

**Interview with Alfred on 6/7/00, Tape #8.**

**Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK**

This was in Manhattan, MacDougal Street, which is the center of all these artists' homes and many of their activities. The first galleries you could get into would be coffee shops along MacDougal Street. You can imagine putting up a totally nonobjective work. At that time the Metropolitan Museum, for instance, banned contemporary work. Artists who accepted the influence of the German or French Expressionists were welcome to that great Museum. So I found myself involved in picket lines outside the Metropolitan Museum. And again outside of City Hall when we had to put up with corrupt inspectors who came into the lofts and demanded that we do this and do that, and would hint that if we gave them money they would go away. So this was all part of what we went through. There were people who were active in vandalizing our paintings. People in defined schools that were faithful to the European tradition like the German School led by Walter Stumpf. How anybody can paint with a name like that! General Stumpf, I can see a General Stumpf in the battlefields, but he would come to New York with his legions and vandalize paintings.

**(What do you mean by vandalize?) Lived through a period of art where contemporary was rejected. Contemporary art was vandalized but Alfred continued to make art in world who rejected him and his colleagues, who rejected them as artist and their art movement.**

Slash them with razors or write obscenities on them. However, every now and again there would be cooperatives that would organize where painters would get together. Some would have money and some would not, and they'd rent a cheap loft and exhibit paintings there. But these were always quarrelsome affairs which I managed to avoid. I really had a foot into the

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situation because I came from a foreign country. The Artists Club, their landlord was actually William Stanley Hayter and I would sometimes go down there to get the rent. And I had the European artists, like Chagall—I never met Chagall in New York—but Marcel Duchamp, certainly. There were expatriates who did very much to enrich American art and frankly the greatest thing that ever happened to art in America was the G.I. Bill of Rights.

GI's by the tens of thousands went through, visited studios of Pablo Picasso in Paris, and they elected to study art. Of course I complained about Picasso's attitude toward me when I visited his villa, but still he was very generous to Americans who had liberated his country.

Getting back to the war of survival, I found a talent for selling things. That's apart from working during the day, and being involved with the affairs of Pagano's Gallery. It began as a little cooperative in the basement or boiler room of this building on MacDougal Street. And invariably this coal boiler—yes, it was a coal boiler, imagine—would puff out smoke and soot which if you had works on paper, they'd suffer mightily and would actually be destroyed by this. But thank God, a guy who was working on a thesis on heat exchange, an engineer, decided he would start a sandal shop in the Village. And it was very successful, and he allowed us to remain. Of course it assisted his business. That was Pagano's. Every Friday night the crowds would be unvarying. There would be people coming in to observe the high life in the Village, you know, look at crazy artists and listen to jazz.

I'm trying to think of this popular spot, but I can't think of it, it was this jazz musician—Eddie Duchin--whose father was a society jazz musician.

**(The Blue Note?)**

No no no. The Blue Note. I'm glad you mentioned that. The Blue Note was not exactly recommended or de rigeur for visiting tourists. It was a hole in the wall and years later when I

left that scene, I revisited it with my wife. She wanted to hear jazz and Johnny Coltrane was playing and Buddy Pettifer and I knew these people. We all lived together on Thompson Street. They would have sessions in the basement and I knew all these people. I was their neighbor. These were neighbors who had trouble paying rent, so they were more than neighbors, they were part of a strata of survivalists. And I remember going in to the Blue Note and my wife [Patti] went up to I think Johnny Pettifer, and said, "I'm from Alaska" as though this was really a big deal. And I was afraid to utter a word, as though the Blue Note is utterly ruined by its first tourist. But I want to say that on the floor that night there was an audience of five people. One was a priest, an Episcopal priest who had been defrocked, but there he was in his collar out of force of habit; a girl with a splendiferous kind of boa, feather boa cape, and two other people who sort of looked at me sleepily. I think they were all high.

The young lady was Naomi and she approached us and said, "Alfred, where have you been!"

And I said I live in Alaska, this is my wife, I'm on my honeymoon. And she turned towards my wife and said, "Are you an Es-kee-mo?"

At any rate that was my visit out of context to the Blue Note. And of course now it's become a splendiferous jazz joint.

