



Interview with Cortés Alexander

By Michael Roberts

The multi-talented Cortés Alexander, who is currently touring with the legendary Liza Minnelli, takes time out of his hectic schedule to talk about life on the road with Liza, his success as one of the 'Tonics' and his beautiful new solo album entitled "Swell".

MJR: Thank you for taking some time out of your schedule to talk with me. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed Liza's concert, especially the second act tribute to her godmother, the legendary Kay Thompson. As one of "Kay's Boys", what has this tour experience been like for you?

CA: I would say the best thing and the worst thing about touring with Liza is the travel... and the travel. I've been so many places, but I'm there barely long enough to go to the corner. Two weeks ago we were in San Sebastian Spain and it was gorgeous. Like Monte Carlo. We drove from Germany the night before after the show and had to work the next day. So we get to Spain and there's literally four hours before sound check and the show. I thought, if I take a nap I'll be more tired than if I stay awake. So I walked around San Sebastian with my eyes pried open, trying to take it all in. "I'll sleep on the plane" has become my motto.

MJR: Did you ever have the chance to meet Kay Thompson?

CA: I was lucky enough to know her in her later years when she lived with Liza in NY. She loved the Tonics and we used to rehearse for her all the time. When I first met Kay, Liza told me who she was and I had NO idea what I was in for. She was bedridden by this time and her nurse rolled her in the living room to receive me. Kay was in her uniform. A black cashmere turtleneck with a black pea coat with the collar turned up, black pants and a black beret with an eight foot bright red scarf dragging behind her. Liza says "Kay darling, meet one of my dearest friends, Cortés Alexander." Kay broke into song: She scatted, "Cortés Alexander, couldn't be grander... zip-zap va-doooh day." I fell in love.

MJR: You also toured with Liza almost a decade ago with the 'Cortes Alexander Trio'. How did that come about?

CA: Here's the moment: I went backstage to see her after one of her shows (she had come to all our Tonics shows and became quite the groupie) so I went to hers. Radio City I think it was. She asked me if I wanted to start a male trio to tour with her. We'd sing some backup and absorb about ten minutes in her set while she changed costumes. I said I'd love to but we had a Tonics show coming up and since I had already bought the stamps for our mailing (it was my turn to spring for the stamps) I wasn't available. She said how about after? I was numb. Really? "Where would you like to go?" So I start naming places. Paris, Rome, Scandanavia, Russia, not really comprehending what was happening. Her road manager was taking notes on a yellow legal pad. I was pretty much mugged by her and later even hired one of my pals from the Tonics to sing in the trio.

MJR: What has being mentored by such an icon as Ms. Minnelli taught you not only as a performer but as a person?

CA: Liza as a mentor... Well, I was never so nervous as I was the first show with the Trio at Foxwoods casino in Connecticut. My legs were noodles and I thought I really will not make it through this. As the overture is playing right as we're about to go out, she looks at me with those

huge brown eyes, grabs me by the shoulders and says "Baby, take no prisoners, & f*ck the wounded!" And out we went. The thing she taught me the most as a performer which I learned in about seven seconds that night, was that she doesn't know how to do anything less than full out, even in rehearsal. That's why director's love her. She'll rehearse in a crappy dance studio, like it's The Palais du Congres. So now when I rehearse, even at sound check, I do it full out. One last thing; On the plane to Connecticut for that first show, I'm looking at the schedule with all these places and she looked me dead in the eye and said "Never let the world get too small." That was the best advice I ever got... from anyone.

MJR: Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up and who were your musical influences that shaped you?

CA: I grew up in Southern California but my family moved to New York when I was 13. I got a spot in the pre-college division at Juilliard as a piano major. Disaster. All I wanted to do was surf and skateboard. Not the place for me at all. I stopped playing piano really until the Tonics came along. I always loved vocal groups or bands with great vocals. Manhattan Transfer, Chicago, were the bands I loved as a kid. Now, I love Swing Out Sister, Maroon 5, KOOP. I love that kind of 'loungy', jazzy thing. I knew NOTHING about Liza, Judy, MGM or any of that as a kid. Maybe that's why Liza and I get along so well. Once we were talking about some guy and she said "Do you think he's a friend of Dorothy?" And I said, "Who's Dorothy?" She threw her arms around me and said "I love you baby!" I was puzzled.

