

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: SHEP GORDON**

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I read about Colonel Parker, who managed Elvis Presley, coming to Hawaii and renting some beach houses in some story. A journalist had done a story. And I had a good friend here, Uncle Tom Moffatt, who I called and said, Do you know those houses? And he said, Oh, yeah, I rented it for him 'cause I did the show. So, it was at a time when I was smoking two or three packs of cigarettes a day, and I had a fairly large office, and I offered anyone who wanted in my office to quit smoking to come with me to Hawaii. And I rented on Kahala Beach the houses that the Colonel had rented. And ... we all landed, we threw our cigarettes out the window. I'm sorry to say, we weren't that environmentally conscious at the time. And ... I ran into the wrong crowd in Honolulu. It was like being back in Hollywood; it was all the same, for me, from my view. I ended up going to the Imperial Hotel every night to a dive bar in the bottom room where ... who knows what was going on. And I told Tom; I said, You know, I want to try another island. And he had, I think, Kalapana playing in Maui. And in those days, it was a hydrofoil. So, I said, Can I come? And he said, Sure, I'll let you sell tee-shirts. So, him and his son Troy and I went over to sell tee-shirts. Hydrofoil landed in Maalaea Harbor, I put one foot on the dock, and I turned around to Uncle Tom and Joe Gannon, who has also ended up living on Maui and owns Halliimaile General Store and Joe's Bar & Grill, and I said, I'm living here the rest of my life, I just found my home.

**Shep Gordon has called Maui home since landing in 1974. That didn't keep him from becoming one of the best-known names in Hollywood as a successful talent manager, film agent, and producer. Shep Gordon, next, on Long Story Short.**

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

**Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Shep Gordon built his career on managing legendary music artists, while becoming one of Hollywood's most successful agents. Throughout his career, he has built a reputation as being friendly and compassionate, qualities that he attributes to his father and the unusual circumstances he endured at home, growing up in the 1940s and 50s. At the time, he thought it seemed normal, until he wrote his memoir, *They Call Me Supermensch*, based on a documentary film that was made about his life. Writing this book opened the door to a deeper understanding of his parents.**

I started in Queens, New York, which was a suburb of Manhattan. And it was an immigrant town, mostly Eastern European, lot of Jewish, lot of Italian, some Latino. And for the most part ... very little English spoken. You'd hear Italian on the streets, you'd hear Yiddish, you'd hear Russian, languages that I didn't quite understand. And then, we moved from there in the first wave of suburbia. It was a moment in time; it was a place called Levittown. It was the first real middleclass suburban community built outside of New York City. And it set the model for a lot of communities, where people who had been used to living in apartments were starting, normally first generation, sons and daughters of immigrants who were in the middleclass and starting to make some money, and could move their families to a place that had a backyard, good schools, and could start to take advantage of everything America had to give.

**Did your family feel like they were really moving ahead?**

Oh; it was an amazing time. Really an amazing time. I mean, it's all the things that you hear about America and about the dream of America, and what America can do. This was the embodiment of that. These were proud people who were so happy that they were in America, taking advantage of what America could give you. And for most families, it was their first home, it was their first car. It was the first time that a kid took a bus to school instead of walked.

**Your dad was a bookkeeper who didn't speak much.**

Right.

**Your mom was a rigid woman who allowed a dog to attacked you to have the run of the house.**

Uh-huh. I think, you know, in the Jewish community, remembering where they came from, remembering their heritage; these were all people who were affected by the Holocaust. So, things were very black and white. Even though my parents weren't affected, their parents were. Then they had a depression. So, these were people who had to live through serious consequences, their actions had serious consequences. And I think she just viewed the world differently. And I know a lot of my friends who were Jewish, it wasn't dissimilar, that their mothers were very strict, you lived in their vision of life, or you didn't really exist, almost. I never thought that she hated me. It was her path. And I had a brother who ended up being a veterinarian, who loved animals, and wanted to be a vet, and had a dog that I couldn't get along with. And ... too bad.

**And you lived mostly in your bedroom, because the dog was running around.**

Yeah; yeah. Which in some ways ended up, I think, being a huge advantage to my life. At least, I tend to make it that way. I was scared to death to leave the room, 'cause the dog would bite me. So, I spent a lot of time alone. I had to entertain myself, I had to be comfortable with myself, and I had to create my own world that I could live in. And that's really, I think, how I ended up making my living, which is creating a world. That's what I did for my artists.

