

**FOREWORD BY BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN**

**Laura Davis-Chanin**

**Liz Lamere**

# **INFINITE DREAMS**

**THE LIFE OF ALAN VEGA**

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**Foreword by Bruce Springsteen**



ESSEX, CONNECTICUT



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Dedicated to All the Frankies



There was simply no one else remotely like him.

—Bruce Springsteen



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# FOREWORD

ALAN AND I WERE IN THE SAME STUDIO—the Hit Factory. He was there working with Ric Ocasek. Alan was coming from the outside but I'd heard of his group and I'd heard some of their music and it entranced me—his courage and his aesthetic was something that deeply appealed to me. He was just incredible. So that was kind of when we actually met and struck up a small conversation.

His level of integrity and the way he approached his work was inspiring—quite inspiring. And that's the way I always found him to be, and he was also very sweet—in the time that we spent, he was always a sweetheart of a guy. Of course, I loved his music and did that recut of “Dream Baby Dream,” which people really loved. It's the classic American hymn. It's just really beautiful. And I had an idea that if Roy Orbison had lived, this was a song he should have cut. So, my own approach to performing the song was if Roy Orbison had sung this song, he would sing it something like this.

And “Frankie Teardrop”—that was incredible. That might be his greatest piece of work right there—certainly his scariest. It had a terror-filled ambience that people weren't expressing in rock music at the time, and it was totally unique. The sound of his voice was: “Whoa, this is—!” It was something I really related to. And definitely inspired the way I wrote “State Trooper” and a few other things on *Nebraska*. Very, very influential.

I liked the idea that he approached his work as mainstream. He would say, “Hey, why shouldn't everybody be getting this?” Well, it wasn't quite that and obviously if you get on the wrong bill, you're going to have a problem. I opened up for Chicago for thirteen shows and dodged Frisbees for a good part of it. But it was nothing like what Alan had to suffer. And I know that he and Marty really went through a lot and it took real courage; they were brave. In the end though, Alan will last forever . . . his music will be here forever.

—Bruce Springsteen  
2023



# PREFACE

I KNEW ALAN VEGA WAS A UNIQUE, REMARKABLE, ABERRANT, and often shocking presence onstage. I was very aware of him because my band, the Student Teachers, opened for Suicide several times in the late '70s. I was but an unseasoned, youthful fifteen-year-old drummer at the time and my first memory of seeing Suicide was—"Are you kidding me? This isn't rock 'n' roll!"

How wrong—and right—I was. Of course, youth is a keen deceiver.

During the writing of this book, I learned about a man who struggled with many demons—the Vietnam War, the oppression of the disenfranchised, the confusion with his born religion—many issues. He weathered life in fierce and volcanic tones and wrote, performed, and sculpted this experience.

And he needed to share all of it. It was important. We are enriched when we are shown the threads of darkness in our world—it inspires us to create more light.

He disclosed to us what we needed to know to become better human beings.

I am honored to have had the opportunity to write this book and learn about the man I seriously misunderstood. Alan has taught me so much and I am very grateful.

And I thank my agent Lee Sobel for arranging this project for me and introducing me to a remarkable woman—Alan's wife, Liz Lamere, who made Alan's life so grand, so special, so complete with love.

We are all Frankies.

—Laura Davis-Chanin

WRITING ABOUT THE LIFE OF ALAN VEGA is akin to capturing lightning in a bottle. One of my dreams is that this book conveys Vega's electric energy to fuel inspiration. Inspiring others was likely one of his greatest achievements. My hope is that this biography will give a deeper understanding of a human being who was often misunderstood and never wavered in his commitment to pure artistry: fearlessly seeking new ground. Alan Vega lived his life through the lens of creation: tapping into the full spectrum of human emotion, deeply exploring the human condition and the duality of beauty and despair while never losing sight of hope. Many have heard the legends of the intense stage persona; far fewer have a deeper knowledge of the full spectrum of creative pursuits and sphere of influence of the man himself.

I'm filled with gratitude for the thirty-one years we had together, the invaluable creative lessons and unconditional love and truth imparted from one of the most genuinely sincere, authentic, empathetic, and loving persons to walk this planet.

Writing Alan's biography wasn't something I had planned to do. It was sure to be a daunting experience and I thank literary agent Lee Sobel for knowing it needed to be written, setting the challenge, and connecting me with my steadfast and wonderfully creative cowriter Laura Davis-Chanin. She couldn't have anticipated what a complex trip it would be and took the ride with abandon.

I'm humbled by the generosity of spirit and sentiment of those whose interviews and quotes about Alan are contained herein and of the great photographers who contributed their amazing images. This was truly a mission of love. To all of you and everyone who seeks to discover more about Alan Vega, I'm deeply grateful.

