How Stirling Silliphant, One Of The 20th Century’s Greatest Writers, Became My Mentor

Chapter 4 of 8
Landing the Big Interview

By John Corcoran

“When the student is ready, the master appears.”
—Buddhist proverb

I love this ancient proverb above, which is liberally quoted in the martial arts field, but it’s very deceptive in its simplicity. In actuality, the master “appears” only when he is seriously sought out by the student. The student is “ready” when he/she realizes an intense need to learn something from one, and only one, enlightened source. Then the student’s journey to gain the master’s personal attention begins. And it can often be a long, tedious process to reach that goal.

As you are about to read, I learned that lesson firsthand with Stirling Silliphant, one of the 20th-century’s greatest screenwriters. The master storyteller was going to “appear” because, little by little, I was subtly gaining his attention. Now, however, a confluence of events occurred that placed me in an appropriate position to embark on a full-throttle pursuit of him to put myself directly in his vision.

And I came prepared. I sought to conduct the quintessential interview with him about his decades-long passion for — and involvement in — the martial arts.

As explained in Chapter 3 of this series, my first personal meeting with Stirling happened by sheer chance in 1978. We were brought together by an advance screening of Stirling and Bruce Lee’s one-time dream project, “The Silent Flute” (a.k.a., “Circle of Iron”).

Appeal to Someone’s Passion and You Can Get His Attention

In October 1979, I left my part-time position with the Professional Karate Association, one of kickboxing’s two major pioneering sanctioning bodies, and went to work as a consulting editor for publisher Curtis Wong. Curtis had been publishing “Inside Kung Fu” as a regional, southern-California magazine since 1973 and was now expanding its distribution throughout the U.S. and Canada. The magazine would serve as Curtis’ flagship publication for decades as he built a martial arts publishing empire.

When going national/international back then, it was the nature of the business for publishers to also increase their number of magazine titles. The more magazines you published, the better your overall distribution on newsstands for each magazine. So, within mere months, I helped Curtis create two new internationally-distributed magazines, “Martial Arts Movies” and “Kick Illustrated.” We were on a roll!

Launching new magazines at this level requires the inaugural issue in particular to have a strong cover personality tied into a riveting, relevant cover story. Jackie Chan was our “Martial Arts Movies” cover story. In 1978, Jackie had created the “kung-fu comedy” subgenre in Hong Kong and had literally rocketed to prominence as Asia’s biggest movie star. His films there had set new box-office-profit records, surpassing Bruce Lee’s.

I was already a big Jackie Chan fan, as were many of my friends and colleagues, insiders who followed the martial arts film genre worldwide. We had already seen a bunch of Jackie’s phenomenal “kung-fu comedies” in L.A.’s Chinatown theaters. We were always some of the few Caucasians sitting among all the Chinese patrons in the audience. Fortunately, these Hong Kong-produced, Chinese-language films were subtitled — many times comically — in battered English.

Blessed with a unique combination of personal charm,
Chaplinesque, universally-understood physical comedy and superb kung-fu craftsmanship, Jackie was in L.A. shooting his first American movie, “The Big Brawl,” when we were launching “Martial Arts Movies.” Hollywood was hoping Jackie’s kung-fu genius would attract an American audience. We published an unusually long cover story about Jackie’s career, written by my friend, Neva Friedenn, liberally accompanied by dozens of movie stills demonstrating his brilliant physicality.

That left me with just one obvious cover-story choice for “Kick Illustrated,” Bruce Lee. Despite the fact that he had died seven years earlier, Bruce’s influence and impact was so strong in our field that his appearance on a martial arts magazine cover guaranteed greater newsstand sales than anyone else. But there had probably been a million words written posthumously about Bruce by that time. I needed something entirely new, something decidedly big and bold. Instantly, I thought of Stirling Silliphant.

Outside of his interest in the outcome of “The Silent Flute,” I knew Stirling hadn’t revisited the martial arts for some five years at that point, since his ill-fated 1975 martial arts-laden spy thriller, “The Killer Elite.” I also knew that, other than focusing on his various projects with Bruce (“Marlowe,” “The Silent Flute” and TV’s “Longstreet” series in 1970), very little had really been written about Stirling himself in any martial arts magazine.

So, I wrote out a list of everything I already knew about his martial arts involvement and dove headlong into research on what I didn’t know. Then I typed up a list of over 40 key questions, organized in chronological order, tracing his entire martial arts history from the beginning up to that date in 1980.

The “student” was ready!

I sent Stirling a cover letter at his Warner Bros. office expressing my avid interest in conducting the “definitive” martial arts interview with him. To demonstrate my sincerity, I included the entire list of typed questions. It would prove my degree of preparation and professionalism and show him that he wouldn’t be wasting his time with me.

The Master Appears!

Stirling called me personally the day he received my request and said he was interested in doing the interview! But also explained that he was very busy and, given the extent of my questions, we would have to do it in stages. He set up a date, time and place for the first such meeting. When we hung up, I leaped up from my desk and roared in triumph! My nearby coworkers thought I’d gone crazy.

Getting the actual interview, however, turned out to be a major ordeal in itself. He made me chase him around L.A. for three preliminary meetings without actually proceeding to the taped-interview stage.

In one of those prelim meetings, at the Century Plaza Hotel, I met Stirling in the early morning at the tail end of his breakfast and we proceeded up to his room, presumably, per his prearrangement, to conduct the interview.

Now, I was indeed a young, starry-eyed fan of Stirling’s but, nevertheless, also a professional journalist. I opened my briefcase, removed my tape recorder and, purposely, placed a copy of Alex Ben Block’s paperback biography, “The Legend of Bruce Lee,” on the table. Stirling had been liberally quoted in it. Very uncharacteristically for him, some of his comments in the book were awash with a negative tone and seemed decidedly contrary to the nature of Bruce and his close relationship. Some of his comments were contradictory to everything else I had previously read about them.

