

**Interviewee: Richard Winer: “Raised on the Beach”, Beach High,  
Hotel Scene, Gambling and Illicit  
activities**

**Interviewer: Kathy Hersh**

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Q: I am interviewing Richard Winer on 19 November 2011 at the headquarters of the Miami Design Preservation League. We're talking about your childhood on the Beach.

A: When did you arrive? Arrived Thanksgiving Day 1947. My father had come down three or four months before that to get three jobs so that we could afford for my sister and I and my mother to drive down from Camden, New Jersey.

Q: Quite a switch from Camden, New Jersey to Miami Beach. How old were you and how did that affect you?

A: Well, I was born July 14, 1941 so I was on my way to six years of age. I'm guessing, I didn't figure it out in advance, but it sounds like I was 5 1/2. My sister is three years older than I and my mother told me just recently -- my mother died about six months ago -- and she said the reason we came down was that my sister had a lot of colds and congestion constantly and the doctors said get this girl to a warmer climate, either Arizona or Florida. And, not only that, but my mother and father didn't like the weather weather

up north, either. But seeing as how it was my sister, that was the deciding factor.

Q: Do you do you remember this?

A: I remember when I was three and four, not in super detail, but I remember I went to sleep-away camp in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania when I was four. And, I remember the trip down because we stopped in Washington, DC and I walked up the Washington Monument and it was wonderful. When we finally got to Florida we went to St. Augustine for the first and only time that I've never been there. It was a small little town. But as I think I mentioned to you before, as soon as we crossed the Georgia Florida line it was like the Wizard of Oz. Remember when she opened the door and instead of being black and white it was all technical color. And we all remember it that way. My sister and I remember that, that as soon as you crossed the border -- Florida and Georgia -- it was bright and cheerful and pastel and clean. And the trees looked different as you got south -- palm trees. We had never seen palm trees before. So it was a great start and it did nothing but get better, in looking back on it. Too bad I didn't realize how wonderful it was when I was a kid.

Q: But you probably had some good times that you remember.

A: Yeah, wonderful times but there was no perspective to me. I was a kid. I didn't know anything. Now I'm looking back, it's even better.

Q: So you went to school here, elementary likely school?

A: That's correct, on Miami Beach. The first grade I went to North Beach Elementary which is on 41st St. which some people call Jackie Gleason Way or something like that. It's named after him.

Q: It's Arthur Godfrey, isn't it?

A: I'm sorry, Arthur Godfrey, right. Because I can remember before that, it was only 41st St. And we lived... and after a while we lived right at the end of that street, near Mt. Sinai Hospital, which is about 42nd and Alton. Those were just great days.

Q: You had childhood friends?

A: Yes, and some of them, that are still alive, we're still friends. Yes.

Q: You told me that you ran with the rowdy bunch?

A: 1950s rowdy.

Q: Okay, explain that.

A: Pretty innocent. We would rebel by wearing T-shirts to school or putting on sunglasses, shades, and we smoked and we tried to carouse.

5:00

It wasn't easy, in those days. That's what I mean by rowdy. We were rowdy in as innocent in today's standards as you can possibly imagine. But we were rebelling and it was great, it was wonderful. I loved it. I always loved starting trouble in school and that's why I had a tough time in high school because I didn't leave it behind me. And when you get up into high school they looked a little askance at my rebelliousness.

Q: Any particular incidents that you recall?

A: Well, I remember one day at Miami Beach High School when the rumor got around that everyone was going to wear T-shirts and sunglasses and most of the rowdy kids did and even some of the -- I'm gonna kill you with this one --the goody two shoes, because I can't think of a better phrase, even some of those people, did. In fact at the last high school reunion that I went to, my 45th, a couple of girls I went to elementary school with and then Nautilus Junior High and then Beach High, reminded me of that. These were girls who were at the top of their class and who I had very little social contact with because I was known as part of the rougher group. In looking back, it really was something. About as innocent as you can get except, in the timeframe we're talking about.

Q: You told me you also about an incident where a group of you got arrested. Would you like to tell that story?

A: Yes. My mother won't have to listen to this so that's a good thing. We were at a movie theater on Washington Avenue and I believe it was fifth and sixth street, called the Variety. And I don't remember what was playing.