Special thanks to Toots Melgard, Dante Vega Lamere, Amie, Beth, Sue and Mariette Bermowitz, Dr. Marty Levitt, Mel Auston, Ric Ocasek, Peter Crowley, Marty Thau, Perkin Barnes, Howard Thompson, Kevin Patrick, Michael Zilkha, Roy Trakin, Hegg, Michael Alago, Kate Hyman, Claire O'Connor, Henry Rollins, Larry Hardy, Caleb Braaten, Paul Smith, Susan Stenger, Jesse Malin, Bruce Springsteen, Billy Idol, Phil Hawk, Kid Congo Powers, Elvis Costello, Ben Vaughn, Mika Vainio and Ilpo Väisänen, Mark Kuchinsky, James Murphy, Gregg Foreman, Bob Gruen, Ivan Karp, Barbara Gladstone, Jeffrey Deitch, Mathieu Copeland, Thierry Raspail, Laurent Godin, Ben Tischer, Marc Hurtado, Lydia Lunch, Marie Losier, Jared Artaud, Michael Handis, Martin Rev, and every human being who touched Alan's life and whose life Alan touched. Love forever!

—Liz Lamere

PART ONE

“MEMORIES ARE NOISE”\*

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\* Alan Vega Notebook, courtesy of Saturn Strip, Ltd.



© Bob Gruen/www.bobgruen.com

# 1 America Is Killin' Its Youth\*

## 1969

Hey, Hey LBJ, How many kids did you kill today?†

—Protest Chant, 1967

### **New Year's Eve**

#### **#6 Subway**

The graffiti sang. He sat in the weaving and banging subway car, bouncing back and forth to its commands. As the tunnel sped by, he stared at the blood-orange, savage-red screams laced across the train walls: “CoCo 144,” “Hurt 168,” “Kill,” “Stank.” Pure art, he thought to himself. The entire subway car was ablaze with them. New York subways in the seventies were steel canvases pleading for a voice.

The torment of the spray-painted words dragged him inside their agony. He had ridden this train from home in Ocean Parkway to the Bowery in Lower Manhattan every weekend for the last year. But this was the first time he was so deeply pulled into that world unfolding around him.

It was 1969 and thirty-one-year old Alan Bermowitz was seeing life differently. He squeezed the suitcase between his thighs.

---

\* “Ghost Rider” by Alan Vega and Martin Rev.

† See <https://www.cfr.org/blog/vietnam-war-forty-quotes>.

I have to walk down to the river . . . a steady, flowing, crawling  
and impulsive surge, a welling flood that would come on  
forever and knew no limit to the invasion of its power.\*

—Alan

## One Week Earlier

Dancing Bensonhurst holiday lights swarmed around them as Mariette and Alan walked slowly down Nineteenth Avenue. Holiday shadows blinked and flickered in the brick building windows as the season slowly shifted to a close. The season had ended for Alan and Mariette two weeks ago when she lit the last candle on the menorah. Mariette had been alone at that moment. Alan wasn't there. He hadn't been home much for a long time.

They reached the corner of Nineteenth Avenue and Eighty-Fourth Street and crossed over approaching Alan's parent's building. A short time after he was born in 1938, the family lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, until they moved here—to Bensonhurst. They settled into a small, one-bedroom apartment where Alan followed and adored his mother—Tillie—and where he spent years meeting up with his cousins to play baseball and wager on the Dodgers. It was also where he and his brother Robbie laughed and wrestled on the living room floor—and where he needed to walk away from—forever.

Mariette watched as Alan opened the lobby door. Petite, with tender, curled brown hair, tight caramel eyes, and a distinct European presence, Mariette's world had become stained inside a damaged reality with her husband of nine years. She didn't recognize him anymore.

He had let his hair grow and was wearing tormented black clothes. He was burning plastics and piling junk up every day in the apartment for his artwork, then recording unrecognizable, agonizing sounds, vibrations, and echoes every night.

\*\*\*

“What's happened to you?”

“What are you talking about, Pop?”

Alan took a deep swallow of Chablis and lit an unfiltered Lucky Strike at the looming oak table in his parents' dining room. It was Friday night. Dinner with the parents. The Brooklyn Dodgers could be heard on the RCA TV in the next room.

“Look at you . . . you're a disgrace.”

Louis rubbed his head as he finished his coffee.

Not that tall, but with rich, wavy black hair and a striking Cary Grant demeanor, Louis had worked tirelessly that day—like every day. He was fatigued and stressed. Dealing with his son was the last thing he had energy for, but Tillie

\* Letter from Alan Bermowitz to Mariette Bermowitz, 1961.

had begged him and his culture, his tradition, the times—all dictated his son should stop acting crazy and go to graduate school.

