

Family Business

Randy Newman reflects on how his Uncle Al, who scored films for Fox, influenced his love for music.

by Naomi Pffefferman
Arts & Entertainment Editor

AT AGE 5, LONG BEFORE HE BEGAN WRITING satirical pop songs and Oscar-nominated film soundtracks, Randy Newman trekked down to the sound stage at 20th Century Fox to watch his Uncle Al conduct the studio orchestra. Uncle Alfred was only 5-feet-4, but the Newman family patriarch seemed larger than life as he conducted his intensely dramatic score from "All About Eve."

"It was a big deal for me," Newman recalled during a recent Journal telephone interview from his sprawling estate in Pacific Palisades. "It had a big effect on me that it was possible to make that noise. It was really the main impetus for my getting into the music business."

For all the Newmans, music is in the blood. Uncle Al (1900-1970) scored many of Fox's most famous films from the 1930s to the '60s; Uncle Lionel ran Fox's music department and shared an Oscar for "Hello Dolly"; Uncle Emil conducted the music for most of John Wayne's movies; Alfred's sons Thomas and David are Oscar-nominated film composers; and Alfred's daughter, Maria, is a respected composer of contemporary classical music (see sidebar).

To honor the centennial of Alfred's birth, Maria and Randy Newman will perform at the March 4 Los Angeles Jewish Symphony (LAJS) concert "Cinema Judaica II: A Salute to Alfred Newman." "It's a tribute to my Uncle Al," explained Newman, who has received 14 Oscar nominations for his work on films such as "The Natural," "Awakenings," "Pleasantville," "Parenthood" and "Toy Story."

Of course, he remains best known for his politically incorrect, bluesy pop ditties satirizing sadists, lechers, liars and bigots. Death threats came his way for "Short People," a parody of prejudice, even Newman is nervous about performing his song, "Rednecks," which makes liberal use of the N-word and describes a racist on TV "with some smart-ass New York Jew."

In "The World Isn't Fair," the narrator chats with Karl Marx about rich old geezers married to gorgeous young blondes who look like Gwyneth Paltrow. "My music has a high irritation factor," the composer gleefully admitted.

DURING A JOURNAL INTERVIEW, THE irreverent Randy Newman was most evident when reminiscing about his Uncle Lionel. "He had nicknames for everybody," Newman recalled. "The composer Elmer Bernstein was 'The Wrong Bernstein.' [Composer] Jerry Goldsmith he called 'Gorgeous,' because he was handsome and had all that hair." (During the March 4 concert, LAJS director Noreen Green will conduct an arrangement of Goldsmith's score from the 1981 miniseries "Masada.")

Newman turns serious when the subject reverts to his Uncle Al. He grew up with tales of how Alfred, the eldest of 10 children, showed talent early on in his working-class family in New Haven, Conn. Since the family was too poor to afford bus fare, young Albert walked 10 miles each way to practice on a friend's piano; by the age of 12, he was sponsored by Polish composer and pianist Ignacy Paderewski for a recital in New York. But



Randy Newman

the following year he had to go to work to support his family, so he set off on a vaudeville tour in which he sat at the piano dressed as Little Lord Fauntleroy.

At 16, Albert Newman was the youngest conductor ever to appear on Broadway; in 1930, he arrived in Hollywood to make a film with Irving Berlin. He never left. As the general music director at Fox, he went on to compose rich scores to films such as "Wuthering Heights," "The Diary of Anne Frank," "How Green was My Valley" and "The Song of Bernadette."

Along the way, he was adamant that his younger brother Irving (Randy's father) did not follow his inclination to become a professional songwriter.

"He made my dad become a doctor," said Newman, who began playing piano at age 6. Nevertheless, Uncle Al encouraged Randy's musical talents, presenting him with bound scores of symphonies like Beethoven's Third and Shostakovich's Fifth.

"He was with me the first time I ever recorded with an orchestra," added Newman, now 57. "We did my song 'Davey the Fat Boy'; he was conducting in the rehearsal, and he was very nervous. He'd get sick before he worked, and my cousin Tom used to say that that had an effect on me, that I was subconsciously trying to emulate him. It was like, you had to vomit for things to work out well."

Only after Alfred's death, in 1970, did the younger Newman try his hand at film music with a Norman Lear comedy called "Cold Turkey" (1971). He had turned down similar offers for years. "I was scared, and I still am," he admitted. "I had studied composition privately and at UCLA, but I was a slacker. I didn't think I knew enough to write something that wasn't bad." He also realized there would be the inevitable comparisons with his famous relatives. "There was a little extra pressure," he once told People. "Standards are high in the family."

Newman managed to live up to them. In 1982,

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THE LOS ANGELES



JEWISH SYMPHONY

Noreen Green, Artistic Director

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 he received his first Oscar nomination for a song composed for Milos Forman's "Ragtime," which he had scored while remembering tips from Uncle Al. "I still recall a great many things that he said about the orchestra," Newman said. "He said that if something is written well on the piano, it'll sound good with the orchestra. He said never to condescend upon the characters."

