“DREAM PROJECT”

By Alan Swyer

“Give me a thumbnail on Cab Calloway,” a B-level Hollywood producer named Arnie Berman urged when he reached Steve Alexander by phone.

“One of the all-time great entertainers,” Alexander gushed. “*Minnie The Moocher*, *Reefer Man*, *A Chicken Ain't Nothing But A Bird*, and my favorite version of *St. James Infirmary*.”

“And Dinah Washington?”

“This some kind of test?” asked Alexander.

“Indulge me,” insisted Berman.

“The self-styled Queen Of The Blues, praised by purists for *Evil Gal Blues*, *Baby Get Lost*, and a couple of dirty ditties like *Big Long Sliding Thing*, even though her big hits were *What A Diff'rence A Day Makes* plus a couple of duets with Brook Benton.”

“Somebody knows his shit,” stated Berman. “And if I say Louie Armstrong?”

“The most overpraised, yet under-appreciated, musical genius ever. I can't listen to *Hello, Dolly*, but love the early Hot Five recordings. The sound he created, the improvising – nothing better! Plus the singing and scatting. Listen to *Lazy River*.”

“You're making my day!” announced Berman.

“Want to tell me why?”

“Let me drop one more name. Irv Rosen.”

Alexander chuckled. “Want the good, or the not so good?”

“Start with the good,” insisted Berman.

“He managed some unbelievable Black acts.”

“And the not so good?”

“By reputation? One of the worst pricks ever.”

To Alexander's surprise, Berman laughed. “How'd you like to spend time with him?”

“He's still alive?”

“He was when I left my house this morning. He's my father-in-law, in from New York for a visit. Up for meeting him?”

“To listen to stories, or for some other reason?”

“Both,” said Berman. “He thinks there's a movie in his tales about being on the road with the stars we were talking about. Like it?”

“Sure. Only –”

“Yeah?”

“At a time when studios want superhero movies, and Netflix wants films about Blacks without a white guy as hero, where would the bucks come from?”

“He's says he's put together financing.”

“I thought you said no meetings or distractions till you finish the new script you're working on,” wondered Lorna, Alexander's live-in girlfriend, as the two of them munched on takeout Indian food that evening.

“This would be a dream project,” Alexander replied, explaining that there was no way he could pass up a chance to hear first-hand accounts of his musical heroes from yesteryear.

When Lorna followed with another question – “Is the financing real?” – Alexander shrugged.

“Only one way to find out.”

Arriving at the production office the next morning, where he heard hubbub that likely owed to some combination of pre-production, post-production, story conferences, and deal-making, Alexander was about to approach the receptionist, whose name was Nadine, when Arnie Berman came bounding toward him. Oozing gratitude, Berman led the way past people on phones and laptops until they reached the conference room, where Alexander did a double-take. No longer the robust creature he'd seen in scores of vintage black & white photos, Irv Rosen, stooped and bald, reminded him of a aged thumb wearing horned-rim glasses.

Once introductions were made, Rosen demonstrated that age had not rendered him cheerful or docile. “Why,” he demanded of Alexander, “do you give a shit about dead people?”

“Nice meeting you, too,” Alexander countered, drawing a gasp from Rosen's son-in-law, who immediately tried to mediate.

“What can I do for you guys?” Berman offered.

“Get us some coffee,” replied Rosen, “then beat it.”

Trying to ignore the put-down, Berman retreated, promising to check on them later. Silence reigned until broken by the older man. “So let me ask again.”

“If you mean why do I like Calloway, or Dinah W, or Ben Webster, or Sister Rosetta Tharpe, maybe it's because I have taste.”

“You know about Sister Rosetta Tharpe?” asked Berman.

“No, I pulled her name out of thin air.”

Alexander watched as Rosen's dour expression gave way to an unexpected grin. “You and I – in contrast to my *schmendrick* son-in-law – are gonna get along just fine. But before we start talking about Armstrong, or Dinah, or Coleman Hawkins, or Cab, I'm going to explain why

music back then – like the movie biz – was run by guys referred to not too kindly as Hebes and kikes. Ready?"

