

Bobby Furst, beloved artist and founder of Furstwurd, passes

By Heather Clisby - June 9, 2025

passed away June 8, 2025



Known as the 'unofficial mayor of Joshua Tree,' the Morongo Basin has lost one of its brightest lights with the passing of assemblage artist Bobby Furst late Saturday evening. News of his death spread quickly on social media as Furst loomed large in the community, not just as an artist but as the developer of a fertile atmosphere of art and acceptance.

An assemblage artist of note, Furst created with found objects – industrial discards, household items, weapons, shell casings, musical instruments, letter blocks – anything 'unwanted' that could be repurposed into statement art, with environmental concerns and the futility of war being favored topics. Furst had a gift for breathing new life into the discarded and forgotten as he moved through his unique life with curiosity and compassion.

Born August 7, 1953, in Long Island, New York, Furst was just 18 months old when the family moved first to Hollywood, California, before again moving to nearby Laurel Canyon in 1959 just prior to the turbulent Bel Aire fires. The new neighborhood was a hotbed of colorful characters like Joni Mitchell and Frank Zappa – musicians, artists, poets, activists – and the new arrival soaked it all up. Exploring his new hometown, young Furst brought home sticks, bones, rocks, and a lifelong love of collecting began.

Coming of age in the 60s, Furst was inspired by the work of his stepfather, Peter Furst, an anthropologist and art collector, who documented the life and art of the Huichol Indians of Mexico. In his early teens, the family frequently traveled south of the border, often camping in Baja, where his collecting habits flourished. At one point, the family formally relocated to Guadalajara to continue his stepfather's work which included shooting a documentary on the tribe's ancient 40-day peyote ritual, which Furst participated in ... at age 15.



Bobby Furst in 2017. Photo Credit: Diane Kuntz

In 1971, the family moved to upstate New York, where Furst quickly realized he was, indeed, a Californian in every sense. After turning 18 and dutifully registering for the draft,

Furst flew straight back, arriving in Hollywood with \$4.89 in his pocket. Furst then picked up his own camera to capture musicians, concerts, street people, and ultimately returned to Mexico to document renowned potter, Juan Quesada. In 1998, he studied under assemblage artist George Herms at the Santa Monica College of Design Art and Architecture.

After a wild initial visit to Joshua Tree involving mescaline and breakfast with George Van Tassel (creator of the Integratron) in 1972, Furst returned to LA, working in carpentry, and exploring his own art instincts. Somewhere along the way, he befriended Noah Purifoy, who undoubtedly inspired and encouraged Furst to explore his assemblage leanings. Furst bought a house in Laurel Canyon in the late 80s and his neighbor, singer Victoria Williams, deliberately put Joshua Tree back in his mind. On a return visit to the Hi Desert, he unexpectedly reconnected with numerous artist friends happily living here and enjoying a freedom that was unattainable in the big city. A decision was made.

After an exhaustive search for the ideal location – visiting 70 properties over 18 months – he finally found the spot for his vision near the border of Joshua Tree National Park off Desert Shadows Road. Furst officially moved to Joshua Tree around Thanksgiving 2008 amidst a rare snowstorm and landed on the community radar when he opened his steel Quonset hut studio/gallery for the Highway 62 Open Studio Art Tours.

After an impromptu performance of Gram Rabbit for a birthday party at the new space, word spread and the concept of Furstworld was born. Furst was now welcoming artists, locally and globally, in all manner of events – music concerts, comedy performances, fundraisers, fashion shows, live theatre, film screenings, and so on. He would often shake his head and marvel, “I still have never asked anyone to perform here.” In truth, it was always the other way around.



Image Credit: Furstworld

For a man small in stature, he loomed large, both in the scale of his art and in the generosity of his heart. In creating Furstworld, he thought beyond himself and saw how it grew organically out of the community. Indeed, as Furst stated to Gary Daigneault on the "Up Close Show" on January 27, 2023, Furstworld will "be left to the community." The details of how exactly that might happen will likely be revealed in the weeks and months ahead.

"Connecting people through music, voice – be part of the solution. Get involved. You gotta make yourself happy before, you know, you go out, otherwise, everything you share is anger, frustration, being pissed off, and it brings everybody to a stuck place. That's my message. Get over it. Make it happen."