

Al's Answers to Fans' Questions, March 2010
By Carol Vermilyea

During a tour of the Northeastern USA in March 2010, Al was kind enough to answer the following questions which I had collected from the fans. Dave Nachmanoff was touring with Al, and he shared his perspective on some of the Q&A's as well. Many thanks to Al and Dave for their time and good humor.

About "Accident on 3rd Street"

Q: Is there a particular story or person behind this song?

A: No, just the general phenomenon of people being killed by drunk or drugged drivers.

About "Almost Lucy"

Q. Is this song at all autobiographical? We noticed that the initials of "Almost Lucy" are "AL."

A. (Laughing) I never noticed that about the initials! No, not autobiographical, except in the sense that it would apply to any performer just starting out in his or her career.

About "Apple Cider Reconstitution"

Q. Why would the trains want to take you to the Earl's Court Road and why would it not seem right to go there? (Is it because of the hard partying in the area, or it being a gay center, etc?)

A. No, not about being a hard party area or a gay center. (Pauses to think.) I'm not sure. I used to live near there. It wasn't a gay center when I lived there. Maybe it wouldn't seem right because it would be like going home or going backward, and I wanted to be moving forward.

About Fan Lyrics to Your Songs

Q. Have you seen many of the fan lyrics to your songs? If so, do you enjoy them?

A. I've certainly seen some. Yes, I do enjoy them, if they're good.

Author's note: I didn't think to ask Al how he defines "good" lyrics. I do recall that he considers "bad" lyrics to be along the lines of "oh baby baby I want you, oh baby come close to me, oh baby don't ever leave me...." I also recall him having said that he considers Fountains of Wayne and They Might Be Giants to be groups that write good lyrics.

About "Hipposong"

Q. Is "Hipposong" meant to be funny? It seems to have a serious message.

A. It's meant to be funny. I had just finished writing "Trains" (long and very serious), and I wanted to write something light and humorous next.

About Humor

Q. You have a wonderful ability to make people laugh. What kinds of things do YOU find funny?

A. Off the top of my head, I think of Monty Python, and comedian Bill Maher. The live act "Bonzo Dog Doo-dah Band" made me laugh so hard I thought I was going to die because I couldn't inhale.

About "Last Days of the Century" and "Somewhere in England 1915"

Q. Regarding "Last Days of the Century," which mentions a woman who quotes Shakespeare, and "Somewhere in England 1915," which mentions a girl on a bed who is reading Shakespeare: do these two songs refer to the same young Shakespeare-reading woman?

A. "Wow, this fan sees very deep connections! No, not the same person."

Author's note: Dave had previously seen this question and had guessed that it wasn't the exact same young woman, but the same TYPE of young woman, which was a common TYPE during the time that AI wrote "LDOTC." Dave was present during the asking and answering of this question, and shared his guess. AI then said "That's right. What he said." All three of us had a laugh over this.

About "License to Steal"

Q. These days, how do you feel about lawyers and about the song "License to Steal"?

A. "License to Steal" was about music business lawyers, and about one lawyer in particular. In general, most music business lawyers are still pretty sharky. But I have never had any problem with lawyers in general.

About Being a Celebrity and Having Fans

Q. In your experience, what are the good and bad aspects of being a celebrity and having fans?

A. The good aspects are meeting lots of people and getting to know them, especially getting to know them. The bad aspects....I can't really think of any.

Q. Really? Even when fans get drunk or obnoxious during a show or in the signing line?

A. Like when?

(Author's note: AI seems to have the fortunate ability to tune out these unpleasant experiences, or at least forget about them once they are over.)

About the High and Low Points of Your Career

Q. What do you consider to be the high points of your career?

A. (Below.)

1. When Love Chronicles was voted Melody Maker Folk Album of the Year. At that time my pay for gigs went from about 10 pounds to about 100 pounds.