To Alexander's surprise, a metamorphosis started taking place, with geriatric Irv Rosen looking and acting considerably younger, and far more vibrant, as he spoke. The world he began to describe was one in which the best med schools, law schools, banks, and corporations were virtually closed to Jews (as well as Blacks and other minorities). Consequently, enterprising Jewish guys – since women in the workplace then were predominantly nurses, secretaries, or schoolteachers – went into professions considered disreputable for the so-called well-bred. Little wonder that record labels were headed by people such as Leonard and Phil Chess (ne Czyz) in Chicago; Sid Nathan in Cincinnati; Herb Abramson in New York; Herman Lubinsky in Newark; and Art Rupe (aka Arthur Goldberg) in Los Angeles. Or that the movie studios were founded by men with names like Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn, Jesse Lasky, Carl Laemmle, and Samuel Goldwyn (ne Goldfish).

Only when serious bucks started rolling in, explained Rosen, did the *goyim* want entree into those businesses. That not only opened the door for what he called "know-it-alls" with no kinship to the public and no feel for the business, but also to jargon he dismissed as "bullshit mumbo-jumbo": market research, demographics, quadrants, and branding.
"Armstrong, Ella, Louis Jordan, and Cab," Rosen insisted, "didn't need researchers to tell 'em what the public wanted. They *were* the public." And that was also true, he explained, of the Jewish songwriters who basically defined what America was. First and foremost in that regard, as Rosen saw it, was Irving Berlin (born Israel Beilin), who penned *God Bless America*, as well as classics such as *White Christmas* and *Easter Parade*. Then the Gershwins, Hammerstein,

Harold Arlen, Yip Harburg, Sammy Cahn, and Frank Loesser, all the way through Leiber & Stoller, Goffin & King, Pomus & Shuman, plus half of the folksingers.

Irv Rosen continued to lecture for another hour or so until his son-in-law popped back in.

“Anything you two need?” Berman asked.

“Yeah,” insisted Rosen, “less of you.”

“I'll come back to check on lunch.”

“Don't bother,” said Rosen. “I'm taking Steve out.”

At a Beverly Hills deli, after demanding a booth big enough for four people even though he and Steve Alexander were only two, Rosen faced the younger man once their orders were taken.

“You're what?” he asked. “Thirty?”

“Thirty-one.”

“So how in hell did you discover people like Dinah and Calloway?”

“Blame my mother's cooking.”

“What's that mean?” demanded Rosen.

“Because I grew up in a Black neighborhood, there was a soul food place on the corner where what they served actually had taste.”

“But nobody your age – or even your parents' age – listens to Dinah, Cab, or Sister Rosetta.”

“The owner was an old guy named Moses who used to say, *My place, my music. Don't like it? Eat somewhere else*. So it was nonstop Wynonie Harris, Dinah, Big Joe Turner, and the rest.”

“This was where?”

“Newark,” replied Alexander.

“Birthplace of the great Sarah Vaughan.”

“Plus Wayne Shorter, the Monotones, and Babs Gonzales.”

Rosen eyed Alexander strangely. “You know about Babs Gonzales?”

“No, I just pulled his name out of thin air.”

That drew a laugh from Rosen, just as their pastrami sandwiches and cole slaw arrived. “Know what's crazy?” Rosen then asked.

“What?” replied Alexander.

“I used to cheat on my wife, but now it's on my cardiologist.”

“Is your heart okay?” asked Alexander.

“No, but rumors to the contrary, I actually have one.” After savoring a couple of bites of his sandwich, Rosen launched into Dinah Washington stories. “She had a mouth on her like a dockworker,” Rosen began, “and referred to herself in the third person. Instead of, saying *I want*, it was always *Dinah W wants*, even though her real name was –”

“Ruth Jones,” Alexander interjected.