In the old days, Miles Davis played at the Five Spot and the Blue Note. Then he had some gigs uptown, he was very proud of this. It was always perilous for us to go uptown for economic reasons, but we found money to go and see Miles and he would play, look at the audience, and turn his back to them. And sometimes not play. I thought well, this is a statement. We've come uptown and this will teach us that statements are at the expense of the innocent sometimes, but we forgave him. But then we ran into him in the Cedar Tavern. He came into

the Cedar and we decided to help him. We decided that around the corner was a little shop that had been selling Italian Grocers, and it was just a little hole in the wall. We suspected really that a godfather hung out there, that seemed to be their favorite place to sit next to the zucchinis and vegetables. And we said to Miles, this guy's moving out of here and you can move in there. All you need to do is get some musicians. We've got people here who will set up a bar, and this will be your place. We'll call it "Miles". He said, "Great!" We had a great first night.

**(Who is "we"?) Alfred really thrived with the survivalist life style and sympathized with those under similar conditions. There was a brotherhood amongst them, spending more on booze and other people than themselves. Such as setting up fellow musician Miles with a hole in the wall bar to play in.**

The gang at the Cedar Tavern. I want to say it was the most anonymous bar you would ever walk into. If you were in the Village, visiting the San Remo would be more like an artists' bar. People with wild hair who would declaim poetry and get thrown out, then get ushered in. But the Cedar was not like that; it looked like a place where a successful building contractor would discuss the job with his superintendent, or his banker. And there were prints on the wall that were English hunting scenes, etchings by Stubbs, and people like that. So these were high quality prints, but nevertheless that was the decor. Other people remember other things about it. It was a great place. It had a kitchen in the back, and there was an Italian influence in the food you could get there. It was the only explanation I can make for the main dish being lima beans with some ham in there. Larry Rivers, who was of course one of the Hofmann student habitues, what he remembers is the menu. He did a painting of the menu. It's a collage of all the specials they had for all of eighty-five cents, which was very very reasonable, but not reasonable to us. It's like confronting someone with a steak and lobster dinner for thirty-five dollars now. Eighty-

five cents was really unobtainable. There were soups you could get for fifteen cents and that was a helluva deal. So he remembers that, and well he should.

Well, anyway, I'm not trying to avoid talking about one of the survival bars, Pagano's, but I'm afraid at long last I'm going to tell you about the invading army that would come down MacDougal Street, following the well-trodden paths of tourists. These were the cadets from West Point, looking for a souvenir of the Village. If I'd sell a painting, I'd head immediately for the Cedar Tavern and this would be translated into beer and drink. On a good night I'd go back there with—I don't know why I remember twelve dollars—so that was a good night and you could afford a round of drinks. That is, the recipient would buy you a drink and stuff like that.

Anyway, I looked at these young mavens, these young cadets and I thought, they wouldn't be interested in this. And then I thought yes they would be. Because what we were doing, particularly Franz Kline's calligraphy on telephone books, were entirely expendable thing for him. He wouldn't let them hang around the house, and I would specialize in running upon the street—we'd had to come out of the basement—and I sometimes imagined myself, because I'd stand on the step, and look down the street and look down the street like some sort of insect or cockroach, and then I'd see the West Point boys coming. And then I'd say, "Look at this". And they'd look at a Franz Kline, typically, and they thought it was just impossible. I said, "Boys for two or three dollars, wouldn't you want to buy this? So that you can get some measure of the madness that goes on here." And invariably I'd sell five or ten of these, that would be twenty dollars. Sometimes it was negotiable. Targeted West Point cadets into buying paintings. Tell them it was "...measure of the madness that goes on here."

And now I think of hundreds of works on the telephone books by Franz Kline. Sometimes it was black, invariably with a kind of electric blue. His first experiments with

refracting yellow to balance the inner core of a painting that was out of balance. We used to call that space leaks. There was a whole nomenclature of expressions. Intervals, which I thought belonged to music, but we ripped that off.

Anyway, these were a huge source of income for us, and a half century has gone by. I feel like saying to the soldiers of America who are probably now generals: “Boys, you remember those funny things you picked up in the Village on a Friday night, and you probably took them home and put them in a trunk in the barn. Well, they’re worth three-four-five-ten thousand dollars.” I feel it is my duty to talk to the soldiers of America and tell them that what they have is historic and of great value. Certainly Australians have bought the Cardinal for over ten million dollars. I don’t know what it was. All this boggles the mind.

Would love the preamble to this and the sketches, this choreographic dance, and then the attack, worth tens of thousands of dollars. They were not exactly given away. It was gravy, you know.

