



## This is Jeopardy: The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show

### Episode Nine: Alex Trebek: The Perfectionist, The Handyman, The Marshmallow

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment, and Sony Pictures TV

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**Archival:**

**Audience Member:** *How do I get your job?*

**Alex Trebek:** *How do you get my job?*

**Buzzy Cohen:** The question is coming from an audience member at a *Jeopardy!*'s taping, in 2016, at D.C.'s Constitution Hall.

**Archival:**

**Alex Trebek:** *You grow up in Northern Ontario, Canada. You, uh, get a good education. You pay your dues in broadcasting by starting in radio, working for, uh, many years. Then moving on to television. You get experience hosting game shows, dealing with audiences and contestants on your feet without any script. As you notice, I don't have any cue cards or anything like that. And then you have to be lucky to be hired on a show that is going to succeed.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex had gone from working at the Canadian Broadcasting Company to hosting various game shows to...becoming one of the most recognizable figures in American culture. And he held that spotlight for over 30 years.

Alex always said that *Jeopardy!* was about the contestants—

**Archival:**

**Alex Trebek:** *I don't try to force the spotlight to be on me when I'm hosting these programs.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** But there was something about him as a host. People loved Alex.

**Archival:**

**Alex Trebek:** *I seem to be, you know, your uncle, your friendly neighbor, and people react to that in a positive way. They feel comfortable with me.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** Some *Jeopardy!* viewers even referred to him as family—

**Archival:**

**Audience Member:** *Well, first of all, I just want you to know, we call you Uncle Alex in my house, to my baby girl. Y*

**Alex Trebek:** *You call me Uncle Alex in your house.*

**Audience Member:** *To my baby girl.*

**Alex Trebek:** *Get out. [Laughs] Uncle Alex....*

**Audience Member:** *She called you Uncle Alex. Other things, but yes*

**Sandy Goodman:** **He was an icon. He was bigger than life.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Sandy Goodman, long-time make up artist for *Jeopardy!* and specifically for Alex Trebek. She and Renee Ferruggia, who did Alex's hair, worked with him for years and years.

**Sandy Goodman:** **The first six months, he intimidated the living shit out of me.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** I remember the first time I met Alex Trebek. He stepped out on stage and I was like Oh, that's Alex. He was poised, professional, and intimidating. He had that effect on most people.

But there was more to him too.

**Sandy Goodman: When I started to really see the man for who he is, and he was really, really a bit of a marshmallow underneath. He really was.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** A few episodes back, we did a deep dive on Alex the host, but what was he like before the curtain call? What about after the tape day wrapped?

### **THEME MUSIC**

**Buzzy Cohen:** What made him tick? What delighted him? What challenged and surprised him?

I'm your host, Buzzy Cohen. And from Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV, this is Jeopardy: The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show.

Today — a few more stories about the quintessential Alex — when the cameras weren't rolling.

### ACT I

**MUSIC: Exciting string beat with building momentum**

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex was, in his bones, a man of routine. He taped 46 days per year, for over 30 years, and they all looked something like this...here's Jean Trebek, his wife:

**Jean Trebek: Alarm clock would go off at 5:30 in the morning. He would immediately jump out of bed. Where I was like, you know, you're gonna trip one day, like, give yourself a moment to get your blood back in your, you know, your body. He would immediately take a shower every morning...and he would get to the studio so he would be ahead of the traffic. And he also liked to be one of the first ones at the studio.**

**He would leave with a Diet Coke and a Milky way in hand. And then I think he enjoyed a donut at the studio.**

**Rocky Schmidt: I don't know if anybody told you the donut story, but we get donuts on tape day.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Rocky Schmidt, a long-time *Jeopardy!* producer.