With a knowing smile, Rosen continued, once again seeming to grow more vital as he explained that his first serious assignment as a trainee was to accompany Miss Washington, as he was expected to address her, on a seven-city tour. Among his duties was to knock on her dressing room door each evening so as to give her notice twenty minutes before she was to take the stage. That went fine in Providence and Boston. But in Philadelphia, when Rosen knocked, the door flew open, revealing a stark naked Dinah lying on a sofa. Instantly the young man froze, only to hear Dinah say, “Two choices, white boy. Get in here and do what needs to be done, or shut the goddamn motherfucking door!” Petrified, Rosen chose the latter.

Except for a couple of digressions about his personal life during the early days of his career, most of the afternoon was devoted to Rosen, whose energy when he was reminiscing continued

to amaze Alexander, recounting more Dinah Washington stories. The one that became Alexander's favorite, which he planned to tell Lorna that evening, involved the morning the star showed up for a recording session and found a string section.

“What the fuck is this?” Dinah demanded to know.

It was up to Rosen to placate the diva, which he did by stating as gently as possible that it was something that had been explained to her and that she'd approved.

“Bullshit!” the singer bellowed. “Dinah W don't do no motherfucking strings!”

Inevitably, a settlement was reached. Dinah would record one song with the strings before they were released.

The result proved to be her biggest hit: *What A Diff'rence A Day Makes*.

Months later, when it was again time to record, Dinah entered the studio, looked around, then glared at Rosen. “Where's the motherfucking strings?” she growled before breaking into laughter.

As Alexander was leaving the production office, Arnie Berman caught up to him near the elevator. “I can't tell you how happy I am!” the producer gushed. “Anything I can do for you?”

“How about validating my parking?”

“Is he a nicer guy than you expected?” Lorna asked when Steve Alexander got home.

“Yes and no.”

“That sounds iffy.”

Alexander shrugged. “He didn't get where he did by being Mahatma Gandhi.”

“Is it worth staying with it?”

“To hear his stories?” replied Alexander. “You bet.”

“And there's the chance of a movie?”

“I sure as hell hope so!”

That night, after several hours of restless sleep, Alexander sat up in bed at 3 AM, unable to ignore a question that troubled him. “Why now?” he found himself wondering. If Irv Rosen's goal in generating a film was to commemorate or memorialize the world he'd been part of, or to create some sort of legacy, why didn't he do so five years earlier? Or ten? Or fifteen?

With Lorna asleep beside him, Alexander pondered, ruminated, and wondered until finally an answer dawned on him. With all of Rosen's friends, colleagues, and even professional adversaries dead, decrepit, or demented – and his family tired of hearing the same old war stories – the once-powerful man, nearing 90, wanted to fight against loneliness with the same zeal he once brought to making a name for himself.

In Steve Alexander he'd found a younger guy who knew about, cared about, and was eager to preserve a cherished musical world before it disappeared entirely.

“Let's see how hip you are this morning,” Rosen announced, when Alexander arrived at the din-filled production office the next morning. “Who was the first Black artist to have a million-seller?”

“Probably Armstrong or Ellington,” answered Alexander.

“Wrong!” exclaimed Rosen, delighted to inform his new acolyte that it was Cab Calloway, with *Minnie The Moocher*. “I laughed in the sixties,” Rosen continued, “when hippies thought they were inventing drug culture and double-entendres. When Cab let's you know that Smokey was

cokey, think he's talking about soda? Or that *kicking the gong around* isn't about opium? Yet here's the fun part – that stuff separated hepcats, as they were called then, from the rubes who had no idea what Cab was talking about, even when the song was used in a Betty Boop cartoon."

Gleefully, Rosen listed Calloway songs that, during Prohibition, tickled the fancy of the hip crowd at Harlem's famed Cotton Club: *Reefer Man*, *Kicking The Gong Around*, and *The Ghost Of Smokey Joe*.

