

THE "KNOWING IS NOT ENOUGH" INTERVIEW

THIS MONTH: JUN FAN JEET KUNE DO NUCLEUS MEMBER GEORGE LEE Bruce Lee's Bay Area Connection

On Sunday, May 17, 1959 a fresh-faced 18-year-old Bruce Lee stepped off a freighter from Hong Kong and onto the shores of America (San Francisco, to be exact). For the next three months and 17 days, Lee would remain in San Francisco. Apart from Gung Fu, Bruce was particularly fond of the "Hong Kong Cha-Cha," of which he was crowned the Crown Colonies Champion the year before.

It was during one of Bruce Lee's Cha-Cha performances at a Chinese Community Center in San Francisco, that George Lee first laid eyes on Bruce Lee and was completely captivated by his grace, poise and the fluidity of his dance movements. After locating him in the hallway shortly after the performance, Lee-the-elder was even more impressed by this young man's thorough mastery of Gung Fu. The men became great friends and allies, and when it was discovered — to Bruce Lee's delight — that George Lee was a supremely gifted artist and

*craftsman, the two collaborated on the design of unique martial arts training equipment that was, of course, formulated to Lee-the-younger's exacting specifications. The two men shared many happy times and life experiences together throughout the course of Bruce Lee's life. And for this reason, we are pleased to introduce George Lee to the readers of *KNOWING IS NOT ENOUGH* with the hopes that his recollections will allow you to see the personal side of Bruce Lee. A side seen only by his closest friends — like George Lee. — J.L.*

What are some of your fondest memories of Bruce?

GEORGE LEE: Well, any of the times that he came up to Oakland. The things that we'd do, the fun that we'd have, the jokes that we'd tell, and the places that we'd go to eat — and flipping a coin to see who would get stuck with the bill — it was usually me, by the way. Those are all fond memories.



Old Friends: George Lee (left) and Bruce posing in front of Lee-the-younger's Chinatown school in Los Angeles (circa 1967).

Can you recall any of those anecdotes?

GEORGE LEE: Any of the times that he came here on his birthday were always fun. I remember too, the time that he came up here with a big fur coat that the studio had given him — that really cracked us up when he came walking into the restaurant wearing that thing! It was a full-length fur coat! We thought to ourselves, "Hey, what's going on here!" He thought he would crack us up by wearing it into the restaurant! I couldn't believe it. I said to him, "Gee, Bruce, you're lucky I didn't have my shotgun with me when I first saw you in that thing, or I might have mistaken you for a bear and shot you!" He just laughed. So, these and other similar memories of Bruce, Allen Joe, and I at Jimmy Lee's house. Those were all good times. Bruce used to do a trick where he would snatch a coin out of your hand. You've probably seen people do this: they will place a coin in your upturned palm and ask you to close your hand before they are able to grab it. Well Bruce was so fast that he would, not only grab, say, a dime out of your hand — but he'd put a penny there in its stead! And he'd do it so quickly that you still thought you were holding the dime!

What other "tricks" of precision did Bruce Lee do?

GEORGE LEE: Well he did a trick that involved a punch and a candle. He would light up a candle and then he would punch toward the candle so fast and powerfully, you'd think he was going to smash it — but instead he would stop just short of it, and the resulting breeze coming off the force of his punch would extinguish the candle! It was quite a thing to see. It was things like this that always made Bruce great company to be around.

I also understand that he was constantly training and striving to improve his techniques and accuracy.

GEORGE LEE: Oh yes. I remember walking down the street with him in Oakland and there were all sorts of potted plants that were lining the edge of the sidewalk and he would kick at every one of them to see how close he could get to the leaves without actually making contact. And he'd do these kicks fast and powerfully, and yet he always had supreme control and never hit a leaf. One thing about Bruce was that he picked his friends carefully.

Can you provide us with an example of this?