“You had it, son. You were in astrophysics at Brooklyn college. You had it,” Louis groaned, and turned his chair away.

Alan got up and walked around to his father. The ladies had cleaned off the Friday night fare and disappeared into the kitchen for girl-chat. Despite the screaming baseball-crazed fans from the living room, Louis was unmoved.

“Why have you grown your hair like that?” he posed, staring at his son. “And why do you dress like a depraved demon?” Louis didn’t blink.

Alan stabbed an uncompromising look back at his father then turned and walked out of the house.

Louis shook his head. He called after him, “Look at your brother! He’s a meteorologist—and your cousin, he’s a dentist!”

## 2 Days Later

Mariette had come home early. She was worn out. It had been a trying day. Teaching French was usually more than fulfilling but lately her students had become apathetic—being high school seniors, they had the more pressing demand of New Year’s Eve parties on their minds.

When she opened the front door of the narrow Ocean Parkway apartment she shared with Alan, where there was a small bedroom, a cornered kitchen, and small bits of sunlight slipping through the living room window, she found Alan sitting with one of his new friends. He was someone she didn’t really know and felt uncomfortable around. They were recording sounds on Alan’s Revox tape recorder. Unusual sounds. Abnormal sounds. She’d heard them before. They bothered her.

Alan barely noticed her standing there.

Over the last year, Alan had become obsessed with creating music. But he wasn’t a musician or a songwriter or a singer. He was an artist—or that’s what Mariette thought—a painter, a sketch artist. That’s the degree he graduated with from Brooklyn college—Art.

A few months back, he had his first gallery show in Park Slope—even though Mariette was the only one to purchase any of his work.

Which she never told him.

She looked at Alan and his friend quizzically. Alan closed his eyes to the reverberating echoes of distortions and disfiguring sounds. He looked at peace to her. She realized they were living on planets far from one another.

\*\*\*

And then there was Vietnam.



"Untitled," 1969. *Photo by Mel Auston*

Alan's disenchantment with his old job, his outrage at the local New York city government, and America's never-ending murder of young men in Southeast Asia—was only the beginning. The war, the oppression of the poor, the lack of care for the common man—were causing a torrent of fury within him. He had become obsessed with the “splintering of America's soul.”\*

Something had changed.

I so wanted truth, whatever the truth meant to me.†

—Alan

Mariette watched Alan and his friend as the sounds howled. After a moment, she turned away and went into the bedroom to change and take a shower.

## 1976

The lights dim. A pulsing, oscillating noise drones. A single spotlight focuses on Alan as he stares out at the audience. The sound gets louder and louder. The electronic tones are asynchronous, unusual, brutal. The audience is confused. Where's the drummer? Where's the guitar?

The modulating synth textures carry on as Alan oscillates between soft groans and clipped shrieks. He stares at the audience—delivering his lyrics with an intensity the audience finds menacing. They boo and chant their loathing. Alan's eyes spear back harder with his pounding incantations. They scream at him to get off the stage. He balks. He bangs the mic stand on the stage, then he strikes himself with the mic—hitting his leg, his chest, his face. The sounds from Martin Rev's synthesizer rip across the club. Alan chants:

Hey, baby, baby, baby, he's a-screamin' the truth  
 America, America is killin' its youth  
 America, America is killin' its youth‡

The crowd's angst blows up. Alan pulls out a bicycle chain and thrashes it around the stage, above his head—swooning in staccato starts:

America, America is killin' its youth!  
 Hey, baby, baby, baby!§

\* Mariette Bermowitz, *Mindele's Journey: Memoir of a Hidden Child of the Holocaust* (self-pub., CreateSpace, 2012), 209, Kindle.

† Paul Tschinkel, Inner-Tube Video LLC.

‡ “Ghost Rider” by Alan Vega and Martin Rev, *Suicide*, 1977.

§ Ibid.

“Get off the stage!” the crowd howls.

Alan hits himself with the chain. He barks as he slams it. The audience’s booing deafens the club. He whacks it into his leg—and his chest, then tightens it around his waist—clenching, straining. He pulls harder. The distorted wall of tremolo from Marty’s amplified keyboard and drum machine goes on and on . . . and on. . . .

## 1969

### New Year’s Eve

The subway pushed to a heaving halt. The wheels grated against the rails. Passengers fell to the side of their seats as the car came to a full stop. The train doors quickly opened. Alan looked at the exit. He stood up, grabbed his suitcase, went out and up the stairs to the street.

As he emerged from the subway station, the New Year’s Eve moon shone stark into his eyes. He looked around him.

His heart pounded. He peered across the broken Lower East Side streets laden with polluted garbage, black potholes, and the homeless coiled on every street corner. He remembered what he had told Mariette once: “This is going to be the story of my life. I will be a failure.”\*

He shook himself and lit a cigarette. That was a long time ago, he thought. He didn’t feel like that anymore. He picked up his suitcase and marched ahead—as a profound smile unfurled across his face.