Rosen took particular pleasure in describing how he was instrumental in helping Cab create his Zoot-suited image, then assembling a band that included jazz giants Ben Webster, Dizzy Gillespie, Milt Hinton, and Cozy Cole. But even while acknowledging the talent of those stars, Rosen proudly quoted Calloway. "You hear about the Duke Ellingtons, the Jimmy Luncefords, and the Fletcher Hendersons," Cab said, "but people forget that Jazz was not only built in the minds of the great ones, but on the backs of the ordinary ones."

"People think that there are stars today," Rosen then added. "But to quote Pops Armstrong, *They ain't shit next to the real thing!* You want real stardom, tell me who did all that Cab did?" Rosen talked about how, at the age of 23, while the country was in the midst of the Great Depression, Calloway was already making $50,000 a year – the equivalent of roughly $800,000 today. That led to a discussion of the records Calloway went on to make, plus a new process called Rotoscoping, which allowed for his dance steps to accompany his singing in Betty Boop cartoons. Next Rosen talked about the short musical films – precursors to music videos – that Cab did for Paramount. Then Cab's feature film career, which ranged from *The Singing Kid,* in

which he starred with Al Jolson in 1936, through 1943's all-Black *Stormy Weather* (together with Lena Horne, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, and Fats Waller), all the way to *The Blues Brothers*.

Rosen expressed particular pride in having helped in the creation of a weekly radio quiz show called *The Cab Calloway Quizzicale*, then getting Cab the opportunity to influence his audience by recording songs with social commentary: *Doing the Reactionary*, *The Fuhrer's Got the Jitters*, *The Great Lie*, *We’ll Gather Lilacs*, and *My Lament for V Day*.

But never did Rosen beam as much as when he took credit for coming up with the idea for the first dictionary ever compiled by an African-American: *Cab Calloway's Cat-ologue: A Hepster's Dictionary*, which quickly became the New York Public Library's go-to reference book on Jive. The dictionary, Rosen stated proudly, went on to have two updates: as *Professor Cab Calloway’s Swingformation Bureau*, then later as *The New Cab Calloway’s Hepster's Dictionary: Language of Jive.*

“The stories he's been telling,” said Lorna as Alexander poured the two of them glasses of Pinot Grigio, “how many are new to you?”

“Most.”

“So why do you let him go on with the others?”

“I'm getting 'em first-hand, not from some third-party, and with something researchers miss.”

“Namely?”

“Emotions.”

“I bet,” said Lorna, “that's a world you would have liked to have been a part of.”

“That's a world I would have *loved* to have been a part of!”

“So,” Rosen inquired when he and Alexander sat down together on Thursday morning, “are you getting what you need?”

“Yes and no.”

Rosen eyed the younger man strangely. “What's that mean?”

“The stories are fantastic. But if young Irv Rosen is to be at the heart of the movie, I need a whole lot more of what you were like.”

“You heard how I was involved every step of the way.”

“That's what you *did*,” replied Alexander, “but not *who you were*. For the character at the center of the film to be three-dimensional – more than *the trainee*, *the manager*, or just *the white guy* – I need to know where you came from, what drove you, what were your hopes and dreams. In other words, what made you tick.”

“And if I'm not comfortable giving all that?”

“Then in addition to not having a movie,” stated Alexander, “you're not being true to who I think you are.”

Rosen eyed Alexander suspiciously. “And who do you think I am?”

“A guy with courage, conviction, and chutzpah.”

Rosen smiled. “That, kiddo, is how I made it a dog-eat-dog world.”

“Then tell me about it,” said Alexander.

Rosen studied the younger man momentarily before speaking, “I've been with hotshots in music, politics, and business,” he offered. “And you can hold your own with any of 'em. And my son-in-law says you've got talent up the gazoo. So how come you're not rich and famous?”

“I don't know what it says about me,” countered Alexander, “but that's never been important to me.”

“I'll tell you what it says,” answered Rosen. “It says you're a mensch. So let me see if I can give you what you want.”