**Rocky Schmidt: And there's donuts in the booth. There's donuts in the library. There's donuts upstairs for the production people. And it's a variety, right?**

**But Alex liked chocolate donuts. I guess because he was the first one there, he usually could get his pick of any donut he wanted.**

**Well, we hired a new researcher. And so Alex didn't go to get his donut right away and all of a sudden there weren't any more chocolate donuts. And he went around and said *hey, new guy, chocolate donuts, mine, instead of just like, okay, you know what, we'll order two chocolate donuts in the future...***

**Buzzy Cohen:** Donuts - all varieties of donuts – are everywhere on tape days. And with very, very few exceptions, Alex always got his chocolate donut.

After that came Alex's morning meeting with the writers...Here's Harry Friedman, former Executive Producer of *Jeopardy!*

**Harry Friedman:** He would get the five games at 6:30 and read through them, going through them for his diacritical marks, the pronunciations, and also construction of the clues, determining or confirming whether or not something was accurate or whether or not there should be other answers that were acceptable as correct.

**At 9:00 we had our morning meeting and it was Alex, me, Lisa Broman and the writers and researchers. And it was around um, about an eight foot long table in the library.**

**Michelle Loud:** When you were in the library with Alex, he was wearing a pair of dad jeans and an old t-shirt that he got for free from somewhere. And it might have had holes in it, it might've had paint stains on it. He was not well dressed in the office.

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Michele Loud, co-head writer at *Jeopardy!*.

And, to be clear, Alex would get into a suit eventually...

**Harry Friedman:** And so we would go through the games and sometimes we would have to, um, defend certain questions if Alex thought that they were too tough or too easy or unclear.

**Michelle Loud:** He could suggest an entire category or just throw out, you know, here's an idea for a final, here's an idea for a category. So he definitely suggested material pretty regularly.

**Harry Friedman:** Then when our business was done, then it was time to talk about the events of the day or maybe the previous day. That could be anything from politics, to movies, to music, to, you know, you name it, any subject.

**Buzzy Cohen:** After he met with the writers...

**Sandy Goodman:** He would be in the makeup chair at 11.

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex's makeup artist. Sandy Goodman again.

**Sandy Goodman:** He had this humongous forehead, and I always would shade his forehead and then contour under his cheeks, contour under his chin, and contour his nose.

**Buzzy Cohen:** She and Renee Ferrugia who did Alex's hair, prepared him to go on stage every single tape day. They took turns. Makeup would go first....

**Renee Ferruggia:** Unless I was gonna cut his hair, which I did like usually every other week, just to keep it, you know, looking good.

**Buzzy Cohen:** And Alex treated it as a break from the hustle...a time where he could relax, literally.

**Sandy Goodman:** He fell asleep. So many times when I would do his makeup, oh my God. I'd be doing his makeup. And I literally would put my hand under his chin and I'd feel the weight. So I knew he was out like a light. And then I'd have to wake him up so I could do underneath his eyes, and I'd say to him, *I'm so sorry, I have to wake you up now.* And I'd say to Alex, *you know, I think if you put a makeup chair in your master bedroom, you'd be able to fall asleep a lot easier.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** After hair, makeup, wardrobe, Alex would head to the stage.

Then comes the part that we all know.

*Archival:*

*Alex Trebek: Here we go. Jeopardy!. And your categories....*

**Buzzy Cohen:** During commercial breaks, Alex would step away from the lectern and talk to the studio audience.

He started these Audience Q&As in the early days of the show, to build rapport with *Jeopardy!* viewers. But, even after Alex's reputation had been cemented, he kept on doing them. It had become routine.

**Archival:**

**Alex Trebek:** *So if you have, uh, any questions you would like to ask, don't be shy. Raise your hand. We get to talk....Yes, at the back.*

**Audience Member:** *You're so knowledgeable. How would you do as a contestant?*

**Alex Trebek:** *If I were in against my peers, uh, I might do well, but I've always maintained that a good 30 year old would clean my clock any day of the week.*

**Harry Friedman:** *It would typically be probably the same 5, 6, 7 questions from the audience. And he did it with good humor. He did it very often, almost as if, oh, no one's ever asked that before.*

**Archival:**

**Audience Member:** *What did you study in school?*

**Alex Trebek:** *Philosophy. I know why I'm here.*

**Audience Member:** *What other hobbies besides, uh, construction do you have?*

**Alex Trebek:** *I drink 1% milk. I love 1% milk, and I cannot, I cannot sip milk. It's gotta be cold and I slug it... I also drink Chardonnay, but I don't mix the two.*

**Audience Member:** *Did you and uh, Sean Connery really have beef during celebrity Jeopardy!?*

**Alex Trebek:** *I have no connection with Sean Connery. If I were to meet Sean Connery, I would probably punch him.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex would roll out the same jokes over and over again.