One statement in particular was, to me, downright shocking. Stirling said, in a seemingly accusatory tone, “Bruce deserted me!” That comment always bothered me. “What does he mean, ‘deserted’ him?” I pondered when I first read it. “Bruce died! Seems to me he didn’t ‘desert’ anybody on purpose.” So, that was the hardball, intimate journalistic question Stirling knew was coming. He had seen it in my list of interview questions I had sent him in advance. My openly placing the book down, too, I knew, served as a reminder.

To my complete surprise, Stirling said, suddenly, “Look, I’ve got a meeting coming up shortly so we can’t do the interview today. Call me and we’ll set another appointment, okay?” I politely agreed, packed
up and politely left. Apparently, he wasn’t ready to address that particular topic.

In Nat Segaloff’s excellent biography, “Stirling Silliphant: The Fingers of God,” I learned there might have been another reason for his uncharacteristic comments about Bruce in Alex Ben Block’s book. In early 1973, Stirling and actor James Coburn visited Bruce in Hong Kong during the filming of “Enter the Dragon.” They urged Bruce to rejoin “The Silent Flute,” but, by then, he had lost interest. Bruce told them that Dino De Laurentiis had just offered him $1 million to star in his next film after “Enter.”

In retrospect, was it Bruce’s rejection of their dream project that caused Stirling to feel “deserted”? (Later, I’ll disclose Stirling’s answer to this question from my interview.)

A Sensational Interview. . .and My Amateur Blunder

To finally conduct the taped interview, I met Stirling at a restaurant near his second home in Mill Valley, in the hills of Marin County above San Francisco, on March 1, 1980. This required an 800-mile round-trip from Los Angeles. My close friend and colleague, Paul Maslak, accompanied me. I was also able to attend a major national karate tournament being held in nearby Oakland, California that same weekend. So I was able to mix business and pleasure.

After three false starts, when Stirling proposed doing the interview 400 miles from L.A., naturally I had to wonder, initially, if this was some kind of further “test” of my sincerity or a stall tactic on his part. But once I agreed to follow through despite the distance, I believed he would, too.

At the restaurant, standing by an ornate fireplace, one elbow propped on the mantle with a cocktail clutched in his other hand, nicely clad in tailored casual clothes, Stirling was the picture of elegance. To me, he embodied class. He was a fancy dresser, decked out in the best clothes money could buy. Dapper comes to mind. He exuded an aura of power and confidence, was blessed with a “Panavision” smile, as author Segaloff puts it, and radiated vitality from his eyes. He peered at you with laser-like focus.

Any doubts I had had about getting the interview and how well it would come off quickly vanished as soon as the tape was rolling. The interview lasted over 90 minutes. Stirling was so well-prepared for it that, astonishingly, I only got to ask two or three questions during it! He had apparently memorized all of my questions I had submitted to him in advance and addressed them sequentially. It was a magnificent experience sitting there, somewhat spellbound, listening to a master storyteller relate his entire martial arts background from beginning up to that date.

Stirling really wanted, perhaps even needed, to disclose the full extent of his long martial arts involvement, professionally and personally. Like numerous other high-profile celebrities and very successful executives from the entertainment field I have interviewed, he was very proud of his martial arts participation. These driven intellectual types, I found, wanted everyone to know they had acquired skills in a physically-demanding activity like the martial arts. In Hollywood, martial arts/self-defense training was considered very macho, very trendy, very cool.

Stirling went far beyond the physical connection, though. Starting with his first film as a producer, 1953’s “The Joe Louis Story,” about the famed African-American boxing champion, all the way up to his completed screenplay in 1980 for a martial arts film called “The Masters,” he had infused more material about the martial arts in his projects than any other filmmaker in Hollywood.

I committed one unprofessional blunder during that long interview with him. Young writers, listen up! When we had sat down at a table of Stirling’s choice, he chose his seat first — at the narrow head of the rectangular table with me seated around its corner, so he was positioned diagonally to the left of me. I was using a tape recorder with a built-in microphone at its top. It stood vertical. Along the width of one side was a “window” that showed the tape rolling.

But, the way in which I had to position the mike toward Stirling placed the window on the opposite side of my vision. I couldn’t see it. Still, when each side of a tape had run its 45-minute course, the depressed recording button was supposed to pop up with a sharp click, signaling when to turn the tape over to the other side.

Even though I was mesmerized by Stirling’s account,
at one point I was sensing that the tape should soon end. No click! I recall actually breaking into a sweat; I was afraid to interrupt Stirling during his highly-focused narrative. Finally, he took a breath and I grabbed the recorder to check the tape.

Damn it — the tape had already come to a stop, unnoticed! I informed Stirling, humbly apologizing. “Pay attention to what we’re doing!” he barked at me harshly. “I don’t like having to repeat myself!”

Properly chastised, I would have done a hundred knuckle push-ups on concrete to atone for my mistake! I humbly repeated my apology. Fortunately, when I played the end of what had been taped, it was pretty close to where Stirling had paused! Lesson learned: Take command of an interview, no matter who you’re interviewing! That includes controlling who sits where, if your equipment dictates the seating process.

When the interview finally ended, Stirling was extremely pleased and I was thrilled. I had his whole martial arts history on tape! I expressed to him my excitement about the scope and depth of the contents.

“Why didn’t all of this information come out before?” I asked him.

“Because no one ever asked me, John.” he replied, simply. “You were the first one.”