**Did you listen to music?**

I didn't really listen to music.

**You didn't have digital devices at that time.**

I didn't have a TV. No; it was a lot of reading. And a lot of being in my brain to fantasize. And there wasn't that much time at home. I'd go to school, and then I'd play basketball 'til it was dark. And then, I'd come home.

**Did you eat with your family?**

Very rarely. Just 'cause I was scared of the dog getting loose.

**What about your dad; what did he have to say?**

My dad was the provider for the family. And he was always very compassionate with me; lot of love. And I would say to him once in a while, Why would you let Mom do this? Why would you pick a dog over me for freedom in the house? And he would say, Would you like me to leave, and leave you alone? I'm not gonna do that unless you want me to. So, we just move on, make it work. I don't want to paint a picture of depression, 'cause it wasn't. It just was the way it was. I didn't know any other life. This was the life I knew, and I didn't really think about it until after I left home. And I always said, you know, my first day of college was the first day of my life. Because then, I could live my life in a free way.

**I know you've described your dad as compassionate. And then, when it came to the way you did business later, you talked about a compassionate form of doing business.**

Right.

**Is that because of your dad?**

I think so. When I was writing the book, I had never really thought about it. I had always thought that I'd lived in reaction against my mother. And when I wrote the book, I realized that, in fact, my whole life was really following in my father's footsteps.

**How was he compassionate?**

He stayed; took care of us. Never heard him say a bad word about anybody. Helped anybody he could. I would hear stories from his friends when I'd meet them about who he was as a young man. Just was always kind to everybody, always had a good word. Just very compassionate in a very simple way; not in a big way. But the choices he made at every turn were always compassionate.

**When Shep Gordon left home for college, he never looked back. He chose the life path that took him directly to the heart of the 1960s American Cultural Revolution.**

**So, you would go from a pretty regimented, strict lifestyle to pretty much hedonism.**

Oh, completely; Animal House.

**What was that transition like? You finished, you went to college.**

Yeah. College is where I really started to develop a personality. I went to the University of Buffalo, and started to have social interaction with people, started to find a path and way that I could support myself. Started to realize what my skills were and weren't, and started to find a way to get through life.

**And it turns out, you had a lot of social skills, but they hadn't really been cultivated in your childhood.**

I think maybe part of it was that I didn't have a social life as a child, so I tried so hard to get one and was so excited by it. And didn't bring maybe the selfishness that develops if it's just part of your life. So, I was so grateful, and worked very hard to try and be included. Which showed itself in service.

**And you're a product of the time, which meant sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll.**

Sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll. And some social consciousness. You know, it was the Vietnam days, so I participated in burning draft cards in ROTC buildings, and doing all those things. And then, Kennedy died, which was a very powerful moment. I remember I was a freshman at the University of Buffalo.

**Did you feel your future was limitless? Did you have that sense of, this is a new game, and I can be anything I want to be?**

Absolutely. Yeah. I think that period in American history was an amazing time period. Not only you could be what you wanted to be, but you could say what you wanted to

say, you could act out your feelings. I lived during the generation where if we didn't like something, we protested against it, we took action. I went to New School for Social Research, and dropped out after a few months. But I went for sociology. And at The New School, a recruiter came from the probation department in California, and I was a sociology major, which qualified me. I had my bachelor in sociology, which qualified me for the job. And I always wanted to go to California; I was a Hippie. And there was that song, Wear flowers in your hair in San Francisco. I said, That's gonna be me.

**Although, it seems like an odd choice for a Hippie to be a probation officer.**

It fit into being on a white horse, saving the day. Social liberal. It was the same thread for me as burning your draft card. And in those days, Reagan was the governor of California, and had a reputation for being very oppressive to Hippies. Which I was one of. And I thought I would go out, you know, on my white horse, save the kids in the probation department.

**But you had a tough time in that job, and it didn't last.**

It didn't quite work. Yeah.