**Archival:**

**Audience Member:** *In an alternate universe. If you were in an alternate universe, if you weren't the host of Jeopardy!, what would you be doing in an alternate universe?*

**Alex Trebek:** *If I were not the host of Jeopardy!, what would I be doing? I would like to be Pope. The reason is I look good in white.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** The Q&A was an opportunity for Alex to have some fun and show his playful side

**MUSIC:** **Contemplative bright beat begins**

**Buzzy Cohen:** He took every question in stride. And, for the most part, *Jeopardy!* ran like a well-oiled machine.

This is Sandy, again.

**Sandy Goodman:** **Alex used to refer to these jobs as annuities cuz nobody ever left. And so it was very much a routine.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** But even when you've got a routine as established as *Jeopardy!'s*, there are still bound to be some mishaps.

This is Johnny Gilbert, voice of *Jeopardy!*.

**Johnny Gilbert:** **One day we came in, I came in as we do in the show...said hello, talked for a while.**

**I went into my dressing room, went in to use the bathroom, and the toilet was overflowing. It was broken. And I came out, of course, I didn't know what to do with it, and I came outta my dressing room looking for the stage manager to see if I could get somebody to fix this thing.**

**And I'm calling and Alex says, *What's wrong?* And I said, *Alex, my toilet's overflowing.* He got up out of the makeup chair, took the makeup rope off, went into my bathroom and fixed the toilet.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** More on Alex and his penchant for fixing to come... But honestly, accidents like that were rare.

And even if he did have to fix a toilet, Alex made sure that a tape day always wrapped at the same time. He was efficient.

**Sandy Goodman:** And if I had a nickel for every time Alex would say, *come on John, let's go. Come on John, let's go.* Because we would shoot three shows prior to lunch, break for lunch, and then we'd shoot two more.

And Alex would say, *let's go. Let's go.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Jean Trebek.

**Jean Trebek:** As soon as the show finished, taping, like at 10 to 4, I think he went into his makeup room, didn't really wash his face, but just cleaned up a little bit, got in the truck...

And for 30 years, I could clock it. He was never late coming home. I loved that. I loved that I could always rely that he would show up by 4:40. The gates would open and the red truck would pull in.

**Buzzy Cohen:** And then it was family time, home time, solitary time...

More, after the break.

ACT II

**Jean Trebek:** After a tape day, I knew to leave him alone. I would have a glass of Chardonnay ready, poured in the fridge. I tried to make a nicer meal on tape days cuz I just felt he was tired.

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex would unwind with that glass, settling in to watch the Dodgers, Lakers, Kings, whoever was on.

**Jean Trebek:** You know, in retrospect he gave so much of himself on those tape days talking and, you know, being very present and curious and keeping the energy of the show high and interesting.

So I knew when he came home there wasn't, he didn't have any more to give to me. And so I honor that and that was fine. And I was just glad he was home. I could sense if something was like bothering him or something. And he would share if something happened or there was a communication that he wasn't feeling complete about. But for the most part, Alex kept the family life separate from the show.

**Buzzy Cohen:** *Jeopardy!* almost never made an appearance at home.

This is Emily Trebek, Alex and Jean's daughter.

**Emily Trebek:** We would eat usually right around 6:30. So 7:00 came around and *Jeopardy!* would be on. And we all, we did often watch TV while having dinner. But it was still a very, like, familial dinner. We did chat and stuff like that, but he liked to watch the news. Um, and then, yeah, we, we would watch *Jeopardy!* and, and he would just wanna watch it.