We went in and came out and were trying to decide what to do and, I think there were five of us, and a Beach police officer drove by going North on “Wash” and he looked over at us and one of my friends, who is deceased, gave him the finger. We didn't think much about it. I didn't know if the cop had even seen it or not but he turned his light on and he made a U-turn and he grilled us and he said okay, “I'm taking you guys in.” We were 15. We were 15. Took us down to the old Beach police headquarters and they threw us into a cell and we got \$25 bail each and we got \$25 together and we bailed me out because my cousin Bernie Toll had a lounge at the Atlantic Towers Hotel on Collins and 44th or 43rd. And I went to him and he came down and bailed the rest of the boys out. I don't believe, to this day, that my father ever knew about it. That was my worst fear. My mom was pretty tough but not like my dad. And within a couple of days we went down to juvenile court and it was fun. We knew we hadn't done anything bad and we were full of vim and vinegar and the judge, Judge Milton Feller, was a city judge and he listens to the explanation from the cop, an Italian guy, and he looks at the five of us were all sitting there and he says -- I remember exactly, this is wonderful that I'm telling you about this -- he says, “Now boys, don't do this again. Case dismissed.” That was it.

Q: You knew him? You know this judge?

A: No, no, no. At 15 I wasn't paying much attention to city politics and all that. I just remember his name because at the time we're talking Miami Beach was still quite a small town. Not as small as when we first came here, but I can't imagine the population was more than 10, 12, 14 thousand people. Now it's over 100, I'm sure. That was a good thing. That was one

of the good memories. That's like a boy thing. This is not something girls would do.

10:00

Q: Probably not.

A: We laugh about it to this day. Out of those five there's two of us left. My best friend, Al, who's a dentist in Coral Gables and I. The rest are gone.

Q: You mentioned, also, when we talked, about a marvelous sense of freedom that you felt growing up here, from the age of six. Tell us about that?

A: It's not unlike any story I've heard of small towns in the Midwest, we came down and when we moved out of an apartment that was near the Fontainebleau hotel we moved to a small place on 77th St. with the screen door and I don't remember it ever being locked, but mostly I remember being able to hitchhike around Miami Beach from when I was, I think, in the fifth or sixth grade. That would make the 11 or 10. No thoughts about any problems. Never heard anything -- and my parents knew. Miami Beach at that time, there were -- I don't know what happened to the molesters, but they weren't around. They were someplace else. And the traffic was much lighter, of course, than it is now and when I was old enough to get my first bike, and we all got bikes, that was the opening of complete freedom for any boy. When you got a bike, you were king -- until you are old enough to get a car. But in all those years we used to ride our bikes everywhere. Absolutely everywhere, and it was a kids heaven down here because we

didn't think about things that I had to worry about raising my son, or you with your children, or whatever -- my grandchildren. So, freedom was the freedom of any small town. Even though it was called Miami Beach it was small-townish. It really was. Even though the famous people who would come down, like previous fellow was talking about.

Q: Did you ever run into any of those people? Did you see them out walking?

A: No. I ran into Mohammed Ali, one time, on Collins and 23rd St. as I was driving around with friends and we just waved, "hey champ. How you doing?" This and that. Oh, and I met Johnny Mathis, who spent a lot of time down here. Didn't talk to him much, just met him through somebody introduced him. And, was never really one for celebrities.

Q: Your father was a lifeguard, I understand. And then he got into something to do with pools. Can you tell us about his work?

A: My father was a cabana manager/each boy/swimming instructor -- all three -- and started out in 1946 or 47 at the Atlantic Towers hotel. A small place, and then became cabana manager at a least a dozen different places before his death in '86. And this was a guy, my father, up north was a postman and cabdriver and didn't really know much about interplay with people, it he fell right into. He was great. All the people who would come from the Midwest or from up north, he wanted them to have a wonderful time at his pool. Went out of his way to treat them well. Treat them... took his job very seriously. I really do think the only things that were important

to dad, was my mom and his job. He works seven days a week, Left the house at seven in the morning and came it home at six at night, seven night even when it rained. When it rained he went in and painted chairs and lounges and stuff and fixed the pump system painted the pool. I worked with him on many different occasions as a small boy and as a young guy. He was quite a man. And my mom was even more so.

