
Cultural Daily

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Alex Trebek and Me

Jerry Kavanagh · Thursday, November 19th, 2020

I met Alex Trebek one day in the mid-1970s, about 10 years before he started his long-running gig as the host of Jeopardy. The staff at New York magazine received word (maybe from Best Bets editor Ellen Stern, who seemed to know everyone and everything in New York City) that a new game show was in pre-production and looking for contestants. There was a local (that is, Manhattan) phone number to call about trying out for the show. At the other end of the line was a staffer who administered a quick general-interest quiz. Anyone who answered the questions correctly was invited to a makeshift studio (on the west side, I think) for an interview and a second round of questions.

Many of us on staff enthusiastically took up the challenge. My immediate boss, Arts Editor and Music Critic Alan Rich, much to his dismay, did not make the cut. He got the sports question wrong. Alan was more worldly and much more knowledgeable than any of us in every category except sports.

Things were moving fast. We were advised that we needed to get to the studio that afternoon for the second stage of our tryout. I don't remember a single question from either quiz, but somehow, I was still standing, along with Copy Editor Quita McMath, after the second round. We were then escorted into another part of the studio and, with one other contestant, positioned behind separate counters or lecterns (with game-show buzzers), much like those in use today on Jeopardy.

A producer explained that we would now take part in a pair of mock shows, to be played straight, including banter with the host and appropriate breaks for what in a real show would be commercials. As we were ready to begin, the show's host, Alex Trebek materialized from offstage. After a few quick pleasantries and preliminaries from Alex, the show began.

I wish I could recall any part of the conversation with Alex, any of the questions, or even the name of the show. I do remember that Alex, a professional and a gentleman, played it like the real thing. Watching him on Jeopardy years later, I saw the same personality he showed in that mocked-up show: the respect for the game itself and the contestants and the enjoyment he had in the competition. Oh, and I remember that I won both games, each worth \$10,000. Alas, it was play money. The show, for whatever reason, never made it past that stage. Rest in peace, Alex.

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