I made the biggest trip of all . . . Brooklyn to Manhattan.  
It’s . . . a longer trip than going from Manhattan to Europe.

It’s not about miles.

It’s about mentality.†

—Alan

\* Letter from Alan Bermowitz to Mariette Bermowitz, 1961.

† Paul Tschinkel, Inner-Tube Video LLC.

## 2 The Candy Store

# THIRTY-ONE YEARS EARLIER

I got all my boyhood in vanilla winter waves around the kitchen stove.\*

—Jack Kerouac

On June 23, 1938, Alan Vega was born. And that was a secret he held onto close to the day he died.

His birth name was Alan Bermowitz. The name Bermowitz was a distortion of his family's true name, "Bednowitz." In 1918, when his father and his grandparents arrived at Ellis Island, Isadore Bednowitz was instructed by the immigration officials to make his "name more American."<sup>†</sup>

Alan was the first child of Tillie and Louis Bermowitz.

Tillie was born in New York in 1912 and Louis had immigrated with his family from Poland when he was seven years old.

They were both raised in the cold, broken world of poverty and overcrowding in the dusky, beaten-down shades of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Thousands of German, Italian, and Jewish immigrants built their futures there as they escaped the despots destroying their home worlds. Crammed with 400,000 hard-working, determined settlers with horse-drawn wagons, dripping clothes hanging from every window and fire escape, cracked cobbled streets and endless boxes of stored-up food, the Lower East Side in the 1920s was the beginning of a new life for millions.

As it was for Louis Bermowitz and Tillie Lipstein.

---

\* Jack Kerouac, *Doctor Sax* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), Book I, 19.

† Mathieu Copeland, *Alan Suicide Vega, Infinite Mercy* (Musée d'art Contemporain de Lyon, 2009), 43.



Alan with his mother, Tillie, 1941. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*



Alan with his father, Louis, 1941. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*

Louis grew up with his family amid those bustling streets. His father, Isadore, worked as a presser of men's apparel in a local tailor shop and Bertha, his mother, stayed home.

As he grew, Louis became strikingly handsome—dark hair with a finely proportioned face and pin-sharp black eyes. He was raised to become a diamond setter. He ended up working fifty hours a week on Canal Street at “Seltzer and Bermowitz” and was a rising success in the dense Orthodox Jewish diamond-cutting district. Every day, he hurried to work on the subway to Canal Street in Manhattan, where he sawed, blocked, bruted, and polished the rocks in his care with precision and tenacity. Louis loved his work.

But not more than he loved his nightly poker game. Playing cards at the local club with mafia dons and their lieutenants gave Louis immeasurable satisfaction—nearly existential legitimacy. After marrying Tillie, his obsession with his cards found him out of the house constantly—withdrawn from her and the family—every night after work.

Tillie Lipstein's mother, Fannie, and her father, Isadore, arrived in the city from Russia in 1906.

They ran a news and candy stand on Henry Street and lived in a cramped one-bedroom basement apartment just behind it.

Tillie and her four sisters and brother matured, assimilated, and blossomed in that basement apartment. They were raised Orthodox Jews and often had to shower at the Educational Alliance down the street.



Alan's Grandparents—Isadore and Fannie Lipstein, 1906. *Courtesy Sue Bermowitz*

Sadly, Fannie's husband, Isadore, died not long after their son, Charles, was born in 1918. Fannie was left to raise their six children by herself. Her own family would be entirely exterminated in the Holocaust—a bitter reality well known to everyone—but which no one was allowed to bring up—ever.

Fannie ran the news/candy stand on bustling Henry Street with the help of her daughters, and she was known locally for creating the finest egg creams in the city.

Though most of the girls went to high school, the educational focus was more on her son, Charles. The girls were needed to work. They attended high school but no further.

When Tillie was on the job, she made sure to read the newspapers—absorb it all, learn and understand everything. In late 1929, the *New York Daily News* headline splayed across Fannie's newsstand screamed: "WALL STREET PANIC." Tillie read it with confused seventeen-year-old concern while she stirred the egg creams.

The world was becoming a darker, more backbreaking, undependable place. Tillie wanted to make the days better and between egg creams and newspapers, she attended Seward Park High school and became a bookkeeper. She had worked briefly in that position when she met Louis Bermowitz in the early 1930s.

They married in 1934.



Louis and Tillie. *Courtesy Sue Bermowitz*

They lived in Fannie's apartment as husband and wife and Tillie kept up her job as a bookkeeper. Everything seemed to be going well until one day when Louis sat her down and told her the working had to stop.

"No wife of mine," he insisted.