**(Following has no clear connection to foregoing....)**

So that was a major gallery. We had a fellow there, whatever happened to Guiseppi Napoli, a Paisano of Pagano’s, and he did lovely little landscapes, a good souvenir to take back home to your folks or to take back to your bunkhouse or wherever the hell they slept at West Point. He would always overwhelm me with his little potboilers. I wonder if he ever changed working within this context, but now I think that he sold his paintings there and then wandered off down to San Remo, where the “real” artists would prevail.

I always felt perfectly safe in the Village, though I was in the country illegally. Whenever I stepped out of the Village I felt unsafe. Did I have antennae? What about the time I rented a workroom that the painter Robert Beauchamp had. This was on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue towards

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42<sup>nd</sup> street, but this was directly across from a block-long building that was the Immigration Department. These are the people that would swarm over the Island winding up in that place where I first got a job in the Empire State Building [The Brass Rail Restaurant]. But then I lived across from it and where were my antennae to warn me? They didn't exist. This was a more pervasive thing.

The people that you would meet in the Village—you could glean a living there. I had a friendship with Chuck (Charles) Mangravite who was at odds with his father, as we all were. This was the head of the Art Department of Columbia who—I told you about him. And Chuck was wondering when I get through with working on garments, and when I could help him. He knew of my engineering training. He says he's got a wonderful, ideal job. He was building Orgone boxes for Wilhelm Reich as I told you. And then Chuck became interested in a renegade physicist who had fled General Electric, I think. All these people flee General Electric who had built the atom bomb. This was a doctor, and he was working on a problem. He was refining potentiometers. So I became involved in turning the lathe in this guy's bathroom.

There were all these interests, underground theatres, and then I met up with Madame Eva Danielle who led a mission to America, a cultural mission of the French Republic to bring their art of the theatre to the American people. The title of the organization in America was The French National Theatre. They would put on productions in the Village. But then they got a theatre uptown called the Comedy Club Theatre. That was another revelation about New York. If people make tons of money and become millionaires and this is old wealth, just what do they do? Are they an audience for these things, are they epicures, do they just taste everything? No, the Comedy Club was a private club of millionaires who would act in different plays. And then they would lease the theater to you for a hundred dollars a day which was very, very reasonable.

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This is off Broadway, of course, but physically it was near to Broadway. Everything about the theatre was generously done.

Eva Danielle loved that I had some experience with sets, fabricating them. She learned about this through a fellow named Pineirho, who was not related in any way to the great Portuguese playwright, at least I don't think so. And Pineirho was acting in this group and they were producing plays like "Ondine", "Comme vous avec moi" (Come Play With Me), and "Ile de chevre" (Island of Goats). I did the sets for Island of Goats and Comme vous avec moi, that is, I designed the sets for these productions. I don't know who did Ondine.

However, the thing that I have for the Beast, how the Female tames the Beast, really came from the sets of Comme Vous Avec Moi, where clowns lead the horses and pretty ladies and stuff like this. It's a circus thing that I did so many years ago and it still comes back to me fresh, and I do something else upon that theme.

I think that his production of *Ondine* introduced Audrey Hepburn to the American people, but she had to speak French. Under the union law, you do not have to unionize, but you must talk in the French tongue. The play went on Broadway. Of course, I was pissed that I didn't get any credit. I think the guy ripped off my idea for the set, blah blah blah, loser.

Then I did *Isle de Chevre*, a fascinating plot where there are three women: one is a virgin, one is a young wife, and one is the mother. This fellow has gone off to war and been killed, and then this stranger who knew him from the battlefield arrives to tell them about this fellow's tragic demise. And then he sort of insinuates himself and begins a seduction of these women. Finally they get together and say, "Jesus, this son-of-a-bitch has turned us against one another; he might be a complete liar; he might have killed our poor man. Let's get rid of him. But how?"

Well this was a Sicilian farmhouse, and in Sicily in the old country they would have a hole in the middle of the floor of the kitchen, and it would be a deep hole that would be a cellar where you would find wine kept. Wine would be stored in these big earthenware pots. This was a two-act play and in the end of the first act, this guy goes down to get wine from the cellar, and the women, after a hasty conversation about what he's putting them through, pull up the ladder and leave him down there. So during the final act, this poor bastard is begging the gals to send the goddam ladder down and they won't do it. His cries become weaker and weaker. Anyway, I got a wonderful review that the sets were sober and evocative. This was with the French newspaper, I think it was Paris Soir, but in New York. Just a line.

