

Columnist Jack Smith is remembered in Huntington exhibition

“Critics have despised us in Los Angeles as worshippers of money, health, sex, surf and sun. Not quite true. We don’t worship those things; we just rather get used to them, since they happen to be so available.”

So wrote Jack Smith, the chronicler of life in L.A., who for four decades delighted, amused, and provoked his readers in his column for the *Los Angeles Times*. A new exhibition at The Huntington looks back on his career and the city that was his beat. “Smith on Wry: Jack Smith, Columnist for our Times” opens Feb. 16 and continues through May 12 in the West Hall of the Library.

A lifelong newspaperman, Smith was born in Long Beach in 1916 and grew up in Southern California. He served as editor of the Belmont High *Sentinel*, later remarking that this was the highest position he ever reached in his career. After working as a journalist for the *Bakersfield Californian*, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, and other newspapers, Smith came to the Times as a reporter in 1953. Five years later, he began writing a daily column. His final article appeared on Christmas day in 1995, shortly before he passed away in January 1996.



For 42 years, *Times* readers enjoyed their morning coffee with Jack Smith. With seemingly effortless grace and wit, he wrote of his Mt. Washington neighborhood, the activities of his wife Denise (Denny) and sons Curt and Doug, his historic backyard sighting of the common grackle (despite the nay-saying of ornithologists), and the house in Baja with its incomparable landlord, Mr. Gomez. As Robert Jones wrote in a *Times* appreciation soon after Smith’s death, “In many ways, Jack served as the country’s first – and most enduring – columnist of postwar suburbia.”

Jack Smith's beat was L.A., but he wrote larger stories of the human condition, wry and pithy observations on the foibles and follies of ordinary people in changing times. He was a blogger, before the word existed and before the Internet had become a feature of daily life. His readers responded to his columns with scores of letters that became grist for his writing and contributed to ongoing dialogues in subsequent columns.

The popularity of his columns led Smith to gather selections in eight volumes, including *Alive in La La Land*, *How to Win a Pullet Surprise*, and *The Big Orange*. His most popular book was *God and Mr. Gomez*.

The exhibition, drawn from Smith's papers donated to The Huntington by his family, will include columns, reporter's notebooks, corrected typescripts of lectures, typescripts of his books, letters from readers (including actor Charlton Heston and other Hollywood figures), photographs, awards, and film footage. Highlights include Smith's handwritten Baja journal, his signature Greek fisherman's cap, letters and photographs of Jack and Denny from World War II, and material relating to such L. A. landmarks as Angel's Flight and the Los Angeles Public Library.

The exhibition will offer those who sorely miss Jack Smith's column the opportunity to visit once again with an old friend, and it will enable those who don't yet know him to discover the timeless writing of a master Word Smith.

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