**And then came an accidental choice of a place to stay on the road that changed your life.**

Luckiest day of my life. I had about three or four hundred dollars left in my pocket, and I drove into Hollywood. And there was a vacancy sign at a motel, and I checked in. It was late at night. And in those days, I lived a drug-induced life at many times. So, I took a drug at that time, and sitting out on my balcony of this little room, thinking about how horrible my life is, and oh, my god, I just got beat up in the probation department. And I heard someone screaming down at the pool, what sounded to me like screaming. And I get down there, and I separate the two people. And the girl punches me in the mouth. And they were making love. And goes crazy, you know, like, Get outa here, who do you think you are? And I go back up and now, I know my life is ruined. I've been beat up twice the first day in LA. And when I went down to the pool in the morning, the girl turned out to be Janis Joplin.

**Wow.**

She was sitting around the pool.

**With?**

This amazing collection of like, Mount Rushmore rock stars. There was Jimi Hendrix, the Chambers Brothers. During the course of the next few days, Jim Morrison showed up, Bob Dylan's road manager, Credence Clearwater Revival.

**So, this was a hangout for the rock set.**

This was a hangout. It ended up being where Janis actually died a couple of years later. And I started selling drugs, which was the only way I could support myself. Not my proudest moment, but it's what I did. And one day, Jimi Hendrix said—who was customer. Thank you, Jimi. And he said, What else do you do for a living? And I said, Well, you know, I don't really know what I'm gonna do. And he said, Well, you know, if the police come and ask where you got the money to pay the rent, what are you gonna tell 'em? And I said, You know, where I come from, the police don't ask. And he said, Where I come from, if you wear a new watch, you'd better be able to tell the police where you got the watch. And he said, Are you Jewish? And I said, Yes. And he said, You should be a manager. I said, Okay, who do I manage? And Alice Cooper was living in the Chambers Brothers' basement at the time. He wasn't called Alice Cooper; he was called the Nazz. And they said, I think I know this guy. So, Alice tells the story of Jimi coming in and saying, I found a Jew to manage you. And forty-three years later, I'm still managing him.

**Shep Gordon's success with Alice Cooper opened new doors for him. His genius for understanding how to market and promote his clients led them to superstardom. But that wasn't always a good thing for either him, or the people he was managing.**

**You know, you were a manager, which by definition means you were, you know, watching out for things. But during this time, you were drugging and drinking, and had long nights with sex with strangers.**

Yeah.

**How did you manage?**

Probably would have been much more effective if I hadn't been. So, I did as well as I could do, given my lifestyle. But I didn't really have a personal life. So, this was my life. And parts of it were attractive to artists. I was different than other managers. I sort of lived in their genre more than other managers did. I always thought that my job was to try and understand what the connection was between an artist and his audience. And if I could understand that connection, then to try and create a historical moment that really reinforced that connection. In Alice's case, the common thread of his audience was, parents hated Alice. These were kids going through a period of rebellion, which every kid goes through. We wanted Alice to be that focal point of rebellion, to be that

badge. The parents saying, You can't go to the Alice concert, and the kid going, I'm going, he's my favorite artist.

**And everything the others thought was reprehensible and horrible was wonderful business.**

Oh; my god. It was the greatest thing for us.

**You once said you probably knew more celebrities than celebrities do.**

Yeah. I was very, very lucky that way. I think part of me is a groupie, so I get attracted to the celebrities.

**And yet, you came to a place where you saw that the fame that you created was toxic.**

Yeah, yeah; very obvious. It became very obvious, very fast. It was a strange crossroad to be in. I had gotten to the point where I was very successful at what I did, it was giving me an amazing lifestyle, it was giving me a life that I had never even dreamed I could approach. You know, I was meeting presidents, I was driving in Rolls Royces. So, to give it up was something I really didn't want to do. At the same time, I became aware that the better the job I did, or the bigger the celebrity was that I knew, the harder they fell. And it was very tough. The way that I dealt with it was to try and be honest. So, I would tell my clients when they'd come in, and all of them thought I was crazy, they'd all laugh, never had one who took it serious. But I would tell them; I would say, You know, if I do my job perfectly, I could kill you. Luckily for you, I'm probably not gonna be perfect, but I'm really good, so you're gonna get maimed.

**And that was all about fame?**

All about fame. And they all got maimed.

**So, there's nobody that you represented who could handle the fame and the attention.**

You know, I don't want to paint this dark picture of suicidal, 'cause I don't mean that. You know. But you lose your life with fame. It's so hard to stay on your path. There's so many things pulling you, and celebrity becomes so important. It takes you off your journey. And it's very hard to stay on your journey and stay positive, and stay happy. You start to dehumanize yourself for your career. And those are tough. There's nobody who really survives. You learn how to adjust to it, but it takes you off your path. You know, for some, it's drugs and liquor, which lead to, you know, horrible stuff. For some, it's isolation. And the higher it gets, the harder it is. You know, I watch Alice, who I think has handled it as good as anyone I've ever seen, and he's just found a way to get through it, but he's nice to everyone.