MJR: Your dancing is also spectacular. What type of training did you have?

CA: I'm glad you liked it, because in rehearsal I think our choreographer (Ron Lewis) may kill me. I took dance in New York and had an aptitude for it, (being naturally hyper) but was never really good enough to be in an ensemble. Plus, I was sore all the time.

MJR: You first found critical success with the The Tonics (Good Thing Going/Company on the Sondheim PBS special is the best number!). How did the group first come together?

CA: The Tonics met at an open mic night in Los Angeles. Lindy Robbins, (the girl in the group) was doing her act and asked me, Brian Lane Green, and Gene Reed to sing back up for her in her show. While we were rehearsing, I had an idea for a chart of "Oh What a Beautiful Morning." I blocked out all the parts and showed it to them the next day. We learned it and sang it in her show... the place went nuts. I said let's learn another one for next week and do it at the open mic. This went on for a month.

We now had five songs all crazily arranged and all with each of our own unique stamp. Brian got a job on a soap which shot in New York, so rather than break up, we said let's go and do a show in New York. I was at the time making nice money doing commercials and was ready to buy my first place, so I really thought it would be a quickie. It sure was, but not like I thought. We landed in New York on Thursday and went out that night to an open mic in The Village. All huddled around two mics with me hacking at the piano, we sang "Beautiful Morning." (I think we followed some big hairy man singing "Roses Turn"). The place fell silent and when we finished the tiny (then smoke-filled) club went wacko. The owner of the club offered us a four week run on Monday nights at midnight beginning the following week. We took it. That night a really cute blond girl came up to us and said "You guys are amazing! My name's Daisy Prince and I'm going to introduce you to everyone you're going to need to know." She wasn't kidding, but more on that later. We auditioned piano players and picked what we knew was the best guy for the job. (he could also understand my chicken scratch). That guy was Jason Robert Brown. Boy, did we get lucky. First week, we got about 30 people, second week 70 people, third week was sold out. Fourth week sold out with a waiting list. Now the club owner bumped someone to give us Friday night at 10PM and a 6 week

run. By then we received raves from the *New York Post*, *The Daily News*, the *Wall St. Journal*... to name a few.

During that time, Daisy asked us to sing at her parents Christmas party. (Her father is legendary Broadway director/producer Hal Prince). We walked into the most glorious New York townhouse decorated just beyond and there's Lauren Bacall, Liza, Linda Lavin, Jerry Orbach, Sondheim. I felt like "What the hell am I doing here?" Anyway, long story short-ish, we sang and afterwards, Steve Sondheim said they were doing a tribute to him at Carnegie Hall in the Spring and Boys to Men fell out, Manhattan Transfer wasn't available and would we do him a favor and fill in. We could pick the song and do the arrangement ourselves (he told me I had a "sick" sense of harmonics. Of this, I am proud). And all of this happened within 6 months.

MJR: You have shared the stage with some of the greatest entertainers of this or any other era, including, Liza, Bette Midler, Elton John and the late Luciano Pavarotti to name (drop) a few. What, in your opinion is the key to their long term success?

CA: Having shared the stage with so many luminaries, I think I see a pattern. The people who last are not trendy. They do what they do, because they are the only ones who can. They are clear and committed about what their audience wants from them and they give it. Sounds easy doesn't it? For some, it takes a lifetime, but that's the fun of it. Finding out who you are.

MJR: Your new CD 'Swell' is absolutely beautiful. How did you go about picking the songs?