Q: Did she work outside the home?

15:00

A: Yes, not in the beginning when became down but after a while wherever my dad was there was a sundry shop and my mom would try to get in and sell sundries, and stuff like that. My mother and father never believed in credit, everything was cash and they saved their money. My father, who never made more in a year than I made, some times, in a month when I was a grown man, they got a beautiful home on Alton road, they travel to Europe, they did all kinds of things on a very little bit of money because they didn't waste their money and they didn't go into debt. They're remembered by my circle of friends -- the ones that are left, and the children of the people like the Howard's and all the different people that I know, as being every special and different. Their love for one another was so apparent that it was a good thing for me to see, because it gave me something to shoot for, later on in life. I wasn't quite as lucky in getting somebody like my mom, but they were exceptional people. They are exceptional people, wonderful family. We just sold the house that we moved into in 1952. So I would've been 12. My sister and I just sold it



since my mom died April and it was time. Sold it to a beautiful young couple -- beautiful, smart, young couple. My mother would have loved these kids. She would've loved them. My mother wasn't very fond of old people. She died when she was 97. But she always wanted to be with younger people. She said to me many times, she says, "find young friends. It'll work to your benefit later on." And she was absolutely right, like in almost everything she ever taught me and my sister, she was right. Because now I'm losing a lot of friends because they're my age or older, even. But it's not easy to find good friends -- young or old.

Q: So tell us about Beach High. You said that you had some problems there?

A: It wasn't just at Beach High, I didn't get along in school, period. Because, my sister who was three years older than me, I followed her into each school; Biscayne Elementary, Nautilus, and Miami Beach High School. And my sister is an angel. She really, truly is. She was smart. She got good grades. She was, "yes ma'am and no ma'am." And then I came along. And it wasn't quite the same. And I actually, the more I heard about how wonderful my sister was, the more I acted up -- just to show them that I didn't have to be like her. All this is harmless, now, but at the time it made it difficult for me because I was on. I was punished. They don't call it that now. What do they call it when you can't go out?

Q: Suspension? Indoor suspension? Grounded by your parents?

A: Right, and the more I was grounded the more I hated my teachers, not all of them, but most of them. And that followed me all through school. And I didn't have to apply myself as much as my sister. Even she would agree with this, she worked hard. It came rather easily to me. And so it left me a lot of time to get into trouble, into mischief and stuff like that, which I'm glad about. I don't know what else I can tell you about Beach High except that it was not what it is today. It was 95% Jewish it was 100% white and it was just like you see in the movies, in the Porky's movies, which they film some of at Miami Beach High School.

Q: There were some good instructors there, particularly the drama instructor?

A: It was Mr. Peck, may be, I don't remember who the drama teacher was. I remember there was a guy named Walter Peck, I think. But I didn't take that. I don't know anything of that.

Q: It's a pretty impressive Hall of Fame of some pretty impressive people who went there. I think higher than the average high school.

A: Right, Miami Beach was upper middle class professional people: doctors, judges, lawyers, not unlike what it is now. Very successful business people. And, so, there children, I guess, tended to be like that but then there were the working class people -- of which I am a proud member -- but it was a good mixture. It was a very good mixture. And, yeah, I remember Robert Rubin who was Treasurer of the United States, he was in my sister's class. I think he was in Clinton's administration.

Q: Anybody famous from your class?

A: I don't think so.

Q: Anybody infamous from your class?

A: Probably, but I don't think I want to share that, right here. People that I am still friendly with.

Q: So, with your father in the profession that he was in, and your mother, who tried to find jobs where he was working...

A: Not just tried, but did in a lot of cases, especially when my sister and I got older we were very independent. I know I was. She didn't have to take much care of me, I was able to do it myself. They did that a lot, and they needed the money, especially after we moved into a larger home. The home, even today, to me looks like a palace. And I remember that my father didn't know that she was buying it. My mother did anything she wanted. It was okay with my dad. Anything. So we all drove up there. She says, "get in the car, I want to show you our new house. We drove from a two bedroom, one bath, tiny little wood cottage at 7729 Carlisle to 5310 Alton Road. I couldn't believe... we went in there and there was an intercom system where you could press a button and talk from the upstairs to the downstairs. There were italian frescoes in the courtyard with water coming out of the mouth, and stuff like that. I remember, I couldn't believe it, this was our house.

