

DONALD ALAN SIEGAL

1950 – 2004



A native of Worcester, Massachusetts, Donald Alan Siegal wrote his first piece of music at the age of six, the day the piano was delivered to the house. He sat down and began banging on the keys. Miraculously, it seemed to make some kind of musical sense! Experimenting with the white keys and combining them with the black ones, was Donald's life work, his compositional journey.

Growing up in a musical family, Donald was surrounded by music. His father had played classical violin as a child, and then later, bass fiddle in college. In the Navy, his father played with Major Bowes (Edward Bowes) and on the *Ted Mack Radio Hour*. Donald's brother played clarinet and saxophone. There was always music in the house.

Donald commenced his studies on classical piano at age six with Czech cello virtuoso, Bedrich Vaska, whose second instrument was piano. Though performing all of the classical repertoire, at age seven, Donald would compose little pieces for piano and cello. His first was entitled "Bedrich's Blues," with his teacher picking bass parts on the cello. Although he became quite technically proficient playing classical piano, Donald continued writing original pieces.

With considerable encouragement, Donald's father taught him how to play chords, and by age ten, Donald was playing 'gigs' on weekends while continuing his classical studies. But now he was intrigued by Jazz players, the likes of Bill Evans and Oscar Peterson. Against his mother's wishes—but with

his father's blessing—he played with a Jazz quartet at a popular 'strip club.' He was only 11, but learned a lot about Jazz, among other things(!).

One of the great joys of his childhood was a trip to New York and attending Broadway shows. At his first ever Broadway musical, this 10-year-old turned to his father and said, "That's what I want to do." His father misunderstood, thinking his son wanted to play in the orchestra pit or sing on stage. Donald went on to clarify, "I want to write songs!"

By high school, Donald had formed the Don Siegal Trio, playing gigs throughout the New England area, becoming an accomplished Jazz player. He spent summers in Boston, studying at the famed Berklee College of Music, honing his compositional talents. Writing songs in a variety of styles, in his senior year of high school, Donald directed and wrote music and lyrics for his first ever original musical, which received rave reviews and played to packed houses. When it came to college, there was only one place to go—New York. And, to assist in fulfilling a dream, New York University obliged by providing a full scholarship.

At New York University, Donald majored in music and psychology, studying the masters in both. Through intensive musical analysis of the great composers, along with harmony and theory studies, he cultivated an appreciation of the composers he had performed as a child, but now he understood their music through the eyes and ears of a composer.

At the age of 18, he was the youngest person ever accepted into the prestigious Lehman Engel BMI Musical Theatre Workshop as a songwriter. This was to become his most important classroom. It was here that he truly learned the craft of songwriting, particularly for characters in dramatic situations. Donald's fellow participants at the Workshop have also received notable acclaim—Alan Menken and Howard Ashman (*Little Shop of Horrors*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*), Carol Hall (*Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*), Maury Yeston (*Nine*) and Edward Kleban (lyrics to *Chorus Line*).

Until his death in 1987, Edward Kleban was one of Donald's mentors, and he regarded him as his protégé. Donald's other mentor was Sheldon Harnick, lyricist for *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Fiorello*.

Graduating New York University—Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa—Donald had many offers and opportunities available to him at the graduate level in music. He turned them all down, deciding to stay in New York and study privately with Professor Fred Werle, who taught at Julliard and served as Dean at Mannes College of Music.

Public performances of Donald's songs in major New York theatres and cabarets, brought him tremendous attention, launching his songwriting career. In the next 20 years in New York, Donald became a staff songwriter for the Emmy Award-winning *Sesame Street* and *Captain Kangaroo*. His musicals



were produced at major off-Broadway and regional theatres, such as Manhattan Theatre Club and Goodspeed Opera House.

Major artists have recorded and performed Donald's songs including Trisha Yearwood, Roberta Flack, Randy Travis, Jim Henson, James Galway, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Blossom Dearie, Nancy Dussault and John Davidson. Also included are Tony winners Betty Buckley, Faith Prince, Michael Maguire and Debbie Shapiro Gravitte. His commercials aired nationally for products like Tree Top, Mercedes-Benz, French's and Burger King.

In 1994, Donald moved to Los Angeles to work with Disney director, Ralph Zondag, writer and lead animator on *Pocahontas* and director for the CGI film *Dinosaur* at Disney, on an animated musical, writing songs and co-writing the story. Donald was heavily involved in creating stories, not only songs and music.

Other animated musicals for which Donald was doing songs and story/script were with Dick Zondag (*Cats* and *We're Back! A Dinosaur's Story*) and Ron Clark (*High Anxiety*, *Revenge of the Pink Panther*); *Ms. Fortissimo's Christmas* with Baer Animation (*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Annabelle's Wish*); and, for Warner Bros, songs for a *Looney Tunes* project and songs/scripts for *Frosty The Snowman*.

In the live action arena, Donald had two projects with Avery Corman (*Kramer vs. Kramer*), one based on a story Donald wrote entitled, *Andy and Wally*, and the other, a Jazz project, *Hotter Than That: The Louis Armstrong / Lil Hardon Story*.

Afflicted with leukemia in August, 2003, Donald Alan Siegal passed away on January 13, 2004, at the age of 53. I am personally honored to acknowledge Donald, not only as my client, but more importantly, as my friend. May he rest in eternal peace.—*Otto Vavrin II*