2. When Past Present Future Came Out, and my pay for gigs went from about 100 pounds to about 200 pounds.

3. When Year of the Cat came out, one day I was driving down Sunset Boulevard, and the song Year of the Cat was on the radio. When it ended, I switched to a different radio station, and Year of the Cat was playing on that too. At that point I knew we had a hit.

4. At Christmastime 1976, the band and I were playing at, I think, University of Southern California. We were at the edge of the stage waiting to go on. The lights came up, and the band went on stage. At the same time I saw [I think Al said "the Band Manager"] come running down the hall toward me. As he got within earshot, he panted "WE GOT RKO!!!!" RKO was, at that time, a chain of 8 AM Radio Stations that played top ten hits over and over. This meant that Year of the Cat was a top ten record (single.) I ran on stage knowing this wonderful secret, which neither the band nor the audience had heard yet.

Q. What do you consider to be the low points of your career?

A. During the 80's when I was playing casinos with a band. Nobody even paid attention, they were too busy gambling.

I know now what I didn't realize then: it's much better in many ways to travel and perform with one sideman than to travel and perform with a five person band.

About "Night Train to Munich"

Q. In "Night Train To Munich," are you singing about any particular train station, either at the beginning or the end of the ride? Where would someone catch that train, for example?

A. No, no particular train or station.

About "Orange" (the Album)

Q. Does the name of the album "Orange" have any connection with American Football?

A. No, that was well before I got interested in American Football.

About the Photograph on the “Sparks of Ancient Light” CD case

Q. Regarding the photo on the back of the lyrics booklet for "Sparks of Ancient Light," (not on the back of the CD case itself): who are those guys, and where was this photo taken?

A. The photo was taken at the Royal Albert Hall. From left to right, the people in the photo are Dave Nachmanoff, Gabby Young, me (Al), Mark Griffiths, Pete Hamilton, Laurence Juber, and Mark Macisso. The photo has no specific connection to "Sparks of Ancient Light."

About “Princess Olivia”

Questions:

1. Was there a real, historical Princess Olivia who had anything to do with this song?
2. Was there ANY real person to whom this song refers?
3. Does the song have anything to do with Olivia Newton John, on whom some of our members had a crush way back when?

Answers: No, to all three questions. The only significance of the name "Olivia" is that it rhymes with "trivia."

Q. Is there any other song you've written that starts with classical music?

A. (Pauses to think.) I don't think so, although Swiss Cottage Maneuvers sounds kind of classical at the beginning.

(Author's Note: It has been pointed out that the introduction to "Palace of Versailles" bears a strong resemblance to several measures of the "Pavana for the Earle of Salisbury" by William Byrd.)

Q. Does the phrase "she may be large" refer to physical size, or "large" in some other way?

A. Yes, physically large. The idea is that the singer is so helplessly in love with Olivia that even if she isn't the size of a runway model, he doesn't care. He loves her!

About the Out-of-Print CD “Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time”

Q. Regarding the fans-only CD "Seemed Like a Good Idea At the Time," many fans would love to buy a copy of this CD. Is there any way to purchase one?

A. Well, of course this CD becomes available on e-bay once in a while. The other possibility is that Steve Jensen, who has the master, might be willing to produce more copies in batches of one thousand. Steve Chapman should have contact information for Steve Jensen.

Someone would need to collect (or put up) the money for the thousand copies, send the

money to Steve, take delivery on all the copies, then ship the copies singly to those who want them.

(Author's Note: A suggestion has been made to make this CD available on CD Baby or on a special section of amazon.com. As far as I know at this time, no one has taken any action on these ideas as of yet.)

About Unreleased Songs in General

Q. You mentioned that you have written about 200 songs that have not been released. Do you think you will one day release some of these 200 songs? Your fans would particularly love to see the following songs released commercially.

Dreaming

Dark Side of the Street (aka Keening of Children)

Japanese Garden

Life After Death

...and the new song about the travelin' javelin salesman.

A. (Smiling). I like the song about the javelin salesman too. "Dreaming" was written by Tori Amos.

The way the music business is right now, it's not easy to make a commercially viable CD unless you're an artist with a "big name." This would be the main obstacle to my releasing another CD with new material at this time.