I think primarily for critiques of himself. It wasn't like entertainment. It was more kind of research, uh, you know, the mindset of watching it.

**Buzzy Cohen:** Time at home was precious.

**Emily Trebek:** He was a, a very private guy. And he liked to be on his own and he didn't need a lot of people around him or, or socializing.

**Matthew Trebek:** My parents did not do a whole lot of entertaining when I was growing up.

**Buzzy Cohen:** That's Matt, Emily's older brother.

**Matthew Trebek:** I think because when we did try to have, maybe, have a holiday party or something like that. As soon as dinner was over, dad would just go to bed and, alright everybody, I'll see you guys later. And the party would continue. But he would just leave as soon as his portion of the meal was done, he's out.

**Emily Trebek:** He kind of was a solo rider a little bit and was very tight knit with our family and, um, very smart, very determined, very responsible and productive. So I think maybe people assumed, oh, he's so lovely and sweet and friendly to all the contestants and, and smart, which are all true. But I think they also maybe assumed he was like that all the time.

And I think actually you know, off cameras, he was more private, more quiet, a little more reserved.

**Buzzy Cohen:** Jean remembers when she first met Alex, back in the '80s, being struck by this quality—

**Jean Trebek:** I don't recall ever him saying, *I'm the host of Jeopardy! and this is what my job is like.*

**But I love that Alex didn't lead with that. He wasn't like, *oh, this is, this is what I'm all about.* And I do think Alex liked that I didn't know what he did. You know, I didn't watch TV a lot, so I wasn't aware of his job. You know, he could have been a dentist or whatever.**

**I knew he had a lot of integrity and intelligence and wisdom, and that's what really drew me to him.**

**MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins**

**Buzzy Cohen:** As partners, Alex and Jean's personalities played well off each other. As parents, they struck a balance.

**Jean Trebek: I was more of the go explore and it's okay if your homework's not done, we'll get it done tomorrow. And Alex was more, you know, you gotta do it now. There's rules, you know, and I think that was a great blend.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex encouraged his kids to give their all - often by giving his all.

**Emily Trebek: He always showed up to. Sports games was always in the front row. Basically backseat coaching all of our sporting games**

**Buzzy Cohen:** Sometimes it was more than backseat coaching. This is Matt...

**Matt Trebek: I was involved in a lot of sports and he was always like a coach for baseball teams or anything like that.**

**Emily Trebek: He'd always wear his baseball cap and the same outfit. You know, probably in the front row or standing on the sidelines. He wasn't a big socializer with other parents. He was very hands-on with our schoolwork—just a very involved dad.**

**Nicki Trebek: I used to have to do book reports in the summertime.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Nicki Trebek, Alex's stepdaughter who ended up working with him on *Jeopardy!* for many years.

**Nicki Trebek: Like he'd give me a book during the summer when I was about 12 and give me the whole summer to do a book report.**

**So those are the kind of things I remember as far as like regimented and strict, you know, uh, I think his intentions were just for us not to waste time, idle time, and**

**always be trying to learn something. So whatever he could do to impress that upon us, me.**

**MUSIC: Exciting music with momentum begins**

**Buzzy Cohen:** When Alex had time to himself at home, he did what he loved most: fix things. Remember that broken toilet on the *Jeopardy!* set? This is Jean.

**Jean Trebek: If he could fix something, he would do it. We had this swing in the backyard, and rather than just get a new cushion for the swing, he went out and bought the fabric and sewed a cushion.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** Here's Emily.

**Emily Trebek: He was very handy. He never wanted to call anyone, any professional to fix anything.**

**Asking for a handyman would be almost offensive to my dad because he took a lot of pride in being able to fix a lot of stuff around the house. So I think if any one of us suggested to him to hire someone, he would look at us like we're crazy.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** He'd often rope Matt in to assisting him.

