

Alan Rubin Tribute Interview Section

Lew Soloff

We had a friendship for 51 years. I met Alan when I was 16 and he was 17. I first heard him play when he was 16 and I was 15; he played on a Newport Youth Band record, two songs: "You Don't Know What Love Is" and "She's Funny That Way." [Marshall Brown's band of up-and-comers can be heard on two 1959 albums, *The Newport Youth Band* and *At the Newport Jazz Festival*, both released on Deram/Coral.] Right away I just thought he was great. I knew he was better than me, but it was okay because he was a year older.

I came from Lakewood, New Jersey, and Alan came from NYC. He was fantastic. The first time we played together, I was 16 and he was 17. We played duets. We scared the shit out of each other because we both could do different things. But I could not play the trumpet with the technique that he could. He was athletic. They wanted to sign him up for either pro or semi-pro baseball. I was very un-athletic. [laughs] Trumpetistically, he had it all over me as far as being able to play his instrument. He was a very coordinated guy.

When he was young, whatever Alan Rubin said, we did. He helped more people get into the New York studio scene than anybody I know. We started playing in a brass quintet together: me, him, David Taylor on bass trombone, Tony Price on tuba, and Peter Gordon on French horn. Alan picked the personnel for the sounds. I remember telling a classical player friend of mine that I was starting up a brass quintet with these guys and when I told him the personnel he fell on the floor laughing. I said, "What are you laughing about?" He said, "You're all comedians. You'll never play!" He was right. We rented Carnegie Recital Hall and somehow in the middle of our first tune, we cracked each other up and wound up rolling around the floor onstage. I don't want to get really graphic and tell you what happened. We just couldn't play. We gave up, and that was the only time we ever tried to play. [laughs]

Alan's sense of humor was legendary. *Legendary*. He was the quickest wit in a Don Rickles kind of way. He wasn't as quick as [insult comedian] Rickles but for Don Rickles that was his profession. The stories are *unbelievable*. Nobody could fuck with him. There was a certain code of ethic that I've rarely seen today between us very good friends. I'll give you a very graphic example: When I was with Blood, Sweat & Tears back in the late-1960s, we're just a band then all of a sudden we're becoming really huge. Of course when it's just a band, they can't get any [musician] they want because there's not enough money, but as soon as there's enough money, they can get anybody they want. There's not one guy out of the nine of us in the band that the other eight didn't want to fire at one point. At the point they wanted to fire *me*, it wasn't about my playing, it was about something else, and they asked Alan if he wanted to join the band. Alan said, "No, I have to talk to Lewis." And Alan told me what it was about, and this and that, and I went up to the band and said, "Yeeeeeaaah? When we were making a \$100 a week, you weren't complaining about this shit!" I said, "Go ahead [and fire me], I'm leaving!" They said, "We don't want you to leave, Lew." I said, "Okay, I'll stop doing that." Alan didn't grab my gig like many people would have done...There are legendary stories about friends doing this kind of thing to each other and saying, "Hey, friendship is friendship, but business is business." That's not what the relationship between Alan Rubin and me was." And then it happened in reverse. Alan screwed something up with the Blues Brothers, and I was asked to join the band. I called Alan right away, and he straightened it out. A real friend doesn't do that to each other, and that's the kind of guy he was. And he introduced Paul Shaffer and me to each other, and we're best of friends now and have been for years.

Mike Merola. Alan could see people so quick. He was one of those people who had a gift for seeing people, and Alan saw Mike's heart, which is obvious to anybody that knows him. Mike was one of a select amount of people that Alan really fell in love with as a human being.

This brings me to the nitty-gritty of what would be important to say in this article: Alan was like the Pied Piper. If you wanted advice about anything in the business, you asked Alan Rubin. David Taylor was actually asked to join the New York Philharmonic many years ago. Well, it's unprintable what Alan said but he basically discouraged him from doing it. He asked David, "Who you going to hang out with?"

Nobody could play with him when he was very young. He had manicured nails. And he had the chops. He was ludicrously handsome, handsomer than any of us. He got more chicks. He had a car. We all looked up to him. He was funnier than any of us. Nobody was as funny as him. He was very smart, extremely intelligent. He was quick-witted. I *know* what he was to me until the day he left, which was a little bit over three years ago now. And believe me, Alan could be very salty with his friends, but when it came down to it, it would be like a brother saying, "Hey, what's wrong with you?" But if anyone else said anything to his "brother" they better watch out for Alan!

When the Blues Brothers movie came out [in 1980] and Alan got famous from that, he would go into a restaurant and make sure to let them know who he was. He'd do that, and he'd always get extra this or that. I remember when I went down to a certain vegetarian restaurant years ago, when Alan first got ill and we tried to get him to eat healthier. He would crack the waitresses up. He'd say, "Can I have salad with my salad?" [*laughs*] I remember it clearly: Every waiter and waitress in the place came over to have a conversation with Alan. One waitress said: "You got to talk to this guy!" He cracked everybody up. And we got so many extra plates of food, it was crazy!

He could also be the opposite. If something turned him off, he didn't care [who knew it]. If someone was an asshole on a recording date, he would tell them to their faces, not caring if he ever got hired again. He would do that. He was a hero to all of us, [but] not as far as when he would use the abusive part of his humor very openly on people. He was a human being. Everybody's a human being. Everybody has good and bad parts. The human parts of him were so good. He was such a mensch, as they would say, that he couldn't stand it when he met somebody who was for the most part jive. Even though I would go on record saying there's jive in every one of us, there's mensch in every one of us too, and sometimes one outweighs the other. When somebody was jive, they were fodder for him. He wouldn't let up.

On the other hand, when someone was real and good-natured like Mike Merola. Well, he would do anything for Mike. If Mike asked him to play for free, whatever Mike wanted, I'm sure Alan would have done it for him, as I would...When we first worked with Mike [in the 1990s], he couldn't play guitar *nearly* as well as he does now. But it didn't matter because Mike was such a human.

When I was with Blood, Sweat & Tears... I was making far more money than all my friends, I would take everybody out and I would *always* pick up the check for everybody. [Later trumpeter] Jon Faddis and Alan had a pact. When I quit Blood, Sweat & Tears in 1973, for one solid year I could never pay a check when I was out with either one of them. They would not let me pay for anything. They treated me everywhere to make up for what I had done in those years. And Alan of course pushed me right into the recording business.

I will not name names, but Alan was sometimes betrayed by the people he helped out. It really bothered me that people don't remember what he did for them. He put a lot of people in *very powerful* positions. He himself didn't want to be in that kind of position. He didn't want to be in a hiring position. It wasn't Alan's thing; it wasn't mine either. I want to play music. But some people did not remember or appreciate what he had done for them, and that's sad to me. Almost everybody that I know of my generation, Alan got into the recording business.

There's not enough good things I could say about this man.