His traditional values dictated he should be the sole breadwinner. But Tillie couldn't bear the thought of not working, of not calculating, of not using her mind.

Meanwhile, the stress of the tiny apartment they were living in with Tillie's family and the exploding number of people on the Lower East Side was becoming impossible to manage. After years of suffering under the weight of oppressive overpopulation, rampant destitution, and struggles between ethnic groups, the neighborhood became warehouses of exhaustion and despair. Residents tried to live productive lives as crushed sardines inside a tin can.

While the decade moved on, Tillie and Louis decided, as many Jewish families did then, to move to Brooklyn. Added to their concern for a better life was the recent birth of their first child—Alan.

They found a one-bedroom apartment at 1901 Eighty-Fourth Street in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

Alan slept in the bedroom with his parents. Tillie worked endlessly to make the apartment a warm, comforting home. She was highly energetic and a near perfectionist. While Louis was at work, she cleaned the house from top to bottom at least three times daily, punctuated by endless vacuuming.

Alan was wildly curious, digging into everything around him, yet never completely satiated—always searching. It found Tillie on edge—adoring him but balancing her perplexity as to how to measure up and be everything her son needed. And his father, Louis—work and the world behind it kept him emotionally distant.



Alan, two years old. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*



Tillie with Alan in front of the Newsstand, Henry Street, 1940. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*



Alan, Robbie, and their father, 1942.  
*Courtesy Estate of Tillie Bermowitz*

In January 1941, Tillie gave birth to her second son, Robert. Alan now had a brother, and he was thrilled. The boys shared the bedroom while Louis and Tillie slept on the sofa bed in the living room.

Money was tight. Tillie suspected it was because Louis gambled any minor excess which could be used for their home or the boys—at his nightly poker game. That may have been true. But Louis still didn't want Tillie to work. So, she vacuumed and vacuumed and vacuumed. . . .

As Alan grew, more of his extended family joined them in Bensonhurst.

His grandmother, Fannie, moved in with her daughter, Riva Levitt, and her sons on Nineteenth Avenue—only a



Alan and Marty, 1940. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*



Alan and his Aunt Becky, 1941. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*



Robbie and Alan, Catskills, 1947. *Courtesy Sue Bermowitz*

few blocks away. She lived there until she died in 1959. Tillie's other sisters, Sarah Hilsenroth and Anna Krause, moved nearby with their families as well. Her sister, Rose Halpern, moved to Prospect Park and her brother, Charlie, moved upstate. Despite his distance, Uncle Charlie was very close with the family. During WWII Charlie served as an intelligence officer translating German. Alan adored him.

It was a widening, a deepening of the apartment on Henry Street stretching its arms out around the city—more than in name, more than in history—but by a physical connection within the world—and as a fortress against it.

The family went to the Catskills during the summer months and Louis dropped them off at the Borscht Belt haven, then turned around and went back to Brooklyn. Yet, he would return on the weekends for family time and film the boys playing with their cousins and their moms chatting happily nearby. This reality was fine with Louis—there and not there. Like many fathers of his generation, he was somewhere else the majority of the time.

\*\*\*

The cousins—Alan, Robbie, Marty, Herb, Carl, Irvin, Miltie, and Irving—essentially grew up together.

When they started attending grade school, they walked to school together every day. Alan and Robbie went to PS 200 and their cousins went to PS 128.

Alan didn't feel super comfortable getting to know other kids. He was very shy. He mostly hung out and cavorted with his brother and his cousins.

Of greatest importance was his passion for sports. And he shared this spirited obsession with them—basketball, football, and—of highest priority—baseball. Baseball ruled his thoughts and his fantasies—and the Brooklyn Dodgers were his holy grail.



Three of Alan's cousins and his Uncle Sam. From left: Sam, Miltie, Alan, Irvin, and Marty, 1940. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*



Alan playing stickball, 1947. *Author's collection*

He played stickball in the street constantly.

When Alan was older and “Bensonhurst Park” opened with a baseball field and a basketball court, he raced over there with his cousins to realize his dreams.

\*\*\*

The sun is lowering over the Bensonhurst Park baseball field and the air is crisping up. Alan, his brother, Robbie, and his cousins, Marty, Miltie, and Carl are poised on the field.

Alan is at bat ready to hit it out of the park.

Carl winds up and pitches.

Alan’s eyes are fiercely focused as he connects and the ball sails up and up and up . . . until . . .

“Foul!” Marty cries from the outfield.

Alan is completely thrown.

“That was not foul!” he shouts. “It was just inside the pole!”

Alan throws his bat over his shoulder and marches over to Miltie for what he saw.

“Did you see that? Was it a foul?” he asks him.

Miltie looks uneasily at the outfield fence. “I don’t know,” he shakes his head. “It was super close.”