**Matt Trebek: As a kid, I would always have to help him with a project before doing, before going out and hanging out with friends or something. Um, usually it was digging like sprinklers or just random trench lines. Like you have to help before you go out and, and play.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex didn't just fix things - he also saved them.

**Jean Trebek: He was a man that did not like to waste anything. For instance, if I would throwaway, a shoebox, he would take it outta the garbage and he would put it down in his garage and maybe he would put little light bulbs in it, and then he would label the shoebox, you know, batteries or whatever he put in it.**

**He was very thoughtful in what to throw away.**

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex was very thoughtful in all aspects of his life—at times, possibly a little too thoughtful.

We'll be back, after the break.

ACT III

**Buzzy Cohen:** It was important to Alex that he did his best.

**Jean Trebek:** I did recognize that he had a perfectionism flowing through him.

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Jean.

**Jean Trebek:** It was a sense of pride in what you do. And I mean, everything, his closet was neat. His handwriting is neat. The way he would park the car... He just wouldn't park if it wasn't. He would back up and, you know, get it in the lane lines, you know. And, he just was not a messy kind of, *oh, that's good enough*. He really gave it his all.

**Buzzy Cohen:** Whether it was parking the car, or working around the house. This is Matt.

**Matt Trebek:** He would only swear when he was upset, if he was working on something. It would be a lot of like, just personal frustration with a project or something that he's working on—usually sprinklers.

**Jean Trebek:** I think it has more just to do with really wanting things to be as good as you can make them. You know?

**Buzzy Cohen:** Jean saw how deeply Alex cared.

**Jean Trebek:** I just didn't want it to weigh down on him. Cuz sometimes it did, you know. And I know at the studio, if it didn't come out right, he really worried of how that presented. *Did I say the right thing? Did that sound okay*, uh, you know, so it's, it's that, you know, and also having the cameras in front of you is added pressure.

**Harry Friedman:** Every once in a while in the course of a show while reading a clue, he would make a mistake or maybe he said something wrong or we'd have to do a pickup.

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Harry Friedman.

**Harry Friedman:** And that's relatively easy on *Jeopardy!* Because the host is never on camera while reading the clue. So to do audio pickups of a clue, we already have the video. It's just redoing the audio. He hated having to do that. And in fact, there was a time when we had to wait until the studio audience was cleared until he would do those pickups.

**And we finally convinced him that, look, you're human. You make mistakes. If people see that you're not perfect, I think they'll find it endearing and they'll find it genuine. And so eventually we started doing those pickups in whatever commercial break, followed the clue that needed to be picked up.**

**And that was a big, big give for him because again, he didn't want to be perceived as being anything less than. The highest of high quality and that was sort of the Jeopardy! ethos and he represented that so well.**

**MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins**

**Buzzy Cohen:** But Alex had his doubts.

**Lisa Brofman:** He was very hard on himself. Every year or so, he would call me and say, I just don't think I have it anymore...I make mistakes. Maybe it's time for me to just step down.

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Lisa Brofman, co-executive producer of *Jeopardy!*

**Lisa Brofman:** And I would tell him, Alex, you have lost sight of how good you are. You do maybe one or two pickups a show. You know all the answers. You know all the questions. You are so good at what you do.

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex was able to really hear those words sometimes. But he would always be someone who never stopped striving for the best.

This is Nicki Trebek again.

**Nicki Trebek:** There's always room to improve, and everybody around him, he kind of expected that same thing. There's always room to improve. You never stop improving. You never stop learning. That was who he was.

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex expected a lot but he also gave a lot. And gave in intentional and deliberate ways. This is Jean.

**Jean Trebek:** When we first got married, he changed his little wine cellar into my closet and he had a little plaque on the door and it said Jean's closet made with love by Alex and the date on it. He did little things like that. You know, I think he knew that those personal touches really went a long way.

**Harry Friedman:** Every gift that he gave had a handwritten note with it. Every gift that he received, he wrote a handwritten thank you.

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Harry again..

**Harry Friedman:** One time he came in to the morning meeting and he handed me this elongated box and I opened it and it was a long, long, serrated edge bread knife with a carved handle.