Though he started hesitantly, the tale Rosen told in some ways thrilled Alexander even more than all the music anecdotes put together, for it captured the twentieth-century version of the American dream as lived by the son of immigrants who arrived in this country with nothing. Growing up with a father who barely earned a living as a tailor, and a mother who transported the *shtetl* to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, young Irv Rosen was a scrapper who, from an early age, had to contribute money to help his family avoid eviction. Some endeavors were legal – shining shoes, working as a paperboy, washing dishes – some less so – running errands for toughs connected to Meyer Lansky, hustling pool, hosting crap games.
While his Aunt Rivka lamented that young Irving, as the family insisted upon calling him, would wind up behind bars, Rosen had other ideas.

Infatuated with music, he talked his way into a job as a song-plugger, giving him a foothold in the music business at a time when what he enjoyed most was referred to as Race Music. Turned down repeatedly in his attempts to get a paying job at a company that managed Black artists, Rosen took to showing up every day anyway, ingratiating himself by bringing in coffee and bagels, serving as an unofficial messenger, answering phones when others were busy, washing the windshield of the boss's car, walking the poodle that the boss's wife occasionally dropped off, and babysitting talent when they were in town.

Having made himself indispensable, while also learning the ropes, Rosen was finally promoted to paid employee, one willing to work ungodly hours in pursuit of the success he wanted for the

clients, his family, and himself.

As he was headed toward the elevator after another long day with Rosen, Alexander was once again intercepted by Arnie Berman. “Sounds like you got stuff out of him he doesn't often talk about.”

“For which I get another parking validation?” answered Alexander.

“And the Congressional Medal of Honor. I've never seen him this rejuvenated or pumped. But listen, can we postpone tomorrow's session until Monday?”

“Anything wrong?”

Berman shook his head. “Probably just precautionary stuff. His ticker's not what it used to be.”

Alexander winced. “Is he basically okay?”

Berman shrugged. “Know why he's not dead? He won't give anybody the satisfaction. But don't quote me.”

While driving home, Alexander got a call via Bluetooth. “Steve, it's Veronica,” a voice announced.

“Veronica who?” teased Alexander.

“Veronica your wonderful agent, smartass. Ready to start thanking me?”

“Thanking you for what?”

“A meeting tomorrow for the rewrite I just got you. It's a psychological thriller.”

“Which,” grumbled Alexander, “is probably neither psychological nor thrilling.”

“Stop being a pain in the ass and show some gratitude,” countered Veronica. “The script was just emailed to you, and I'll text you the where and when.”

That evening, after fighting his way through the lugubrious script sent by Veronica, Alexander trudged into the kitchen, where Lorna was munching on freshly made popcorn. “Will you be upset,” Alexander asked, “if this summer I don't take you to Paris or buy you a Lamborghini?”

“Why should this summer be different than any other summer? What's up?”

“I'm gonna turn down a rewrite, which may mean I lose my agent.”

“Who does so much for you anyway,” said Lorna, making no attempt to hide her sarcasm.

“You're not mad?”

“I just want you to be happy writing what you want to write. Having fun with the old-timer?”

“More than you can imagine,” Alexander answered.

On Friday morning, as he made notes about Irv Rosen's tales, Steve Alexander was surprised to find himself sinking into a funk. The reason for the glumness, he came to recognize, was simple. After seeing Rosen all day every day, the absence of wonderful stories – plus the curmudgeon he had come to enjoy – translated into withdrawal symptoms.

Once he had made notes on everything he could remember from the lengthy sessions, Alexander's next step was to allow himself time to cogitate, then daydream, in the hope that an appropriate form and framework for the proposed screenplay would come to him.

By mid-Saturday morning, the realization had hit that instead of a linear narrative, what was needed was a framing device – one that would allow for the script to bounce back and forth in time. The key, which came to Alexander after a long walk, was an on-screen interrogation of sorts: a young music buff interviewing the on-screen Rosen character, much as he'd been doing. Though not given to jubilation, that's what Alexander felt while spending the rest of the afternoon jotting down more and more questions he hoped to ask Rosen in the sessions to come.

“Someone seems pleased with himself,” said Lorna as she and Alexander were seated that evening at their favorite Persian restaurant.