CA: SO happy you like "Swell." I wrote ten of the 16 songs and it began as a little acoustic guitar-ish record. I had been teaching tennis in California and hadn't sung in years. I thought I just wanted to have something to show my friends in the home when I'm 90, so I began writing. I met Kevin Holmes (the best guitar guy ever) at a party. A dull party. He had his guitar in his car and we did a mini-set of standards at this party. He introduced me to McKay Garner (my producer). Kevin and I played some of the tunes for McKay and asked him if he'd produced a small acoustic CD. He said yes, but he also made the mistake of putting a drum loop behind one of the scratch vocals. Now, it's like See's Candy. You cannot just have one. The drum loop gave way to a string line, which would sound empty without a million back up vocals and two years later it's a monster. I brought in Faith Prince's husband Larry Lunetta to play horns on some tracks and I play all the keys & sing all the parts (way too high).

MJR: Did Liza have any influence on "Swell"?

CA: Two years ago I was driving home from the dentist, when I saw this huge Rolls-Royce coming toward me in the opposite side of the street. I knew immediately it was Liza behind the wheel. I nearly crashed as I did a u-turn and pulled up behind her. We hadn't seen each other in six years. We parked our cars and walked up and down Rodeo Drive catching up. In minutes the paparazzi found us and followed us throughout the day while we ate lunch and went shopping. I told her I started a project and only had scratch takes but she was free to hear what I was doing. So we got in my car and I played five songs. One of them was "Love'll Come & Do Just That". My good friend Helen Slater (of Supergirl & City Slickers fame) wrote it and Liza took to it right away. I told her it was just a scratch vocal with guitar and I hadn't arranged it yet. She said "Don't touch it! It's heaven baby! You just need to change the last note". I had done some fancy riff on the last word. "Love'll come and do just thaaaaaat". She reminded me of the simplicity of the thought. In other words, you want your musical choices to reflect the lyric, something I lost track of in riff-mad pop music. As it turned out, the vocal on the CD is the scratch that Liza heard, with the exception of the last note, which I shall I say... "fixed". A post-script to the story is that a couple of weeks later the National Enquirer had a centerfold story announcing Liza's and my engagement. We have yet to set a date.

MJR: My favorite number on the CD is 'Pilot Bird'. Can you tell me a little bit about the number?

CA: "Pilot Bird". This is hard to talk about. My mom has early onset Alzheimers and lived with me in my guest house while I was still working on the album. They always say write about what you know and I wanted to write something biographical as a tribute. She was a model and an actress (she was in Blackboard Jungle & Singin' in the Rain) and remarried a difficult man after my father died. Her favorite place in all the world was the Redwood Forest in Northern California and I promised her we'd go again one day. She took me camping there as a boy. The day I finished writing "Pilot Bird", I played it for her with her next to me on the piano, but I don't think she understood.

MJR: Even though she might not be able to respond like she used to, I am sure your Mother's spirit can feel the music when your play. That is a connection that is never lost.

There seems to be a little furry four legged cutie pie in a lot of pictures with you. Who might that be?

CA: The little furry creature you refer to is Babette. I was in the mall which was about to close and I saw a crowd of people laughing and pointing. There she was, covered in crap like dreadlocks of poo. Her price had been redlined three times as she'd been there nearly two months. I said to the manager to wash her ASAP and gave them my credit card. The

best impulse purchase I ever made.

MJR: What do you like to in your spare time?

CA: In my spare time (when I'm not doing laundry) I play tennis about five days a week. When I'm not doing that, I'm banking very valuable couch and clicker time.

MJR: What is next for you after you are done touring with Ms. Minnelli?

CA: After my tour with Liza is over, I'm going to tour my CD. I'll remember that I had this amazing experience, saw more of the world than I ever thought I would and hopefully, be thankful that I never let it get too small.

To order Cortés Alexander's album "Swell" please visit <http://cdbaby.com/cd/cortesalexander>

For more information of Liza's Minnelli's current tour please visit Liza's official website www.officiallizaminelli.com

Also visit Cortés Alexander's MySpace page www.myspace.com/cortesalexander