

A Vanilla Thank You

I always knew our final show would come one day, but I didn't expect it to arrive without an invitation. I had imagined our farewell performance to be the one that was billed as "Our farewell performance!", or "So long and thanks for all the vodka!" or something like that. But I thought Lester and I would be the ones to make that call, after he and I had the talk that ended with us both agreeing that it had been a good run, and that we should end it while we were still riding high. We could plan our retirement party with all the hoopla and press we could garner. There would be tears and toasts and hugs and speeches and stories as we ended the night with our final rendition of "I Want You Back", came back for an encore, and finally walked off stage one last time as it all...faded...to....black.

But it didn't happen that way. And it might never.

I wasn't wishing for it, but after doing the Vanilla Pop thing for 20 years, I started entertaining the idea that maybe it was all winding down. It was a fantastic ride, but I was getting older and definitely getting tired. Not tired of the playing and singing and dancing and flirting- just tired. Getting home at 4 a.m. is for the younger Alan, as is having more than two martinis a night. I used to love telling people, "I only drink when I work." I mean really... who gets to say that? It was an incredible perk of an incredible career, but maybe it was time to slow down and disembark the train which had gone non-stop for almost a quarter of a century. Man does that make it sound like a long time.

While I don't miss the gear humping, (you guys have seen how much crap we traveled with), I do miss the adrenaline rush that comes with performing. It's a cliché, but really- there is nothing like it in the world. You stumble into another dimension where everything flows in slow motion as your body tries its best not to overdose on all the dopamine and serotonin that flood your bloodstream as you hold that perfect note while people lose themselves in a sweaty, orgasmic, hypnotic trance on the dance floor. And although I may have been a bit dismissive, even pissed at times when some of you would corner us and eat up our entire break in order to chat, or request a song that absolutely sucked, I never stopped appreciating your appreciation. A friend once told me that I should never forget how rare it is to be able to bring joy, yet we would have been nothing had we not been able to feed off the energy that you guys provided. That was the magic of the show. The fact that as good as we were (are), it was our friends and fans who made it all possible. The vibe which you all created during those shows became an integral part of it all. The dedication you guys showed over the years is mind blowing, and I can speak for both Lester and myself when I say that we are eternally grateful and honored to have been a part of your lives for so long. I am Alan's utter amazement.

I'm not glad that our careers have quite possibly ended this way, but I'm accepting of it. When you're younger and you fantasize about being a pop icon- getting record deals and selling out Madison Square Garden, there's this tiny voice of reason in the back of your head that says "You're dreaming kid- that'll never happen." Actually that reads more like Humphrey Bogart's voice, but the sentiment is the same. So while we may have never played the big arenas, I'm content knowing that my dream partially came true, happy that we did manage to fill some fairly respectably sized rooms on occasion, and blown away by the fact that we were able to make a living as musicians. That was the last thing Lester and I anticipated when we donned the polyester, and drew on those ridiculous moustaches for the very first time so many years ago. And who names their kid "Humphrey"?

During this downtime, I find myself going through the Vanilla Pop photo folders every so often, as I reminisce about a life that seems more and more distant every day. Even though our last show seems like a lifetime ago, all those snapshots of you guys frozen timelessly in an awkward dance move, sporting your “Hell Yeah!” Rock Face, or pausing to take a breath as you look at me at the exact moment my finger pushed the red button, remind me that this all actually did happen. It affirms that we were doing something good... something creative and worthwhile, even if “worthwhile” merely means giving people the chance to let off some steam at the end of the week. Those photos also remind me that this trip has not just been about me and Lester. There are so many of you who have also been a part of this journey. Some of you have been with us since the days of the Martini Grill and Swig in the early aughts, and others who had just recently discovered us at Hotel Andaluz- having lost their Vanilla Virginité only last year. Yes that is a fan creation, and is now a proper noun just because I say it is.

Speaking of fans, I’d be remiss in these musings if I didn’t mention Brandelyn C., who was front and center for a solid 15 years or so, dancing up a frenzy from the first song to the last. I remember the night at Q bar when Lester and I finally approached her and asked, “Who the hell ARE you?” We’ve been friends ever since, and she would most definitely be the Grand Poobah of the Vanilla Pop fan club if we had one. She’s also in 60% of those pictures. I’m pretty sure you’ve seen her. I’m pretty sure I miss her.

As I slowly come to accept the possibility that this dream “day job” might actually be over, I can’t help but think about all the bar staff, club owners, and hotel folks who have also made their careers in this industry. I know that some of the venues at which we’ve performed might not be able to withstand the drought, and many of the people who were responsible for keeping the ship afloat will not be picking up where they left off. Many of you have become our friends, and it weighs heavily thinking that your livelihood may also have vanished. I know I was demanding at times, and I’d like to thank all of you for doing your best to accommodate us over the years. From the lighting and the stage, to the cocktails and the dance floor, I often needed things to be “just so”, and I know that many of my sentences began with “Would it be possible to...” or “It would be great if you could...”. I’m sure I was a PITA more often than I care to admit, and I know you guys did your best to conceal your eye rolling, but hopefully you’ll look back fondly at my relentless finickiness, and ache for me asking for a few more limes and a little less ice just one more time. Again...Thank you.

While we do have New Year’s Eve on the books for Albuquerque Sheraton Uptown this year, as well as several private events in the wings, they are all in a holding pattern at the moment. I’m doing my best to maintain whatever positive attitude I have left, and anticipate that those gigs will still happen. But if they don’t, and the live music scene gets washed away with so much of the other flotsam which this pandemic is creating, I wanted to take this time to share these thoughts, and to truly thank you all for the experience of a lifetime, since I may never get the opportunity to say all these things during my farewell speech at “Our Final Performance”.

On a side note, Lester and I and our dear friend and fellow out-of-work musician Ryan, are currently in the midst of developing a YouTube channel thingamabob show in order to adjust accordingly to the coming new world order. It's been a recurring topic of conversation during many of our van rides home over the past several years, and now seems like a good time to nudge it out of the nest to see if it can fly. It will be an amalgamation of interviews and musical performances, and will, if nothing else, afford us an opportunity to maintain the flow of expressive energy on which we have depended for so long. The process of developing performance art from the ground up, is reminding me of that special time so many years ago, when Lester and I had a big, beautiful, blank canvas upon which to paint our vision, and I'm reliving the joy that comes with watching something that you've nurtured, slowly blossom before your eyes. Lights, cameras and mics are expensive, but being able to explore one's creativity is priceless. We are excited to see where our new road may lead.

This has been a most unexpected adventure. I have made lifelong friendships while doing the thing I love most. I have seen what happens when you don't take yourself too seriously, and when you take the ball and run with it just to see where you wind up. I have learned that it's important to step off the beaten path as many times as you can during your lifetime so that you can change your perspective as often as possible. Our voyage is so very short, and the best scenery is the scenery you paint for yourself, with your brushes, with your colors and textures and with your happy little trees. Above all else- staying a bit absurd and not overly concerned about what people think of you, makes this journey a most magnificent ride.

Please stay safe and be kind to one another, even if it's not reciprocated. Remember that everyone you meet has pain, and passion, and fear and confusion, and that ultimately, we are all just trying to get through this as best we can. It's easy to get lost in the incomprehensibility of this thing, to go dark and feel the despondency as this pandemic continues to ravage the fabric of society, but we are resilient creatures if nothing else, and we will most certainly come out on the other side. The stage will look different, and the lighting and backdrop will have changed, but I'm hopeful that this time here and now is just a brief intermission.

We'll be right back.

With love and hope...
-Alan (Al Dente) Vetter
Vanilla Pop