Q: Did you have a swimming pool?

A: No, never had a swimming pool. We didn't really need a swimming pool because my father was always at one pool or another. We used to go to where ever he was working and that's where we would... My mother would play cards with her cronies of which there are none left.

Q: So you spent a lot of time around pools and water?

A: A lot. After school I would go to where ever my father worked and I would have a job as clean-up boy. That was where you took a little dust pan and you walked around and cleaned up the cigarettes, in the days when people were still smoking a lot of cigarettes. And we'd clean the gutters around the pool. I loved that part. I enjoyed that part. Although, having your dad as a boss can be intimidating, and my dad was a very intimidating man. I guess, not on purpose but I was always on my Ps and Qs. I watched them like mad because I didn't want him mad at me.

Q: Did he teach you to swim?

A: No, I learned how to swim much earlier. I learned to swim at sleep away camp in the Poconos when I was four. I remember I learned there.

Q: Did you spend a lot of time in the ocean, here?

A: Yes. And if I knew then what I know now, I would've spent a lot less time in the ocean. But I used to go -- my friends and I used to go so far out that we couldn't see which hotel it was that my father was working at. I couldn't pick it out from all the hotels that were there. And we'd go out on an inner tube or a raft with goggles and we'd go down into 20, 30 feet of water and it's not, to my way of thinking, that's not really prudent. Because I'm talking about when I was 7, 8, 9 years old. I was a very good swimmer. And a pretty good diver.

Q: Your parents must've had confidence in that or they would have cautioned you.

A: I don't know how much of my freedom they were aware of. I really don't.

25:00

I don't think my mother would have wanted me to go out in the ocean but my dad let me have my freedom, pretty much. As long as I worked. In summertime I worked at his pools. Not always happily. A lot of my friends were traveling to New York or Indiana or the Midwest, wherever, having a good time, and I was working. That's the bad part, the good part was there were a lot of girls from up north that came down and their parents wanted them to be entertained. Somebody had to bear the burden. Know what I mean? So that part was fun. It was almost all fun.

Q: But you don't live on the beach now?

A: No, I haven't lived on the Beach in a long time.

Q: Have you ever thought about moving back?

A: I thought about it with the house. I could've taken over my mother's house and lived there, but my life has moved on. I don't live anywhere near the beach. I live up in Lauderdale and all my activities are up there. My sister is in North Miami Beach. I don't know if you're familiar with that area well enough to know where that is. It's not the Beach but it's closer than where I am. No, the Beach now is too sophisticated for me. It's too celebrity, too... lot of things that I don't like. Physically it's pretty close to what it was, but when I came down you could ride up Collins Avenue and never lose sight of the ocean. Now you can't drive up Collins Avenue and ever see the ocean, almost. There were very few places where the Fontainebleau is now I remember it was a place called Firestone estate -- Firestone tire and rubber, which is where you all come from. It was a huge place and when they turned it into a hotel they built the hotel around it. They left it there as the construction office, this huge beautiful mansion, and then finally they knocked it down. Because all along Collins Avenue were these stupendous homes the likes of which you only see now up in Palm Beach.

Q: What progress intervened with the hotels?

A: Well, yes. Greed. Developers greed. Everything has its place -- not to denigrate all developers -- but they just take it too far and the city fathers enabled them to do it and almost anybody my age who went to school with

me will probably feel the same way. It was so much nicer to be able to see the ocean, now you can't.

Q: When we talked, you were describing the smells of the ocean and the environment, not just the Technicolor.

A: Yes, good memory. Good note-taking. I remember up in Camden that the smell was of gasoline in the garage where my father kept his car. Which I loved, but that's what the up north, grime and grit of New Jersey. Even though our area then was middle-class and very nice, much different than it is now, but when we came down here you could smell salt from the ocean and you could smell the flowers. There were flowers everywhere. So it was just wonderful.

Q: Where were the flowers I don't see them now?

A: They're gone now. Now they have bars.

Q: You mean the public areas?