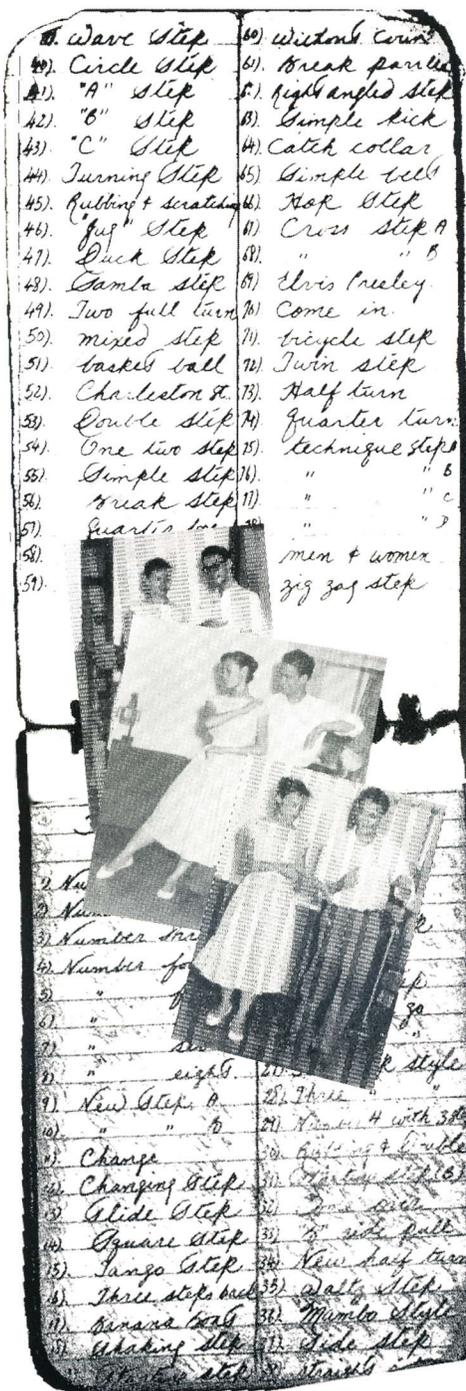
GEORGE LEE: Well he was very selective and he could read the character or psychology of a man — instantly. He could figure out right away whether or not the fellow he was speaking with was a decent person or not.

How did you first come to hear of Bruce Lee?

GEORGE LEE: Well that was the time when he came to over to teach the Hong Kong Cha-Cha at our Chinese club, the C.A. C.A. Jimmy Lee's brother, whose name was Bob Lee, he spotted Bruce over in San Francisco doing a demonstration of the Hong Kong Cha-Cha. And the way Bruce did it was so different and impressive that Bob invited him over to our club and that's how I got to meet him. Bruce was a terrific dancer and his Hong Kong Cha-Cha was so different and impressive from the Cha-Cha we had been learning up until that time.

How was it different?

GEORGE LEE: Well it's hard to describe other than to say that if you saw Bruce do it — it was fantastic! The regular Cha-Cha that we do here is just that — regular. It has a Latin beat. But when Bruce went through his motions, he did moves that we'd never seen and yet he kept it all in time with the beat of the music. I still remember a few of the steps he taught me, and I still use it.



Bruce's personal list of Cha-Cha steps.

How did it come about that you eventually began to talk Gung Fu with Bruce?

GEORGE LEE: When he first came over, we all met and he started teaching us the Cha-Cha. But during the intermission time he came out into the hallway and ran through a few of the moves of Wing Chun. And I said to him: "Gee, that is really impressive! What I learned was never like that, nor did it possess that kind of speed."

What was your original style?

GEORGE LEE: My style was Hung Kune, but it's also known as Bak Kune in China. After the dance class, I pulled Bruce aside and told him that what he had demonstrated in the hallway was so different that anything that I had learned. And he said, "Well, you do a lot of classical movements, I imagine." And I said, "Yes, we do have a lot of classical movements." Bruce said, "Well, I'm trying to get away from all that." So I asked him if there was any chance for me to learn this style and he told me that he was just about to head up to Seattle to go to school — he had only come to Oakland to make a few bucks teaching Cha-Cha so that he could afford to go up to Seattle. I asked him if there was any chance of him coming back and teaching me a few moves and Bruce said, "Yeah, I might come back and open a school here at some time." I said, "That's terrific! I could get you a lot of students!"

So this predated Bruce's arrival in Seattle. It might be safe to say that you were one of the first Americans to ever see Bruce demonstrate Gung Fu.

GEORGE LEE: I was the first — at least, along with Jimmy Lee, Bob Lee and Allen Joe.

What things did Bruce stress in his Gung Fu during the years that you worked out with him?

GEORGE LEE: Bruce was big on fluidity and speed — much more so than in the style I had learned previously. That's what impressed me the most. Of course, he also worked with me on Pak Sao, Lop Sao and things like that. Eventually he made up a list that went way beyond that and included the Salutation, and Trapping and all that. He taught me many techniques.

Did Bruce ever share much of his philosophy with you — his philosophy of life as well as martial art?

GEORGE LEE: In the beginning, he made an audio tape so that he wouldn't have to keep repeating himself to every student that came in. And every student that came into our class — and there were only about six or seven of us — he would play them the tape. And they would learn first hand of Bruce's personal philosophy directly from the tape. As a matter of fact, the way he would screen people who came to his school was by asking them "Why do you want to learn Gung Fu?" And if the student said, "Well, I want to learn it in order to beat up so-and-so," Bruce would just kick them out. He screened everybody that came in and if they didn't possess the



A recent photo of George and the love of his life, wife Mary Lee.

desire to learn the art — as opposed to just fighting — they didn't last long.