“No way! It was over there!” he says. He points inside the baseline, in fair territory. He marches back to the plate and prepares to hit again.

“Let’s do it again!”

But Marty runs up and tosses his glove to Alan.

“I gotta get home. I’m supposed to help Grandma with the shopping.” He jogs toward the park exit. Carl follows him, waving back to Alan. Robbie and Miltie head over to Alan, who is still waiting to hit.

“Let’s go,” Robbie suggests, grabbing Alan’s bat and throwing it onto his shoulder.

“Thinking about it now, you know,” says Miltie as they head home, “it was fair. The ball was fair.” He pats Alan on the back. Alan tries to smile as they walk out of the park.

\*\*\*

Alan’s connection with the game was so dedicated that while he was in high school, he was scouted by the Philadelphia Phillies. However, one day when he was playing stickball and running to catch a fly ball, he smashed into a parked car and suffered an injury—a damaged shoulder joint. As such, the scouting went nowhere.

But it was not a loss. Playing the game, knowing everything about it, fed him on a daily basis. He became a tower of information—tracking everything about all the teams, especially the Brooklyn Dodgers, and eventually the Mets—their



Tillie cooking dinner. *Courtesy Jack and Riva Levitt Estate*

lineups, their stats, following each and every player's background and prospects—it fueled his fascination.

Despite the reality of very little money and living in a minimally sized apartment with his parents sleeping in the living room, Alan had little sense of deprivation. Tillie was very dedicated to making life for her family comfortable, clean, and enjoyable. She never conveyed a sense of lacking or of being in need.

Between racing to the neighborhood baseball field with his cousins after school, then heading home for an afternoon snack with his mom, Alan had the good life. It was all there in Brooklyn for him.

However, despite his passion for sports and everything energetic and dynamic, Alan was often ill when he was a child and found himself at home a lot. He spent those lost days in bed reading about WWII and drawing.

He loved sketching out his favorite comic characters:

He also sketched famous figures who he was learning about in school, such as President John Adams.

Drawing was an existential release, which he wasn't quite aware of as a child but which he realized as he grew up.

With drawing . . . I'll sit down, out of my mind and at peace.\*

—Alan

\* Mathieu Copeland, *Alan Suicide Vega, Infinite Mercy* (Musée d'art Contemporain de Lyon, 2009), 43.



Bugs Bunny, 1948. Photo by Mel Auston

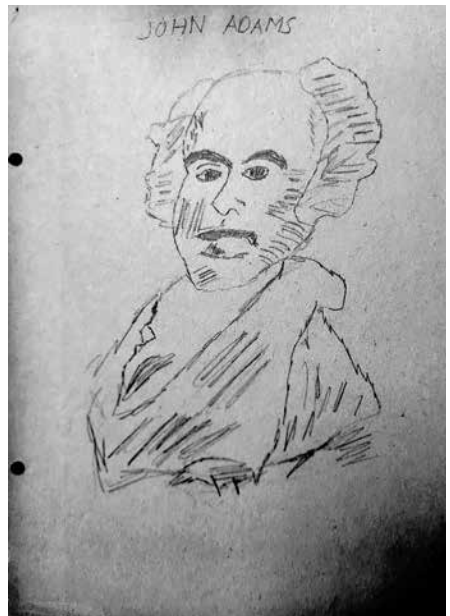


Porky Pig, 1948. Photo by Mel Auston

He also read obsessively about the Nazis, their patterns, their loyalties, the blindness within their cruelty. The Third Reich's brutalization of the world and the horror of their savagery pulled him in deep.

There was a project assigned in Alan's sixth-grade class where each student was to research, write, and draw illustrations of different countries in Europe. Two of the countries Alan focused on were Albania and Norway. He wrote up a short essay about them and made note of the "war" pictures he had seen of the country.

He signed it off noting the amount of time between his birth and the start of WWII:

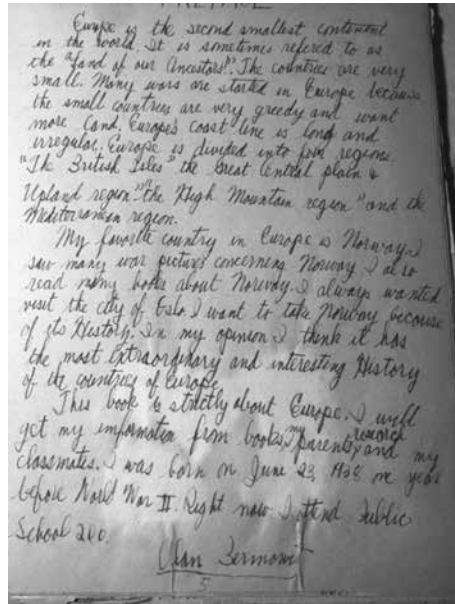


John Adams, 1948. Photo by Mel Auston

I was born on June 23, 1938,  
one year before WWII. Right now I attend PS 200.\*

—Alan

\* Ibid.



