“What you are thinking about, you are becoming.”
—Muhammad Ali

During and after the lengthy course of our collaborative work on Academy Award©-winning screenwriter Stirling Silliphant’s mammoth five-part martial arts interview in 1980, he treated me with a lot of dignity in other ways. None greater than what happened on Sunday, Sept. 21, 1981, long after his interview had been published. It was to be my “date with destiny.” That day, he invited me to his grandiose Hollywood party on Kings Road in the Hollywood Hills, celebrating the completion of “Fly Away Home,” a two-hour movie-of-the-week pilot about Vietnam that he wrote and exec-produced.

For me, it was the party of all Hollywood parties. I had attended some posh Hollywood parties before, but nothing like this soiree. It was literally crammed with A-list movie and TV stars and powerhouse producers. Uncharacteristically, Stirling had invited a bevy of my fellow martial artists, too.

He was mingling with martial artists once again. I knew I had played a key role in reigniting his passion for the martial arts; he never mentioned that to me, but it was very evident by his actions. At this point, he was also seeking financing for one of his close-to-the-heart, martial arts projects, “The Masters,” for which he had already written the script. He hadn’t sold the script to any Hollywood studio because he wanted to produce it himself and thus maintain complete control over the pet project. He just wanted a studio to finance it.

In Nat Segaloff’s superb biography, “Stirling Silliphant: The Fingers of God,” Stirling described it as “a cross between “Rocky” and “Bad Day at Black Rock,” in which martial artists would be fully-developed characters.” He wrote it specifically with three renowned martial arts masters in mind: Okinawan karate’s Tadashi Yamashita, kung-fu’s Eric Lee and taekwondo’s Byong Yu.

Little did I know, this day would be my crossroad with him — the day Stirling would officially become my mentor.

At one point during the party, I was out on the balcony talking to a group of fellow martial artists. Stirling came out and announced he was holding a “producer’s meeting” inside the house and asked everyone else to give them some privacy. A bunch of guests poured out onto the balcony. That’s when I got to meet a number of household-name stars.

I recall shaking hands with iconic actor Sidney Poitier, Richard Roundtree, star of “Shaft,” and veteran actor Robert Stack, best known as the star of TV’s “Untouchables.” I also exchanged a greeting with veteran actress Marion Ross, famous for her role as the mom in the hit TV series, “Happy Days.”

The Stunning Surprise!

Following that producer’s meeting, Stirling came out on the balcony where I was talking to my co-author, Emil Farkas, and, to my surprise, joined us. Emil was a close friend of best-selling author Joe Hyams and, in fact, was teaching him karate at that time. Years earlier, Hyams and Stirling had trained together privately with Bruce Lee at Hyams’ home.

Stirling told us he was thinking about writing a book about those training experiences and wanted Joe to collaborate with him. He asked our opinion of the idea and we both expressed our belief in the commerciality of the concept. Mainly, Stirling talked to Emil about the project and asked Emil to speak with Joe about it.
SS telegram inviting me to the “Fly Away Home” private screening.
and encourage him to seriously consider co-writing it. This was a smart move on Stirling’s part, who was clearly very serious about pursuing this book idea. Although he himself was a close friend of Joe’s, he was arming himself with an ally close to Joe for added support. That’s because Joe Hyams, formerly a prominent Hollywood columnist, was at this time a major-league best-selling author and was always engaged in an ongoing major book project.

Because of what was about to happen next, one of the only other things I remember about this Bruce Lee book conversation was that a photographer from the “L.A. Times” was snapping pictures of the three of us during this impromptu discussion. When that discussion ended, Stirling took me aside and said, “There’s somebody I want you to meet. Come with me.”

He led me around the outside of the house to the bottom floor. Once inside, he put his hand on my shoulder as we approached an older well-dressed man. We stopped and he said to the man, “Jim, I want you to meet John Corcoran. This is the man you want to write your martial arts script.” Turning to me, he said, “John, meet Jim Aubrey.” Quickly then, he added, “I’ll leave you two to discuss it,” and he left!

Holy hell! Jim Aubrey?! A script?! Despite the suddenness of it all, in moments like these you must instantly gather your sense of confidence and professionalism — and I did. I acted as normal as possible given the unexpected situation, as if this kind of thing happened to me all the time.

“The Smiling Cobra”

James T. Aubrey, Jr. was a prominent industry powerhouse who had been president of both the CBS-TV network (1959-65) and then MGM Television (1969-73). Among the Aubrey-era successes were “Green Acres,” “The Dick Van Dyke Show” and “The Beverly Hillbillies.” A ruthless cost-cutter, hard-ass businessman and abrasive back-stabber, he gained the nickname “The Smiling Cobra.” During his dictatorial reign, Aubrey had engaged in now legendary battles with major TV stars Red Skelton, Danny Thomas, Judy Garland, Arthur Godfrey and Jack Benny. According to a close source, “Lucille Ball couldn’t say his name without calling him an S.O.B.”