“With the project,” corrected Alexander. “It's finally coming into focus.”

“Whatever it is, it's great to see you aglow.”

That glow, however, did not last even through the night. Once more it was near 3 AM when Alexander sat up in bed, this time in a cold sweat. Who was he, considering his finances, to be turning down a paying job? With only one feature film credit to his name, plus a couple more in TV, he was far from affluent, and only marginally comfortable. Worse, though he had made the decision to strive for a leap that would be both qualitative and quantitative by writing on what was known as *on spec* – original material not to others' specifications – in truth, with the exception of Veronica's recent call, four months had gone by since he was approached about a paying gig.

Filled with doubt and anxiety, Alexander climbed out of bed, then tiptoed into the kitchen. There he poured himself a glass of water while trying to get a grip.

Thinking about the rewrite he'd turned down, Alexander had to admit that his dream was to be a screenwriter, not an alchemist trying to turn garbage into gold.

Pacing quietly back and forth, Alexander thought about the countless screenwriters who began writing personal screenplays, only to be seduced by commissions that brought more bucks then satisfaction. Far too many had made the unfortunate journey from fresh voice to writer-on-demand, then to hack, and finally has-been.

Among Alexander's contemporaries the process was repeating itself, with people buying houses

in the hills or at the beach, plus Porsches and Teslas, engendering an incessant need for adaptation after adaptation, rewrite after rewrite.

But, he realized, in a town where screenwriters vied for the opportunity to script “Fast & Furious 27,” or “Wonder Woman 5,” or to do a rewrite on a slasher indie or a copycat buddy film, he was the anomaly. Just as his preference in music was from once-upon-a-time, so, too, was his taste in film. In contrast to most screenwriters his age, it wasn't the “Star Wars” films, or “Avatar,” or “American Pie” that give him the filmmaking itch. Instead it was the discovery of films by the likes of Howard Hawks, Orson Welles, and Preston Sturges, which led him first to the French New Wave, then to the American films of the late sixties and early seventies: “The Wild Bunch,” “McCabe & Mrs. Miller,” “Husbands,” “Petulia,” and so forth.

It was the hope of returning to character-driven cinema that Alexander had chosen to devote time to something autobiographical – a white kid growing up in a Black area in New Jersey. Then, thanks to Rosen, came the chance of a project equally personal, but larger in scale, that combined his love of Black music with his affection for film.

That was why Alexander was willing to gamble on what would be a dream project in every possible sense..

“You okay?” asked Lorna when she came wandering into the kitchen, still half-asleep.

“I wasn't,” avowed Alexander. “But I am now.”

“Because?”

Alexander smiled. “I figured out who I want to be when I grow up.”

On Monday morning when Alexander arrived at the production office, raring to go, he was

struck by an unexpected stillness. His sense that something was amiss was reinforced by the troubled look on the receptionist's face.

“Nobody called you?” asked Nadine.

“About?” wondered Alexander.

“Mr. Rosen's heart attack.”

“Is he –”

“Alive? Seems to be. I hope this doesn't mean the end of your movie,” said Nadine.

“Or more importantly,” replied Alexander. “Of him.”

“Any update?” asked Lorna when Alexander returned home.

“Not that I've been able to hear.”

“I feel so bad for him,” she said, stepping forward to hug him. “And for you.”

“That's sweet.”

“Dare I ask what it means for the film?”

“No way to know yet,” replied Alexander.

“But it was your dream project.”

“Know what?” stated Alexander with a sigh. “Just hearing his stories was a dream come true.”

“Meanwhile you've got the script you were working on,” Lorna reminded him.

“Plus,” said Alexander, “I've got you.”

Lorna pointed a finger at him. “Even though you'd rather be with Dinah Washington and Big Joe Turner?” she teased.

“Well –” answered Alexander who forced himself to appear playful even as he feared losing not just a project he never would have dared pray for, but also someone who, in a short period of time, had become first a friend, then a surrogate big brother.