*And I said, Wow, what's this for? And he said, You know, I saw these and I, I knew Jeanie, his wife, would like one. He said, You know, I thought Judy would like one too. That's my wife.*

**Buzzy Cohen:** Alex understood the power of small gestures - and bigger ones too. He always threw the *Jeopardy!* staff holiday party - on his own dime.

**Harry Friedman:** one year he held it at a comedy club and brought in a comedian. And he just, he loved to see and hear people laugh,

**Buzzy Cohen:** He'd rent out venues, organize talent. I mean, there was no job he didn't do.

This is Sandy.

**Sandy Goodman:** My husband and I are driving to go park and I look over and there's a high top table with one chair and it's Alex sitting outside the club by himself with a list . And he's checking each person off that's coming in, and I'm thinking, why wouldn't he have somebody do that for him? But that's Alex.

**Buzzy Cohen:** He handled everything. Because it mattered that much to him, and because, well, everything needed to be just right. This is Rocky again

**Rocky Schmidt:** He loved being in control of his own destiny. I would go, *can't we just send a car to pick you up at the airport..you're gonna come home tired, can't.... No, no, Jeanie, and the kids will pick me up or I, uh, you know, and I'll just take a cab or, or whatever...*

**Buzzy Cohen:** He also found ways to give to people he didn't know. Whether he was donating to organizations, or giving his time.

**Sandy Goodman:** We were in Wisconsin doing a college tournament.

**Buzzy Cohen:** This is Sandy.

**Sandy Goodman:** And there was an elderly gentleman sitting outside the hockey locker room. They were honoring Alex with a hockey jersey. So they take all their photo ops and, and Alex and I are walking out of the locker room. And this elderly man who was seated right outside the locker room pops up like a jack in the box.

And he said, Mr. Trebek, can I shake your hand? And Alex stopped and chatted him up for like five minutes. And then somebody said, we need to get going. And we started to walk away and my eyes welled up with tears. And he looked at me and he said, Sandy, what is wrong with you? And I said, *You don't get it, Alex.*

*I said – to you, you were just being kind. You were just extending just a couple of minutes of your time to this man. And I said, He's going to talk about this until he closes his eyes for the last time.*

**MUSIC:** Contemplative bright music

**Buzzy Cohen:** Here's Emily.

**Emily Trebek:** I don't think anyone got anything wrong of who he was. I just think they didn't get the full picture because they only see one dimension of him, you know, being the host. I think what they missed out on is a lot of softness at times and hardness at times.

**Buzzy Cohen:** So back to that question, who was the man behind the lectern?

Alex was...a perfectionist, caring, funny, committed. He could be a stickler for details. He was always reliable. He was reserved. His family was the most important thing to him, followed very closely by his job. The spotlight energized him, while those quiet moments he could find were absolutely essential. He was a man with his foibles who always strived to be better.

Not so different from many of us.

Next week on This is Jeopardy:

**Jimmy McGuire:** We were gonna be the ones that had the cameras, and we were gonna be doing all these crazy things...maybe opening the show jumping off a cliff with a parachute or being on a rollercoaster. It was a work in progress.

This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show is a production of Sony Music Entertainment, and Sony Pictures TV.

It's hosted by me, Buzzy Cohen.

This episode was produced by Julia Doyle.

The series producers are Julia Doyle, Rob Dozier, Sylvie Lubow, and Mia Warren.

Associate producer is Serena Chow.

Our series editor is Sarah Kramer. Executive producers are Lizzie Jacobs, Tom Koenig, Sarah Kramer, Michael Davies, and Suzanne Preté.

Production management help from Susonya Davenport and Tameeka Ballance-Kolasny.

Our theme song was composed by Hannis Brown. Cedric Wilson is our engineer.

Special thanks to Charlie Yedor and Steve Ackerman.

And a big thank you to the *Jeopardy!* staff and crew for all of their time and help on this. Shout out to Alexa Macchia.

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