Jim Aubrey was now out of the television biz and launching a new career as an independent film producer when Stirling introduced me. Aubrey briefly discussed his intention to produce a martial arts film. He gave me his business card and told me to call him the next day to set a meeting at his office.

I went back upstairs and found Stirling. As I approached, he clearly saw my wide-eyed astonishment and his face lit up with that Panavision smile of his, knowing he had nailed me good. I thanked him profusely. He said to me, privately, “Jim wants me to

SS/Tiana invitation to the “Fly Away Home” party, where Stirling would officially become my mentor.
write the script, but I don’t want to do it.” He advised me to ask for 4% of the film’s budget as payment if the screenplay deal developed. And ended, with, “Now John, I put it in your hands because I believe you’re the right man for the job. Don’t disappoint me.” I assured him I wouldn’t.

When I returned to the apartment that night, I told my roommate, retired world heavyweight kickboxing champ Joe Lewis, all about the party and the intro to Aubrey. He and Aubrey knew each other from their Hollywood womanizing adventures. When I called Aubrey to set the meeting, I asked if I could bring Joe along and he agreed. Joe had already opened many doors of opportunity for me. If Aubrey was intent on doing a martial arts picture, I wanted him to know that Joe was available to star in it.

Joe and I had just one meeting with Aubrey without any immediate action taken. Aubrey said he’d set up another meeting soon. When I didn’t hear from him, I called him a week later. He took my call and said he’d get back to me, but he didn’t.

**My Only Other Blunder with Stirling**

This kind of treatment is standard for Hollywood writers, but I was new to the business and unaware of the b.s. screenwriters have to put up with, which is even worse today. And my naivety led to an amateur blunder I made with Stirling. Worried that Aubrey might have hired someone else to write the script, I called up Stirling and expressed my concern.

Stirling wasted no time bluntly telling me off. “John, if I worried about competition from every other God-dammed screenwriter in the Writer’s Guild, I wouldn’t be where I’m at today!” Then he slammed down the phone to end the call!

_Ouch!_ Counting the earlier tape-recorder blunder during my interview with him, this was my second mistake with the master. I was mortified by my stupidity in declaring my insecurity to him. Another important lesson learned. When someone of elite status steps forward to endorse you for a professional project of any kind, he’s putting his name and reputation on the line for you. So, another lesson learned. _Never, ever_ exhibit any weakness to the mentor after he places his confidence in you!

Unknown to me or Stirling, Jim Aubrey was already somehow involved with indie producer Cannon Films on a ninja project. And the script for this, Cannon’s first martial arts project, had already long been written. So, the only thing clear to me was that the martial arts project Aubrey was discussing with me was some future venture. He never mentioned the word “ninja” in the meeting with Joe Lewis and me.

On October 23, 1981, just one month after my first...
meeting with Aubrey, Cannon Films released its first of a string of American-made ninja movies, “Enter the Ninja,” in North American theaters. It starred actor Franco Nero and karate master Sho Kosugi as the villain. Nero had no martial arts training and was doubled in the fight scenes by retired karate champion Mike Stone. Starting with this film, Kosugi, an old acquaintance of mine, launched a decades-long career in ninja roles, playing both heroes and villains.

Along with Chuck Norris and Joe Lewis, Mike Stone was hailed as one of the three greatest tournament fighters during sport karate’s rugged, embryonic era. In the early 1970s, Mike was the subject of massive worldwide media attention as the karate instructor Priscilla Presley left Elvis for.

Mike had the vision to see the “Ninjamania” trend shaping a year earlier in 1980. He had brought in genuine ninja expert Stephen Hayes to work with him on developing the screenplay for “Enter the Ninja.” Upon its release, the movie helped fuel the ninja trend.

As things turned out for me, even though Stirling had grandfathered me in as the potential writer for Aubrey’s martial arts project, nothing ever happened with it. I never heard from Jim Aubrey again. He died in 1994. I checked his list of film credits on imdb. He produced 10 films and none of them were in the martial arts genre.

But the real reward, of course, was having Stirling Silliphant step forward into a mentor role for me. I’m amazed to this day that, at a party brimming with Hollywood glitterati and renowned martial arts masters and champions, Stirling singled me out and treated me like a star. I’ve been a professional writer for over 43 years now and accomplished many things along the way. But, for me, that memorable day in September 1981 remains a special apex in my entire writing career.