Is it tough for the guy who wrote "Short People" to create cute songs for talking toys? No, Newman said, he likes the challenge of penning the kind of happy or heroic music he wouldn't necessarily write on his own.

FOR THE LAJS CONCERT, HE'LL CONDUCT an arrangement of his Oscar-nominated score for "Avalon," Barry Levinson's semi-autobiographical tale of an assimilated Jewish family. Newman related to the story.

"Assimilation was the style for Alfred's generation, as if anyone would ever mistake us for Christians," said Newman, who had to use the Yiddish dictionary when his father called him a *shmegegge*. "They all married gentiles, except my father." There were Christmas gatherings in Al's Pacific Palisades home.

Even so, Newman said, "I have a strong, cultural sense of being Jewish, and I'm glad of it. It's done something for me in terms of my music and my world view. I believe that I write because of being Jewish, from the position of being the outsider."

During summers with his mother's Jewish family in New Orleans, young Randy learned a thing or two about racism and anti-Semitism. "I saw those signs on the ice cream wagons," he said in an interview. "It was hot and raining and there was [the word] 'Colored,' spelled wrong."

When 8-year-old Randy was once invited to a country club for a cotillion, the girl's father called to cancel on the night of the ball. "I'm sorry, Randy, my daughter had no right to invite you, because no Jews are allowed [at the club]," he explained.

Newman wrote a song, "New Orleans Wins the War," exploring how uncomfortable his father felt as a Jew in the South. Now he's thinking of writing a new song parodying the anti-Semitic tract "The

Protocols of Zion." "It would be about a Jewish banking conspiracy meeting," he said. "It would be really funny."

A less pleasant endeavor will be performing his Oscar-nominated song, "A Fool in Love" from "Meet the Parents," at the 2001 Academy Awards ceremony. Newman will attend with as much enthusiasm as his Uncle Al, who, after 45 nominations and nine awards, the most any individual has ever received, used to trudge wearily to the dais when his name was called.

"I remember my father saying to Al, 'You have to go for your family,' but Al didn't like going," Newman recalled. "I don't like going,

either. You sit there for five hours, and it's a bad vaudeville show. And I have to play for a really tough audience. After all, 80 percent of the people sitting there have already lost."

"Cinema Judaica II: A Salute to Alfred Newman," which also includes works by other composers, takes place March 4 at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. at the University of Judaism. Randy Newman will perform only at the evening concert. For tickets: (818) 753-6681 ■



Maria Newman (above) and Noreen Green



Remembering Alfred

by Naomi Pfefferman, Arts & Entertainment Editor

MARIA NEWMAN, THE youngest child of the late, great film composer Alfred Newman, is a musician with a mission.

"As my father's movies became relegated to late-night television, I felt I wanted to do something to help preserve his legacy," said the violinist and esteemed contemporary classical composer. "I wanted to bring his music to the concert stage."

Newman, 39, began by arranging some of his work for the Los Angeles Viklarbo Chamber Ensemble, for whom she is composer-in-residence. And she was enthusiastic when Los Angeles Jewish Symphony artistic director Noreen Green suggested a salute to her father at the "Cinema Judaica II" concert March 4.

"Alfred Newman was one of the greatest contributors to the Hollywood music industry, yet

hardly anyone was celebrating the centennial of his birth," Green told The Journal of why she scheduled the concert.

Newman, who used to tap out children's tunes with Alfred on the family's Steinway, said she worshipped her father. Though the film composer could appear gruff to some, he was tender with his youngest child, allowing her to scribble all over his scores and nodding as she prattled, "I want to write music, too."

"She has talent," Maria overheard him telling her mother, Martha, a former Goldwyn Girl.

But Newman, a heavy smoker, was ill with emphysema all of Maria's life; several days after she saw him faint one night in 1970, he was taken to the hospital and never returned. When Martha told her that her father had died, the

child let out a bloodcurdling scream. She was only 8 years old. Martha, nevertheless, insisted that Maria continue her violin lessons: "[My mother] looked for my father's musical gene in all her children," said Maria, who went on to attend the prestigious Eastman School of Music and Yale University.

Newman kept her own compositions a secret until the late 1980s. Because she hailed from a famous musical family, she didn't want to be accused of nepotism, so she composed under a pseudonym. She wanted to be taken on her own merits. "That's why I didn't go into film music," she said. At "Cinema Judaica II," Maria will perform as guest concert master on Alfred's scores from the Jewish-themed films, "The Diary of Anne Frank," "Gentleman's Agreement" and "David and Bathsheba." The Viklarbo ensemble will perform her arrangements of Alfred's works. "I hope the concert will revive an interest in my father's music," she said ■