A: Yeah, in the parks and everything. I'm sure you still must have them, I just haven't spent any time in the parks lately because everything's crowded, here. For me. Too crowded, for me. I spent a lot of my time with my friend Stuart up in Amelia Island, Florida. You're familiar with that? That island, physically, is almost a duplicate of Miami Beach. It's about two or 3 miles wide it's about 15 miles long, but luckily they still have less people than here. But I've been going up there, now, with him as a friend for 13

years and I already see the development that's going on there and things: the Publixs and the Walmarts, Targets and everything, whereas thirteen years ago it was a tiny, little town.

30:00

The downtown area is still nice, it is the third oldest city -- it's called Fernandina Beach, it's on Amelia Island.

Q: It's lovely. I've been there.

A: It is the third oldest city in the country after St. Augustine and one other, I think. So, I don't know how I got you on to that, but you lead me on.

Q: So if you had some adjectives to describe Miami Beach in those days, what would you throw out?

A: Pastoral. Comfortable -- walk around in shorts and bathing suits almost always. Freedom. There's probably others, but I can't think of them, right now. Was just great, just a wonderful community.

Q: Did you surf, at all?

A: No I was not a surfer, but the interesting thing is that a notorious surfer worked for my father and was Jack... What was his name? Murph the Surf. You ever hear of Murph the Surf? I had his surfboard because he went to jail and my father bailed him out and he didn't pay my father back. He



worked for my dad for a short period of time and so my father kept his surfboard. Now, of course, he turned into more than just the local joke, because he ended up murdering a couple of young girls and spent 20, 25 years in prison. And then, of course, he found Jesus and they let him out. They're still dead of course but, yes, I didn't surf -- I was never a surfer. Body surfing. Which is almost as much fun. When you don't have the talent to surf you body surf, and you just... we did that -- especially after hurricanes. Whenever there was a hurricane the ocean, of course, got very rough, before and after, and we used to go out on rafts and just surfing. I was very comfortable, very comfortable in the water -- in the ocean.

Q: Speaking of hurricanes, do you remember any big ones -- that came close or struck here?

A: The first one they called it King. It was in 1950. Whether there was one before that I don't remember, but that was the first one. I remember it because, for some reason, I was at my grandmother and grandfather's house and a palm tree fell over and broke the window in the room that I was sleeping in. I remember my grandfather had to go outside in the middle of the night to cover the window, and stuff like that. And that was exciting. Now, I would've been nine so I was a little afraid because I had not been through a hurricane before. But other than that, there was one, I think, in 62 or 63 but nothing really bad until I was a grown man and lived in North Miami Beach with my wife, at the time, and my son when Andrew came through. And we were far away from Andrew and it decimated my yard. It left hardly any trees standing, and we were a long way from it. That was a bad storm. And then also Wilma, which was fairly recent. I lived in

Hollywood and did without electric for almost a week for a tiny storm -- it wasn't even that big.

Q: They couldn't predict them with as much accuracy as they can now.

A: Not even close.

Q: When hurricane season came, did people stock up?

A: I don't know, I wasn't really concerned with that, that wasn't my job. That was my mother and father's job.

Q: But you don't have memory of that?

A: No, no, I really don't think we were ever... I don't ever remember being out of electricity, when we were kids. Of course we didn't have air conditioning until I was almost a senior in high school. Didn't have TV until I was about 14, 13 or 14. My parents thought it was good to wait for things that were comfortable, not to get them too young. I guess that's what they thought.

Q: You also had a marvelous outdoor life, so...

35:00

A: Right, so TV was much less important. Absolutely, good point.

Q: Did you have awareness of some of the illicit aspects of Miami Beach?

A: Yes, I did because my grandfather was a doorman at a place called Place Pigalle which was the strip joint on the Beach. It was right next door to a very famous restaurant called Embers, on 22nd just off Collins. And I would help him park cars. And many times, whenever young guys would come in by taxi I'd open the taxi door. They'd go inside and the place used to pay what was called "turkey" money. Every guy that they brought in they got four dollars for. If it was a couple, they got two dollars. Because the place would then pad the bill. And in 1962 they did that to a Korean immigrant. And they roughed him up and my grandfather put him in a cab and sent him to back to his hotel where he came back with two guns and he shot my grandfather through both legs. He went into the place and he killed the lead singer whose name was Tony D'Arcy. Shot him dead and shot one of the strippers. She lost her leg. And my grandfather crawled into the place and picked up a machete that was being used in an act and started beating him over the head until people jumped on top of him. And a lot of the Miami Beach police detectives used to come in there.

