

Saul Zabar

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In 1989, Saul Zabar gave me a job and rented me a studio apartment. I told him I was from Iowa and had a dream. I wanted to be a rock n roll star, be in a band, and be where the action was, Manhattan, and that I needed a job that paid enough to be able to afford to live there. I was young, full of piss and vinegar, very determined. To Saul's credit, he did not dismiss my desires as so much foolishness. Instead, he decided he would support me and my dream. But I would work for him. He made it happen. I worked hard. Nights and weekends. 60 hours sometimes. Still, my band rehearsed twice a week in the old music building on 8th Ave. We got gigs all over lower Manhattan. Saul even brought his wife Carol to a show at the Speakeasy. We were loud, he didn't enjoy it. But he didn't have to do that, and yet there he was. Maybe he thought it was part of the trade off.

In a relatively short period of time - Saul took me under his wing at the store, challenging me, teaching me and always giving me more responsibilities. He apprenticed me in the fine and delicate art of buying smoked fish for Zabar's. We'd drive out to several Brooklyn smokehouses each week, placing orders for thousands of pounds of lox, smoked salmon, whitefish, sable and sturgeon. They pulled out racks of smoked salmon for Saul to inspect and taste. You really know the measure of a man by the way people treat them. The smoked fish vendors showed him an uncanny level of respect, as though a god was walking among them.

Never mind my dream of being a rock star, under the tutelage of Saul, eventually the inventory of the entire appetizing department was in my hands - an incredible honor. A farm boy from Iowa! A gentile!

The studio apartment he rented me gave way to a proper, albeit modest one bedroom apartment. And my pay soon far eclipsed what I had ever before made in my life. I could afford more guitars, gear, and most of all, recording studio time. It was all happening.

By the mid 90's my band had pressed 2 CD's of original material. We were shopping the labels. As it happened, a Sony records exec named Harvey Leeds had a birthday wish to spend one day working behind the scenes at Zabar's. An unusual wish, but he got it. The store's general manager, Scott Goldshine, knew the score. He sent Harvey to work with me. And as such, I spent several hours with Harvey. We packed containers of gefilte fish. Put labels on packages of whitefish salad and pickled herring. I asked for Harvey's information-

and told him I would follow up with him. I wanted him to listen to my bands CD.

Weeks later, when my calls to his office for a meeting went unreturned, I sent over a Zabar's platter of bagels w/lox and cream cheese. Within an hour, my phone rang. It was Harvey. 'Now you've got my attention,' he said. And following that an appointment at Sony records.

To his credit, Harvey listened to my bands CD. He said he would pass it along, but Sony wasn't interested in alt country bands at that time. They were looking for jam bands, like Moe, or the next Rage Against the Machine.

But none of that really matters. I was able to get an audience. A glimpse. A shot. And it was all because of Saul Zabar.

I was continually intrigued by Saul himself, as he was truly unlike anyone I have ever met. He was difficult to please, meticulous and demanding and naturally he expected an exceedingly elevated level of hard work and dedication from his employees. You might expect that a man in his position wouldn't bother getting his hands dirty with the menial labor that is required to run a store which makes upwards of 60 million per year. But Saul was as much in the trenches and on the front lines as his employees were. He is not afraid to get his hands dirty - indeed he would work elbow to elbow with anyone - anywhere in the store. When a refrigeration unit broke down - he was the first one on his hands and knees on the floor, in the grime and grease with a flashlight and screwdriver taking apart the console to see what was wrong. Some of us joked about him being 'The Grey Ghost,' because he seemed to be everywhere in the store, omnipresent.

Over time, I realized that the store was to Saul Zabar what music was to me. An art, an inspiration, a craft, an adventure to be explored, savored and cherished. His creative outlet. It doesn't matter what form it takes on - our art feeds our souls. The store was Saul's art, his canvas. He obsessed over it the way any mad, creative genius would.

Saul Zabar's legacy will live on. A legend, an icon, a mentor, boss, friend, and father figure - not just to me, ask any of the employees at Zabar's. They will tell you. To me, he was all these things, but he was also a rock star.