**But he's had a serious drinking problem.**

Oh, there's nobody who hasn't hit the wall, that I know.

**Who's famous, in your experience.**

Yeah. I don't know anyone who hasn't had a crisis moment. For Alice, it was rehab, which didn't work, and then it was losing everything. And usually, it is losing everything.

**Shep Gordon's life started to change when he met a famous French chef named Roger Verge. Shep's new interest in food and cooking gave him the idea of creating Celebrity Television Chefs, and his new chef clients started becoming stars as national interest in cooking shows took off. In the meantime, Shep Gordon's chef friends on Maui were not getting any of the benefits of the new culinary trends.**

**You're credited with inventing the celebrity chef concept.**

That's my proudest moment, probably. I had started representing chefs, and signed most of the great chefs in the world, 'cause no one else did it.

**Did you think of, Bam!, Emeril Lagasse?**

We worked a lot together. Yeah; yeah. The chefs weren't friends. I lived in Maui, so I knew the guys, but they were acquaintances. The Hawaiian chefs were friends. Mark Gelman was one of my best friends, Peter Merriman was a great friend, Roy Yamaguchi. These are the guys that I cooked with, laughed with, you know, gloated about how lucky we were to be in Hawaii. And I knew, although no one ever busted me, here I was representing all these great chefs, but yet having dinner at my house for the local chefs, and I wasn't representing any of them. And the question, How come not us? ... although never said, permeated the room. And I realized I had to try and do something.

**That's just a Hawaii thing. It's not spoken, but it's there.**

But it's there; yeah. And they were all so gracious; nobody ever even made a sarcastic comment about it.

**Yeah; there's not a feeling of entitlement.**

Yeah; at all.

**But there's a fairness question.**

Exactly. And I felt it very strongly. So, I spent a little time in my Jacuzzi, and you know, my aloneness thinking, How do I do something that isn't just a show? What can I do that can really help 'em? Three of the chefs that I represented started movements. Mr. Verge had started nouvelle cuisine, which was the first real culinary movement. And Dean Fearing and Robert Del Grande had started Southwest cuisine. And these were culinary waves that went across the world. So, I called up the guys and I said, Listen, I want to try and do something with you. I have this idea that maybe we can start a movement. I don't know what it is, but I think Mr. Verge will come in, I think Dean will come in, and they'll tell us how they started a movement, and maybe we can figure out how to do something with all of you, and the weight of everybody. And they came and lectured, and out of it came Hawaiian Regional Cuisine, which was pretty phenomenal.

**Wow. So, do you spend a lot of time at restaurants on Maui today?**

Yeah; oh, yeah. I love going to restaurants. I think one of the things to me is so exciting, is to see this new generation of chefs who were trained on Hawaiian Regional Cuisine.

**You have a very nice home to this day.**

I'm in the same house. Yeah; yeah. And I love it more every day. And my blood pressure on Maui is twenty-five, thirty points lower than it is on the mainland.

**And you've done some hard living.**

I've done some hard living.

**And you're healthy?**

I am; yeah. Thank you, doctors.

**And thank you, Maui.**

And thank you, Maui.

**Musician manager, Hollywood agent, and culinary enthusiast, Shep Gordon has done it all, while living on Maui. Mahalo to Shep Gordon of Kihei, Maui for sharing your life stories with us. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.**

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**When you look back at a very successful life in many ways, do you have regrets?**

Yeah; I would have liked to have my own children. I wish I had maybe spent more time on myself. I think when I look back at my business career, I think there are things that I would do differently. I never had contracts with any of my artists, which meant my revenue stopped when I stopped working with them. Which I also was a white knight on a horse. You know, I don't need it. I'm doing it for other reasons. And in the days I was doing it, I never had a consciousness that in my older years my resources could really help people that needed it, instead of it being squandered by maybe some artists at the time. So, I think that, I would have done differently. I would have kept the revenue flow that I could have used for good stuff. But for the most part, no, I think my life evolved the way it was supposed to evolve, in whatever way that is.

[END]