I don't know what your liability is here, so I am not going to mention names, but they're long gone. As I remember, they were the Ward brothers, W-A-R-D. Jim Ward and John Ward, I think, and they used to come in and go in the back and talk with the owner of the place.

And as far as the illicit, I didn't know too much about the gambling that was going on, except that my father used to set up card tables around the pool and these guys from Chicago and New York used to come down and they'd

sit at the table. And my father would say to me, "Bring them orange juice, bring them towels and don't hang around. Just get lost. Don't listen to what they're talking about." And they were the biggest tippers of anybody. When they used to leave in the afternoon, on the table was a lot of money -- even for today's standards -- tips for my father for taking care of them.

Q: This incident that you cited, was at Place Pigalle?

A: Yes.

Q: And the Embers was next door?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you know what year it happened?

A: '57, the '58, '56 middle 50s. And I could be wrong on that, it could be before then. But if I was parking cars it had to be right around there because I graduated high school in 59? So I'm going back a few years before then.

Q: And this was a Korean tourist, you said.

A: Yeah. Too bad, I almost brought the article 'cause I saved it. The newspaper article showing a picture of the guy. You know, it's interesting, many years later I was in Pumpnick's Restaurant in North Miami, not the one on the Beach. And I saw one of the waitresses was the widow of this

Canadian singer who was the first person killed. And I said, "I remember you. I'm Richard Winer, my grandfather tried to help." And she went nuts. She started crying, "Oh, your grandfather was so wonderful." That was interesting.

Q: That must have been a headline story?

A: I wan't even here. I was in Europe. I had gone with a couple of buddies to hitchhike around Europe and my mother and sister saved the article for me. That particular incident. There may have been others. My grandfather was a very rough Damon Runyon kind of character -- "dees" and "does" guys and this and that.

40:00

My grandmother was a refined, sweet, quiet woman and nobody has ever been able to figure out how they got together -- amazing.

Q: Opposites attract, they say.

A: I guess, you're probably right.

Q: That's quite a story.

A: I wish I could tell you the stuff I forgotten because there were a lot of things that happened that I just...

Q: There was a lot of illicit activity on the beach activity on the Beach. A lot of bookie stuff and gambling, and numbers racket.

A: Harmless by today's standards, harmless. Yes, I remember the Kefauver investigation when they sent Estes Kefauver down in 1954 and they concentrated on what you just mentioned -- the boleta, they called it, and illicit gambling. Even when I was a kid I didn't understand why that was against the law.

Q: That's because you grew up, probably, with it around you all the time.

A: Plus I've never made any value judgment about gambling because there wasn't violence involved, I didn't really mind what anybody did. As long as they didn't do it to me and mine. I wish I could've remembered more for you but since you've been at this you're going to glean what you want from this, you should come up with a pretty good story from all this.

Q: Well this is certainly a good story. Was your grandfather the same after that? How badly wounded was he?

A: No, he wasn't badly wounded -- shot through both legs, missed vital organs and everything like that and he was the same. He was the same. He was a tough guy until he died.

Q: So how much family did you have down here, you mentioned aunts and uncles, and grandparents.

A: No aunts and uncles. They all came to visit but our family, my father's side of the family went either to the Midwest, Michigan, or Pennsylvania and New Jersey. And my mother was an only child and her mother and father were here. My other grandparents stayed up north. My father's two brothers and two sisters stayed up north but they all visited down here at our house on Alton Road. And my father's two brothers are both alive. Two sisters are gone, which is a little odd, it's normally not that way.

Q: But your mother's parents were already down here?

A: No, they followed -- they came after. My father had to help out because my grandfather never saved a dime and the electric company was always after them and shutting off the electricity.

Q: And your mother was their only child? So they were attached.

A: Right. Not him. She never bad-mouthed him, but I know she didn't think all that highly of her father. Her mother was a very plain, refined woman who was old at 40. She was just an old lady. When I would pick her up to bring her to our house for dinner or something, didn't matter when it was, she wore white gloves and a fur coat and hat. In the summertime. But you know I wish I had been friendlier to that good woman.

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