Sixth-grade essay—Albania, 1949. Courtesy Mariette Bermowitz

Even at a young age, Alan connected himself intrinsically with war. The aching humanitarian conflict inherent in it existed somewhere inside him. His tethering of his birth date to the birth of WWII presaged the future internal outrage he experienced at the realities inside the Vietnam War in the '70s—which ripped him up. In many important ways, war fueled portions of the art he created due to the emotions it hammered within him.

War was his muse.

The Nazis, it was the uniforms, the atrocities,  
the concentration camps.

It was partly fascination, partly horror.\*

—Alan

\*\*\*

Bensonhurst had become a sanctuary for Jewish families in the beginning of the nineteenth century and as time moved on, more and more Italians also settled in Bensonhurst. Many of them were escaping sulfur mine work in Sicily and other degradations forced on them by their oppressive government.

Both groups were influential in the area and had large cultural effects on the Bensonhurst community. Though close with his cousins, Alan had a number of Italian friends, and as he got older he spent the majority of his time with them.

\* Mathieu Copeland, *Alan Suicide Vega, Infinite Mercy* (Musée d'art Contemporain de Lyon, 2009), 39.

He felt his Italian buddies were tough, and even more so, he came to appreciate the Catholic church. Not only were there a lot of stories about all the saints and their teachings, but there were also statues, paintings, and Christian iconography inside the church. Alan found it all very interesting and beautiful.

He had become disheartened by the Jewish religion he was forced to follow. Although Louis and Tillie weren't Orthodox, they were observant. They recognized the major Jewish holidays as well as the Sabbath every Saturday and they expected and planned on their sons to engage in the Jewish coming-of-age ritual—the Bar Mitzvah.

\*\*\*

The room feels barren. The pews are dark wood. The walls are white and vacant. At the front is the Ark where the Torah is housed.

As Alan's nerves start to stiffen, he is pulled out of his seat and his father leads him to the front of the synagogue—to the Bimah. The Rabbi drapes the Tallit over Alan's back and shoulders. He opens the Torah and starts to turn Alan toward it. But that simple move becomes a struggle as Alan seems to be resisting. Louis steps over and tightens a grip around his son's arm. Alan turns to the Torah after giving the Rabbi a look. He looks down and slowly recites:

*“Ba-ruch a-tah A-do-nai Eh-lo-hay-nu meh-lech ha-o lahm,  
a-sher ba-char ba-nu mi-kol ha-a-meem, v'na-I la-nu etTorah-toh.  
Ba-ruch a-tah A-do-nai, no-tayn ha-Torah.”\**

Then the Rabbi takes Alan's arm and turns him back toward him. Alan starts to overheat. He looks around the synagogue. The austere ceremony overwhelms and disturbs him. Where are the statues and the paintings, the stained glass, the gothic windows?

Kid, you're told “You are a Jew!” And you grow up with it,  
you understand that there is a tradition before you which you  
mustn't veer from. But I am not a Jew, strictly speaking, I am not  
Catholic, I'm nothing like that. I am what I decided to be.†

—Alan

The Rabbi steps up and starts reading the Torah, then turns to bless Alan.

But Alan can't take it anymore. He kicks the rabbi in the shin. The Rabbi doubles over. Louis races around, grabs Alan with an infuriated grip of his arm and drags him, shaking, out of the synagogue.

\* *The Aliyah, Step by Step*, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1933255/jewish/The-Aliyah-Step-by-Step.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1933255/jewish/The-Aliyah-Step-by-Step.htm), Chabad.org.

† Alexandre Breton, *Alan Vega: Conversation with an Indian* (Le Texte Vivant, 2017), Kindle.

You know, Jew is something that comes from history, you can't escape it. . . . Try as I might, I can't help it, I will always be a Jew.\*

—Alan

\*\*\*

The following year, Alan, Robbie, and their cousins started at New Utrecht High School and Lafayette High School. They all performed well. It was expected they achieve. Success was an unspoken, fundamental understanding within their tradition and cultural structure. Young Jewish men could not fail. And they were to shift whatever focus roaming inside their young minds and hearts to the sciences and preferably put a medical degree on their docket when they started college.

Alan didn't fight this expectation. He won a science fair award for building his own telescope. He was fascinated by astronomy and loved seeing the stars from his bedroom window. Achieving excellent grades was an unconscious process for him. Second nature.

What was more important, though, were the Dodgers, playing ball, and the beating heart of sports. Academia was a toy to be squeezed.