About Wine

Q. In what kind of a place do you keep your wine? (Actual below-ground cellar, cooled pantry, special refrigerated unit, etc.?)

A. I never got involved with below-ground storage. Most of my wine is in a warehouse... (Author's note: Al added something like "down the street" or "downtown.")

I keep about 200 bottles in a special wine storage unit, sort of like a refrigerator, in my apartment. It holds enough to get me through the weekend. (Author's note: obviously the last sentence was said tongue-in-cheek.)

Q. Would you tell us about your "role" in the world of wine? We have seen photos of you giving talks about wine, for example. Do you have fans in the wine world, the same as in the music world?

A. I don't have fans in the wine world, but I do have colleagues with whom I exchange thoughts. As you mentioned, I sometimes give a talk or write an article for a wine magazine.

Q. What is the best wine you ever had?

A. Chateau Pétrus 1947.

Q. What is your favorite "affordable" wine? (Please define "affordable" however you like.)

A. I'll give three. I think they are all in the range of \$25-\$30.

Patz and Hall Chardonnay
Dehlinger Pinot Noir
Weinbach Gewurtztraminer

Q. What vintage(s)?

A. Well, at the moment, 2007. By the time this answer appears in print, it might be 2008.

Author's Note:

AI also mentioned that if fans would like to bring him a bottle of wine, it's much better to deliver the wine BEFORE a show than after. Although we may not be able to actually find AI before a show, we could ask someone at the venue to deliver it to the dressing room for AI and Dave to enjoy. Attach a card saying who it's from. The earlier the wine arrives in the dressing room, the better.

Reasons:

If the wine is delivered AFTER a show, it gets taken back to the hotel, where AI usually goes right to sleep. Therefore it wouldn't be opened that night. If the transportation to the next show is by car, the wine can be brought along and might be opened the next night. However, if the transportation to the next show is by plane, the wine will often have to be given away or left at the hotel desk. Yes, a bottle of wine can be packed in a suitcase, but if it leaks, it leaks all over AI's clothing for the tour. Yes, there is a special container for wine bottles that can prevent wine from leaking into a suitcase, but it takes a lot of room so AI doesn't usually carry it.

If the wine is delivered BEFORE the show, it will often be opened before the show starts, and shared with Dave and friends and acquaintances who may be visiting the dressing room. AI will often have a glass between the end of the show and the beginning of the CD signing line, and will take a glass out to the signing line with him. All in all, the wine will be enjoyed and often finished before the end of the evening. AI carries a good corkscrew with him.

About Other Interests

Q. Other than your interest in wine and your career as a singer-songwriter, do you have other hobbies or interests you especially enjoy?

A. Yes, I enjoy American Football, reading history, and movies.

Regarding American Football, I'm a Denver Broncos fan.

About history books, I especially appreciate Barbara Tuchman and I just read an Alan Furst book. I don't think I really need to read any more books about Hitler or Stalin.

About movies, I like pretty much all kinds of movies. I especially like:

(1) The 1974 ORIGINAL version of "And Now My Love," a French film. It was remade some time later, and in my opinion, was totally ruined.

(2) "A Room With a View."

Q. Do you enjoy action or sci fi movies?

A. Yes, for example I liked "The Fugitive" and "The Empire Strikes Back."

Miscellaneous/General

Q. What do you consider your eye color to be?

A. Oh goodness, I don't know.

(Author's note: Dave N. was present with me and AI when I asked this question. AI looked directly at me and then directly at Dave with his eyes well open, and we each looked closely but couldn't really be sure.

Fortunately, there was a good strong overhead light, and I asked AI if he would look up toward the light. He was kind enough to do so, and with the strong light illuminating his eyes, I could see clearly that they are grey-blue or blue-grey. To me, it seemed there were about equal amounts of grey and blue in AI's eyes. One might say that determining AI's eye color requires careful study--as do his songs.)