An observer of this was Pineirho's wife who was an actress, a very good actress. During a rehearsal the husband of the lead actresses in *Ile de Chevre*, a French citizen, and seemed to amuse himself and others by climbing out on the fire escape and then appearing at the window leaping and capering about. Well, during one of these activities which disrupted our rehearsals, he fell and got killed.

Mrs. Pineirho, who doesn't speak French, memorized this in French and replaced the lead actress in the play, which was wonderful. We had five days to go, for Mrs. Pineirho to memorize this. Meanwhile at that juncture, I wanted to introduce a new idea that I'd had. It was my idea that actors should create their own environment. They should bring to the second rehearsal, the so-called taping, where they figure out movements and choreography, what have you, that they come to the theatre with sticks and stones or furniture and what-have-you. When I announced this the day before the rehearsal there was no set, no sketches. I said the only set I'm going to give you is the well where this guy goes down, and the ladder. You will have to find everything.

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All the screeching and uproar that greeted this actually surmounted what had happened when this guy plunged to his death. But they arrived on the day of the final rehearsal; some of them just brought rubbish, but there was really a magical thing. There was a fellow who went by a newspaper building and they'd thrown out obsolete metal type. I got hold of these and put little things in them, and they were a mystery. You didn't know what they were. It was just wonderful what these people brought forth.

The people who congratulated Mrs. Pineirho in French—it was explained to them that she is not French and doesn't understand the compliment—would you kindly talk English. So this was unbelievable. Then there were congratulations from the reviewer of *Paris Soir*, and he said to me I have a friend and Madame Danielle should write you a letter of recommendation. Maybe you can help Samuel Beckett. Of course he didn't realize the sheer chaos of how this had come about. Later on when I was able to travel freely I met Samuel Beckett with this letter of introduction.

A footnote to all this was that the play, *Isle de Chevre*, ran on Broadway for one day. That asshole Lawrence Harvey, the British star, ruined the show with a disastrous performance.

**(You were involved in many activities in the Village. When did you paint? Where? What was your studio like? Were you submitting to galleries?)**

Yeah. It works like this. I daresay it's still the same. Your only hope of getting into an uptown gallery was in the month of December. This is when the galleries would mount Christmas shows. And the typical gallery would display 50, 60, or 70 paintings. The paintings would be 8½ x 11. Just prior to that month, the galleries would be charitable towards any painter if you would bring in 8½ x 11. You could not exceed that. The members of their own stable would show the paintings that were successful; these would be large. The odds of your

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being seen—the reviewers would come in and look at the paintings of the stable people, but sometimes they'd stop and look at the smaller paintings, and that would be a great break for you. So that's your only chance of getting into an upscale gallery.

Another way to exhibit was at the co-ops. There was a certain opportunism with respect to where we worked. The choice palaces were the condemned buildings. This was where I met Robert de Niro and he would permit me to do work there. I lived someplace else. I would work on weekends, I'd work at night. It was as if there was no day and no night. It's like summer here in Alaska.

I often wondered how in the name of hell did I ever—why I didn't realize I was living across from the immigration department. They had people who had my picture on a rolodex and were looking for me, and who had raided my shows. Then the thought occurs to me that I wouldn't be there during the day. I would be there at night. **It was difficult to get into upscale galleries. Would submit a small painting at the Christmas shows. Lived across the Immigration Dept. they would come to shows looking and raiding for him.**

### **(Raided your shows?)**

Yeah, they went to one show asking for me. This was at Pagano's. They came rolling in to Pagano's in 1950 or 1951. And at Rienzi—I was a founder of a coffee shop called Rienzi. There were 13 partners and we would exhibit paintings there. The police came rolling into that place looking for me. The problem was I'd use my true name in paintings, always.

The Rienzi was an interesting enterprise. It was once a noodle factory, and it went right through this building on MacDougal Street. So it had impressive space, and we all furnished it by visiting these antique auctions for about \$500. We had these magnificent Florentine tables and chairs. I remember there was an elephant foot with antique umbrellas in it. It was just a

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wonderful opportunity that came about over nothing, and a splendid coffee machine with Italian eagles; a huge edifice. It was terrifying. You could go in there and drink coffee. And of course, we served espresso and lattes and that black coffee in those teeny little cups.

Actually this was the first Italian coffee shop in this nation that was run by Americans. Of course most of the people here, I can't think of their names, were students in Paris and they loved the coffee shops. Some of them must have gone to the Sorbonne because they enjoyed Du Magot. They'd been there when they had a little money, and the other coffee shops around there.