Between baseball outings, Alan worked as a lifeguard at Coney Island Beach during the summer months. He had also started discovering rock 'n' roll, and Elvis Presley was his first hero:

For me it was first seeing Elvis. He has one of the greatest voices of all time. I couldn't go to school unless I put on an Elvis record like "Blue Suede Shoes" to give me the will to get there.†

—Alan

He listened to Fats Domino and Chuck Berry and Little Richard around the clock. He was sensing a new and mysterious world. He also found himself mesmerized by creating strange sounds.

I used to scratch records and play them over and over to make a crazier sound. I had a two-track recorder that I used to fool around with, because I loved listening to static.‡

—Alan

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\* Ibid.

† Kris Needs, *Dream Baby Dream: Suicide: A New York City Story* (Omnibus Press, 2017), 19, Kindle.

‡ Luke Turner, "Suicide's Alan Vega in His Own Words," *Dazed*, July 16, 2016, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/25895/1/suicide-s-alan-vega-in-his-own-words>.

Throughout high school Alan remained shy and introverted. He spent much of his time with his cousins, particularly Miltie.

Alan was very close with Miltie, who was one year older, very attractive in the classic young Brooklyn teen look of the time. He was also brighter than most of his friends. He was particularly popular with girls. They were always after him, but he didn't pass it off as some egocentric reality. He was cool.\*

Alan and Miltie spent a lot of time together because they were both highly active and skilled baseball players. It was one of the closest friendships he had as he entered junior year at New Utrecht.

\*\*\*

Friday evening was one of his favorite times of the week. It was when he could watch baseball on WPIX and boxing on NBC—the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports broadcasting from Madison Square Garden.

I've loved boxing since I was five years old . . . [s]moke-filled boxing rings, men smoking cigars, the whole family there in Brooklyn. Then my father in front of his TV screen. We'd watch the boxing every Friday.†

—Alan

Captured by Rocky Marciano and Sugar Ray Robinson, Alan developed a love and fascination with the sport. The danger—the broken bones, blood, and swollen faces—he was captivated by the risk these men were willing to take on. As he got older, his intrigue with boxing continued unabated. But his grasp of what was really going on during those matches, of why these men continued to stand up to endless violence—hardened—with a tinge of deep concern.

Kids wanting to be rich, ending up brain-dead.‡

—Alan

The other reason Friday evenings were enticing to him was he would be with his father—watching it all.

If his father stayed home.

\*\*\*

“Dad where are you going?” asks Alan.

“What is it, Alan?” Louis gently combs his hair in the hallway mirror.

Alan dashes to the TV and turns it on. He falls back onto the sofa.

\* Interview with Dr. Marty Levitt, 2021.

† Kris Needs, *Dream Baby Dream: Suicide: A New York City Story* (Omnibus Press, 2017), 15–16, Kindle.

‡ Mathieu Copeland, *Alan Suicide Vega, Infinite Mercy* (Musée d'art Contemporain de Lyon, 2009), 40.

“The Dodgers are coming on, Dad! They’re playing the Yankees! And Sugar Ray is in the ring later!”

Alan sits forward and beelines the TV screen. The Dodgers are walking out onto the field.

“Look Dad—it’s Jackie Robinson!”

“Next time, son.”

Suddenly, the sound of a door shutting shakes the room.

Alan stands up and turns. He eyes the closed front door.

He sits back down and starts mouthing the batting stats for each player as they enter the field: .211, .220, .216, .245. . . .

\*\*\*

Alan and his cousins, including his buddy, Miltie, graduated from high school early and started attendance at Brooklyn College.

Miltie had been short-listed for a basketball scholarship as he was “the most valuable player in the 16–18-year-old competitive basketball league”<sup>\*</sup> in Brooklyn at that time. However, he was unable to accept it.

Near his eighteenth birthday, Miltie became very ill with “Bright’s Disease”—known today as nephritis or kidney disease. After some treatment during a long hospital stay, he went into remission. He returned to Brooklyn College to resume his studies. However, his remission was short-lived and Miltie died as he was about to turn nineteen.

Ah, ah, Ah  
Come on, get up  
We’re all Frankies  
We’re all lying in hell  
Come on, get up, come on  
Ah, ah, ah<sup>†</sup>

Alan’s other cousins—including Marty and Carl—noticed a whirlwind change in Alan from that point on. Alan had always looked up to his big cousin Miltie. Whatever twinkle he had in his eye—whatever calm, peace, ease with life—transformed. They rarely saw him smile again.<sup>‡</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> Interview with Dr. Marty Levitt, October 2021.

<sup>†</sup> “Frankie Teardrop” by Alan Vega and Martin Rev, *Suicide*, 1977.

<sup>‡</sup> Interview with Dr. Marty Levitt, October 2021.