



Strange As It Seems: The Impossible Life of Gordon Zahler

Chip Jacobs

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The life of Gordon Zahler was simply so miraculous that it might as well have been science fiction. Born into an entertainment family in suburban Los Angeles in the mid-1920s, Zahler was a lovable prankster and class clown, exasperating his parents with his endless teenage feats of derring-do. But Gordon Zahler's promising career as a public miscreant went pear-shaped one day in 1940 when he and his buddies were fooling around in their high school gym with a spring board. An unsteady jump on the board vaulted Gordon on a deadly trajectory landing him squarely on his neck, severing his spine. He was 14-years old. That's when the miracles began.

Strange As It Seems: The Impossible Life of Gordon Zahler, the journey of a former nobody who defied the odds and biases racked up against him to frolic in Hollywood, is vividly retold by his nephew, writer Chip Jacobs. More than just a biography, Jacobs' portrait evokes an early, *Day of the Locust* Hollywood where art and fortunes were made by a colorful set of foreigners, weirdos, obsessives, and freaks. During the 1950s and 1960s, Gordon became a kingpin in this milieu, as his music/sound effects post-production house scored films for low budget sci-fi films, genre movies like Sam Fuller's *Shock Corridor*, *Popeye* and *Bozo the Clown* cartoons, as well as hundreds of other projects. Gordon, best known for his clever soundtrack on Ed Wood Jr.'s infamous *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, was always a better story than the scripts he accentuated.

Eventually wealthy, with a house off the Sunset Strip, a devoted blond trophy wife and raucous, star-filled parties, Gordon - 95-pound dynamo - built an existence from scratch that mere able-bodied mortals could only dream about. How many of them could say Lucille Ball adored them, or they were partners with Walter Lantz, *Woody Woodpecker's* cartoonist and producer, or Ivan Tors, the brains behind *Flipper*, *Gentle Ben* and the nature-drama field still red-hot today? Bored confining himself to one area, Gordon tried developing futuristic concepts, from audible books to talking gas-station pumps. He kept a powerboat for boozy excursions, traveled from Beirut to Thailand, was thrown out of moving cars, nearly died after being blessed by the pope and had a Forest Gumpian-knack for being in dangerous places at the wrong time.

As a boy, Jacobs was not overly fond of a voluble relation with a spidery physique and witchy arms. As an adult hungry to understand his family's past, Jacobs' trepidation gave way to awe and curiosity. *Strange As It Seems* is the culmination of one man's quest to live a life that was almost denied him, and another's to bring that untold legend out of history's shadows.

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