There were 13 partners in this affair, and they wanted a place where they could drink coffee in peace. But there is no peace when you own a business in New York. You have trouble with the cops, you have trouble with the Mafia, in equal measure. We were located in the middle of the block. San Remo was the corner tavern, but on the end of the block across the way was another tavern which no one ever went into; no tourists either. It was the hangout of Genovese, who became a godfather and the first of the godfathers to embrace narcotics. So this involved him in a war, and we, accidentally and inadvertently, became sort of involved with Mr. Genovese. He harassed us and we went to the police and they said you'd better make peace with that man, said the police.

He would send these young kids over and they would annoy people or break windows. We put up lights and that kind of inhibited them. Then I went over there and confronted him, not knowing. In going into the tavern to beard the lion in his den, there was a bar and at the end of that bar was an alcove and a toilet. And over here were all the tables and chairs, the accoutrements of a bar. And it seems that I went in there, and went right into the alcove and told the man to stop messing with us. This was a terrible mistake. It meant no respect. It meant that

I'd bypassed his soldiers and a wiseguy and a made man sitting at the bar. Seemingly I avoided these people because I'd had no respect, and had addressed Mr. Vito Genovese.

The other partners who knew something about this were horrified. They were boys who were born in Manhattan, or were from the Bronx or Queens or Long Island, and they said you'd better get out of town. But nothing happened, the harassment stopped, and then Mr. Genovese said, "I'd like to talk to one of you guys. Send that Limey in here. Send him in here. I've got a deal for you boys."

I remember telling this to Robert de Niro. I was staying at his place and painting. He had a show coming along. He was a funny one, was de Niro. He had all the requisite paintings that intrigued his dealer—I think it was Zabriskie Gallery—one of the few galleries that had the courage to show our work then. They liked Bob's work. When you first encountered it, there's a degree of difficulty in understanding it. To painters he's a painter's painter and a genius. To everyone else it presents a tough road to hoe. Anyway when Robert heard about this, swinging by to have a cup of coffee at Rienzi, and they told him about Mr. Genovese, he started crying. Whenever I see his son acting the role of these godfathers, these gangsters, these psychopathic killers, I think of his father crying, and then going in there to beg this guy for my life, saying, "He's a stranger, he doesn't understand, believe me, he risked all this for me."

So then Mr. Genovese made an overture, he said, "I'd like to talk to somebody." And I went over there with David Wollman, who was sort of the president of the business. That might not be his name; but this guy was a painter who accepted the responsibility for the business. This time I told the people at the bar that I was there to see the boss, and I walked this chorus line of soldiers who took me on to the wiseguy, who then took me to the made man at the end of

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the bar, who brought me before Mr. Genovese. So appropriate respect was shown to all these people. I was then confronted by Mr. Genovese and another made man.

He said, "I really like what you guys are doing. It's a great idea. I want you to do the same for me. Do you agree to do that?"

And I said, "Yeah, I think so..."

"We're gonna have this place on Christopher Street, and I got a name for you, the Cabaret, and you do all the rest."

And we said, "Well, there's the question of a liquor license. We wanted to sell liquor at the Rienzi and they said forget about it. You need to bribe this guy, and talk to that guy, and it would take a couple years."

He said, "You want a liquor license? When you open the joint you'll have a liquor license. You hear me?"

I said, "I understand, Mr. Genovese."

So we had a liquor license. So we would have an act in there, people would entertain. And I thought wow, this is really great. And then one night, I was there with a young lady to inspect the premises, the cabaret, and there was a fellow, some existential poet explaining the conduct of Andre Sartre whose philosophies were changing and leaving the Communist party which they once worshipped. So he was somewhat outspoken and just as we came abreast of the doorway of the cabaret, our poor friend, the poet, came flying out landing in the gutter. And we were told to work with a fellow that the godfather called "Five by Five". He says, you need anything, talk to Five by Five. And the dimensions of Five by Five were this human block of matter that was five feet tall and five feet wide. He had to turn sideways to get out of the building, just emanating dreadful physical power. So we stayed the hell away from the cabaret.

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I was accused of getting into this mess, but all of them voted that I would go there. Anyway, we had a guy to run it, but Genovese had his own ideas of how to run it, so we were out. Just like that. We were out; told to stay away. Furthermore they felt too that my living in the Village wasn't very safe with Mr. Genovese taking a view of me. So I stayed the hell away from MacDougal Street.

This was in 1949-51. **Ran out of the Village in fear of safety from the mafia by Mr. Genovese.**