Whatever happened to that tape?

GEORGE LEE: (laughs) I don't know. I think Bruce kept it. I asked Greglon Lee [James Lee's son] about that the other day but he said he never saw the tape at his father's place.

Did Bruce ever tell you that only one person — apart from himself — was allowed to teach his art?

GEORGE LEE: No.

Can you tell us about the Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do Nucleus and the work it is doing?

GEORGE LEE: Well I'm all for it. It's a good thing — the best thing that's ever been done for Bruce. It's too bad that it couldn't have happened earlier, like 20 years ago. But, still, better late than never.

You made so many things for Bruce — from artwork to training equipment. What are two pieces that you are particularly fond of that you made for Bruce?

GEORGE LEE: The tombstone and the gripping machine.

What did you like about the tombstone?

GEORGE LEE: Well, I liked it because it perfectly captured his attitude towards the practitioners of the classical arts. It really embodies what he stressed and it really is true: "In memory of a once fluid man, crammed and distorted by the Classical Mess." Remember, Bruce eliminated all the classical movements from his art; things like the 'horse' stance, the "you do this, and then I'll do that" type of two-man cooperative drills — none of which resembled real fighting.

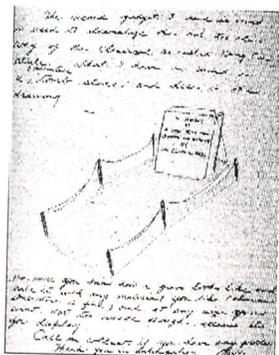
He said "Just do what comes naturally," which means, like he said, "A punch is like a wave crashing into a wall. At the very end of that wave is where the power is, and that's where your power should be." He really believed in that and always using your waist or hips in your techniques.

What did you like about the gripping machine that you built for him?

GEORGE LEE: Well, at first he just had these individual gripping devices — and he didn't like that. He said that with this gripping machine he was able to add weight to it, no matter how strong he got. And he used a lot of weight on that machine. I remember that he couldn't fit enough weight on the machine to tax his grip, so he used to pile the weights right up to the limit the machine would hold — which was right up to the top — and then add a couple of sandbags on top in order to increase the weight even more.

You also built many punching bags for him — particularly those that he mounted on the wall.

GEORGE LEE: That's true. I remember one time he was really into punching hard objects; he filled those bags up with Bee-bee shot and metal shavings or something or other. And he would punch those bags for up to 1,000 punches a day. And his knuckles got so ugly-looking! I couldn't even stand looking at his hands during that period of time. But that was the way Bruce was, very dedicated. Just like his washboard stomach of his. He said to me, "Give me six weeks, George!" And every day, for six weeks he trained like mad on his abdomen and he would lift up his T-shirt and show me his progress. By six weeks, he had a washboard stomach! He did so many sit-ups and leg raises. But that was Bruce; he couldn't boil water, but, by God, if he wanted to do something, he could do it. He was very dedicated to his body and that's why he wanted me to make all this stuff. In the beginning,, I was bigger than him. And then in six weeks time, he put



on solid muscle through his weight training workouts and he was bigger than me.

It seems like you, Jimmy Lee, Allen Joe and Bruce had a lot of fun together.



"The Four Musketeers": (from left to right) George Lee, Bruce Lee, James Lee and Allen Joe.

GEORGE LEE: (laughs) Yeah. We were the "Four Musketeers."

The Yin-Yang symbol and the Chinese phrase that, when translated into English, read "Using No Way as Way, Having No Limitation As Limitation" were philosophical components of his martial art that he had when practicing non-classical Gung Fu in Oakland and retained in the development of Jeet Kune Do, which shows that his art is rooted in that Eastern philosophic viewpoint. Do you think that Bruce was a big believer in Yin-Yang?

GEORGE LEE: Yeah, definitely. He was always talking about it; the soft and the hard, the male and the female. He was always talking about the Yin-Yang.

He was a very wise man for such a young man, wasn't he?

GEORGE LEE: You can say that again! He was very intelligent in that way. He was very well read and an excellent artist too. Whenever he was talking he would be sketching out things that would show us how a technique should be executed. He was very knowledgeable.

What rank did you receive under Bruce's instruction?

GEORGE LEE: I received a "Level 2." I was very proud of that.

In closing, George, what does Bruce Lee continue to represent to you personally?

GEORGE LEE: Well he was my idol. My sifu, my master. I respect him like he was my brother. When he passed away, something within me died too. I don't practice Gung Fu much these days, not just because of my age but also because a good deal of my enthusiasm for it left when Bruce left. He was my good friend.