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FRED L. SINGER, 76

Film pioneer best known for Burdines TV ads

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Fred L. Singer, the documentary and TV-commercial producer/director whose Coronado Studios helped pioneer Miami's film industry — and launch several protégés' successful careers — died of pancreatic cancer on Oct. 25.

Robert Parente, who heads the city's Office of Film and Cultural Affairs, called Singer, 76, "a local legend. . . Long before Miami Vice kicked off the modern era of film here, Fred was established."

Singer shot all over the world for clients like the U.S. Marine Corps, the Biscayne Kennel Club, After Six Formal Wear and Harvey's Bristol Cream. He directed dozens of celebrities, including Frank Sinatra, William Shatner, Don Shula and Jack Nicklaus.

His Miami clients included Burger King, Braman Motors, Williams Island and the Orange Bowl, but he was best known for his Burdines commercials.

"He had a couple of big ideas for them," said fellow South Florida producer/director Bob Berkowitz. "It was his idea to bring in [actor] Ronnie Schell, who became their spokesman."

In a field where "people come and go, Fred came and stayed," Berkowitz said. "He was totally happy in Miami."

Singer founded the South Florida Film and Tape Producers Association, and won Florida's first CLIO, the ad industry's Oscar, for a 7-Eleven spot.

A 1952 Miami Beach High School graduate, Singer began directing his alma mater's annual Hall of Fame DVDs eight years ago, contributing to the latest series from his deathbed. "His fine hand is definitely in it," scriptwriter Alexa Weiss Rossy said. "He had ideas that we used."

Rossy, a Miami Beach Realtor, said that when she helped launch the Alumni Association project eight years ago, "we didn't know what we were doing" and sought Singer's help, which he gave thereafter, gratis.

Years earlier, Singer had used Rossy's hands in the Burger King fish sandwich's inaugural commercial.

"He went through 20 boxes of buns to find the perfect bun," she recalled.

Rossy described him as "charming, but no doormat."

"Nobody could handle clients like Fred," Berkowitz added. "He could deal with the corporate elite, politicians and prima donnas."

Fred Leonard Singer was born in Pittsburgh, where the family lived above his father's bar.

"Dad would come down and sing and [patrons] would give him nickels," said daughter Marci Fried, of Atlanta.

Fred's mother brought him to Miami Beach as a youngster in the early 1940s, where the climate was said to be good for his asthma. "His parents separated when he was 9," said his wife, Betsy Shockett Singer. "He lived by himself when he was 13 at a hotel."

After Beach High, he earned the second bachelor's degree that the University of Florida's newlycreated Communications Department gave, his daughter said.

"They had a coin toss to determine the first graduate," she said.

Betsy Singer met her husband after he had served in the U.S. Army. They married at the Deauville Hotel and would have celebrated their 51st anniversary this coming Monday.

Early on, he made commercials for drive-in movies in the South, she said, “then he met somebody down here with an agency” who gave him local work.

From there came Coronado, a name he chose “because it sounded like Hollywood,” his wife said. “It thrived for three decades.”

Retired hotel publicist Rose Rice recalls sharing an office with the studio at 1070 NE 79th St. and benefiting from Singer’s success. Thanks to an ice cream commercial for 7-Eleven, “for about four months we had a freezer full of ice cream. . . We had Friday night poker games. It was good times.”

Miami filmmaker Carl Kesser said he began “sweeping floors at Coronado” and learning from Fred.

“It was a hot and heavy place 40 years ago,” said Kesser, who partnered with Singer on commercials for decades to come.

“What I learned from him was patience,” said Kesser. “He really was inspirational. He taught me not to burn bridges and to really understand what everybody’s functions were” on a production.

Bob Gordon, of Bob Gordon Films in Los Angeles, started with Singer in the 1970s.

“Those were the golden days when everyone was coming down here to shoot,” he said. “Fred was the big gun, maybe the first TV commercial director to own a company down here.”

Singer never viewed other directors as competition, Gordon said. Rather, “if ‘Uncle Freddy’ thought somebody had talent, he wanted to make sure they got a good start. . . He was happy to see people do great work.”

Once their kids were old enough, Fred and Betsy Singer — who shot production stills — traveled the world making commercials and documentaries: France, Spain, England, Norway, Ireland, Austria, Monte Carlo.

“One year we went back and forth to Europe five times,” she said. But he also did pro bono work for local nonprofits like the Jewish Federation and the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center.

After getting a definitive diagnosis last spring, Fred Singer figured pancreatic cancer’s odds and decided to forgo treatment. He opted instead to enjoy whatever time remained with Betsy, their daughters, grandkids, and his work rather than undergo chemotherapy.

“As he was dying, he was moving his fingers like he was threading film,” daughter Marci said. “He was Fred to the last moment.”

In addition to his wife and daughter Marci, Singer is survived by daughters Deborah Kolodkin and Lisa Cohen and brothers Sidney and Mervin.

The family welcomes donations to the Fred Singer Scholarship Fund at Miami Beach High.

Services were held.



SINGER



FAMILY PHOTO

ARTIST AT WORK: Fred Singer with fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg.