

THE SOUND OF GIVING

ALEX DONNER

BY AVA ROOSEVELT



Seldom does philanthropy sound so exhilarating. The dapper Alex Donner has mixed a career in music with a serious commitment to philanthropy for more than a quarter of a century and inspired many not only to dance but also to give.

Alex Donner has been dubbed “the best entertainment provider in the east... if not in the country” by *The New York Times* and other esteemed critics. His music and voice, reminiscent of Frank Sinatra days, have become a permanent fixture among discerning socialites and demanding young brides. His com-

pany, Alex Donner Entertainment, has built a reputation for elegant music that “makes the party swing” while being able to converse with your partner without losing your voice.

A long list of luminaries has enjoyed the four Alex Donner Orchestras over the years including the Inaugurations of Presidents George H.W. Bush and Donald Trump; Rudolf Giuliani; Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes; the Rockefeller family; Itzhak Perlman; Kevin Klein; Lou Dobbs; Susan Lucci; Queen Noor of Jordan; the King and Queen of Sweden; Mario Cuomo, among others.

Ava: How did you get started in the music business?

Alex: Besides singing in school and church choirs, as a kid in New York my dad took me out to jazz clubs and Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts. Later on, I did a college year abroad in Paris and sang in the Metro while there. At first I was ignored, but soon after, they were throwing a lot of money at me. I realized that there was nothing I loved to do more than sing and began to take it seriously. I returned to Princeton and studied music and sang with a band there. My first job out



Alex Donner at Mar a Lago, Palm Beach 2016

of college was as the bandleader at the legendary El Morocco in New York. Then it was on to Fordham Law School and eventually working at the Roy Cohn law firm.

Ava: So I guess you saw people at their worst as a lawyer and their best as a bandleader?

Alex: Exactly right. I used to joke that it was a package deal: engagement parties as a bandleader, creating pre-nups as a lawyer, weddings as a bandleader and divorces as a lawyer.

Ava: How did you transition to full-time music?

Alex: Studio 54 was a client and Steve Rubell, its owner, occasionally hired me when he needed a live band like for Mick Jagger's birthday party. I then played a wedding in Jaipur, India, for an heiress who had been a client for years. It was one of the first destination weddings and included a week of events sponsored by the Maharajah, including polo matches. I even played elephant polo! The subsequent publicity led to being pictured in *Town & Country* leading the band in a turban and footage on *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous*. When I returned, the law firm started getting too many calls for my band and so I left.

Ava: How has your music changed over the years?

Alex: Most people want the music they grew up with at their parties. So for most young weddings now, we play contemporary hits. For a more senior clientele, it's often Swing, Motown and Classic Rock. Our

repertoire ranges from Shakira to Sinatra, Beyonce to Irving Berlin, and Gershwin to Gaga. Recently we were honored to play Yo-Yo Ma's daughter's wedding. As you can imagine, playing in front of Yo-Yo Ma was quite unnerving; he turned out to be a super nice guy who embraced me when it was over.

Ava: Do you remember one of the first weddings you played?

Alex: Of course I do. It was your own wedding to the late William Donner Roosevelt, my first cousin, at the Wee Burn Country Club in Darien with the whole family gathered. It was a very special moment in our lives. We loved Bill and seeing him joyous made us all very happy.

Ava: Do you perform for a lot of charitable galas?

Alex: Yes, we have done close to a thousand. Highlights include the Costume Institute in New York; in France, a ball at the Palace of Versailles; the Chicago Lyric Opera; the Newport Preservation Ball, and Doris Duke's Rough Point mansion, also in Newport. Others include the Kennedy Center, The Plaza Hotel, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum and the New York Botanical Gardens. In Palm Beach, we have performed at the Breakers, the Norton Museum of Art, and the Heart, Cancer and The Preservation Foundation benefits to name a few.

Ava: Any other involvement in philanthropy besides performing for charitable galas?

Alex: It started early on with my parents. They taught me by their example to give at least 10 percent of the money you make and 20 percent of your time to charity.

I have been a board member of the William H. Donner and Donner Canadian Foundations for more than 25 years. I am most proud of our pioneering work in Arts Management; in Animal Rescue and Animal and Veterans legislation; and reform of the U.S. legal system.

Ava: What other grants are you currently working on?

Alex: One particular new interest of mine is measuring the dangers of the worldwide addiction to nonstop wireless and disseminating those results. Though wireless is here to stay, there is mounting evidence that it is extremely harmful when used on a continuing basis.

Ava: Since you are in music professionally, have you ever done any grants in that area?

Alex: Yes, about 10 years ago, I put together a one-time benefit for musicians and singers of New Orleans who were victims of Hurricane Katrina to rebuild their houses and start playing music again. By performing over the years at a reduced fee for many charity balls, I had built up a number of IOUs from the chairwomen of those galas and they joined our committee. Our family foundations provided seed money, and I got my musician friends from New Orleans to perform for free. We had a wonderful party in New York and raised a net \$200,000. When we flew down to New Orleans to present the check, the local jazz musicians put on an impromptu jam session for us. I joined them on stage and sang, "Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans?" I was very proud.



Ava Roosevelt is the author of *The Racing Heart*. She is also a Palm Beach philanthropist and wife of the late William Donner Roosevelt, grandson of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.