records (trade and publicity), Dance Current, Canadian Art Teacher News, Art and Design 2.

At one time Herman was the Canadian editor of Billboard (amongst other music related endeavours).

During his time as a member of the Victoria Camera Club, in addition to his time as Vice-President and President, he was instrumental in setting up the Club's Lighting SIG and presented many workshops. He had a high degree of skill and expertise with Lighting. He generously guided and mentored many VCC members in working with light, in the studio and in nature. His leadership drew a number of members into developing a studio photography specialty.

Herman was also a founding member of the “Photo Editing Group” (PEG), a small group of photographers including VCC members and others who initially focused on getting the most out of digital images and then wandered off into the realm of creative photography. The group is still in existence today.

He was instrumental in the setting up of the ballet photography training sessions with Ballet Victoria. His knowledge of lighting and shooting dancers helped guide many aspiring photographers to hone their skills shooting this challenging genre.

During his time as President, the Club was going through a period of rapid growth and he was instrumental in a change in focus towards more artistic content.

Herman also had an interest in nature photography. He worked extensively with, and supported, a number of animal protection groups. He was a founding member of the Crystal Garden Conservation Society in 2004. When the Crystal Garden Conservation Centre was being closed, he tried to either save it at that location or, to find a place to move it to. After the centre closed, the society changed its name to OASES, (Organization Advocating Sanctuary for Endangered Species), and continued working for the good of all endangered animals and plants. Herman used his photography to promote OASES and would take his snakes to events so people could meet his wriggly friends.

One of his more interesting incidents with nature was being pecked on the hand by a Pileated woodpecker in his kitchen. A long-lived family of many generations of Pileateds had been living in his neighbourhood for years frequently visiting his balcony feeder. One day, one just got too friendly and came in through the open balcony door.

Herman ran a small studio in Victoria for many years shooting both human and animal models. He was selective in the models that he shot, some were known to him from “the business”, others would be friends of friends, models from various agencies including Coultish Management in Victoria and online sources such as Model Mayhem. He was greatly respected and liked by his models, particularly the dancers. From flamenco to folkloric and ballet, they all felt he brought out their very best in his images.

He held numerous solo and joint art exhibitions in Victoria and elsewhere. He encouraged other photographers to do the same.

Compiled by Barbara Burns, Nancy MacNab and Richard James. Image courtesy of Tom Gore.

Sources: Personal knowledge, Herman’s website and Flickr bios (see which for a longer list of artists he photographed).