

# MATC NOW

## Beyond MATC

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### *Wide-Ranging*

### *Multitalented Writer, Photographer Finds Unique Niche*

When Larry Widen left a thriving career in advertising to become a freelance writer, it was a gamble, but he hit the jackpot in terms of making a self-reliant living doing what he loves. "I've always been a writer; now I'm dedicating myself to it," says the 1980 Photography graduate. "I'm working harder than I ever have in my life. This past year I proved to myself I can do it full time."

Full time for Widen means 16-hour workdays filled with research, writing, marketing and public appearances. In January he was a featured guest on Channel 10's "I Remember" and did a book signing at Schwartz bookshop to promote his latest work, the self-published *Vintage Milwaukee Postcards*. The 162-page book features 250 images of early 20th-century city scenes. Widen chose the postcards from his own collection accumulated over 30 years.

His interests range far beyond local history. For his 2005 book *Tombstone Blues*, he took a road trip to Chicago and the Deep South to photograph final resting places of blues legends the likes of Robert Johnson, Leadbelly and Stevie Ray Vaughn.



**Larry Widen (left) signs copies of his latest book, *Vintage Milwaukee Postcards*.**

Widen's lifelong interest in comic books and classic pulp fiction earlier had led to *Doc Savage: Arch Enemy of Evil*, hailed internationally by aficionados. In a similar vein, this year *The Shadow: Master of Darkness* will be published.

## Latent Talents Awakened

Widen began his creative career at MATC in 1978, when he joined *The Times* student newspaper as a photographer. He soon discovered a gift for writing and layout, mentored by faculty advisor Tom Gould, and within a year he became editor. "Tom encouraged me to try a variety of things. I give him a lot of credit for not pigeonholing us. I had my hands on layout, photography, feature writing.... everything I learned, I still use today." This period of his life later inspired "a reflective memoir," *Lar and Len: A Long Strange Trip*, about college life back in 1979.

After his MATC graduation Widen spent a year at UW-Milwaukee, soaking up classes on F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack Kerouac and the Beat Poets. Hoping to combine his interests in art, journalism, literature and history, he asked MATC photography instructor Elliott Schnackenberg for advice on his next steps toward a four-year degree. Schnackenberg suggested Ohio University at Athens. Widen graduated from Ohio U. in 1982 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in photography and communications and a minor in art history, then returned to Milwaukee to launch a freelance photography business.

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I still use today."



## Chronicler of Palaces

Just for fun, he began taking pictures of Milwaukee's historic movie palaces. "Theaters were vacant or being knocked down, so I started photographing them and doing research on each place," Widen says. "After awhile I had bankers' boxes full of information." He compiled and organized his photos and notes to write his first book, *Milwaukee Movie Palaces*. "It didn't start out to be anything. That's the beauty of it. It was just something to do whenever I wasn't working."

The Milwaukee Historical Society accepted the manuscript for publication, the MATC Alumni Association agreed to help pay for the printing, and *Milwaukee Movie Palaces* was published in 1986. Over the years it has gained acclaim among historians and film buffs locally and nationally. The Wisconsin State Historical Society will publish Widen's sequel, *Silver Screens*, next fall.

## Top of His Game

*Milwaukee Movie Palaces* led to Widen's first advertising job in 1987. He promoted new movie releases for Nato Marketing in Milwaukee. Five years later he joined Covenant Healthcare, working his way up in marketing and communications for television, radio, print and the Web. At the top of his game creatively, Widen moved on to the Zizzo advertising agency in 2002 to build a health care division. In 2005 he resigned to write full time.

Upcoming projects include a history of pop concerts in Milwaukee and a play called *The Agency*. It's evident that Larry Widen's wheels never stop turning.

As the promos say, stay tuned, folks.