“The Los Angeles Times” once called my father a “National Treasure” and as his son and biggest fan, I agree. I would also like to propose an equal and inverse truth that my dad treasured the nation. The proof is in the pudding, or in this case, the vinyl. I am referring of course, to his magnum opus, “Stan Freberg Presents The United States Of America, Volume One: The Early Years.” I am not alone in believing this album to be his seminal work. Everyone from Steven Spielberg to John Goodman, George Carlin to Adam Sandler, Ray Bradbury to Richard Pryor, Herbie Hancock to David Ogden Stiers, Tyne Daly to Tom Hanks, Weird Al to Ice-T, Doctor Demento to Martin Sheen, John Ritter to Stephen King, Jim Henson to Paul McCartney and far beyond, have lauded it as an influence on their cerebrums and careers. Even the astronaut Buzz Aldrin told my dad that it was one of his favorite records ever. My father told Buzz, “I’ll be sure to tell Orville, my puppet from the moon. He will be impressed.” Buzz roared.

Of course, the album was critically acclaimed as well. As one of the founding Board of Governors of NARAS, The Recording Academy, dad personally created the word “Grammy.” So it pleased him that the record won a Grammy, two in fact…one for the (Grammy) Hall of Fame and one for Best Engineered Recording--Special or Novel Effects. The second volume (which I was proud to perform on) was nominated for a Grammy in 1996. When it lost to Al Franken, the aforementioned Ice-T stood up in the audience, shook his furious fist, and yelled, “FREBERG! You were robbed!” My dad was touched. Surprisingly, my father loved rap and hip hop. Maybe not such a surprise, for he was always in step and on the beat…funky, fresh, outraged, tuned-in and socially conscious. He was decades ahead of his time, even when he was standing in a recording studio in 1961, pretending to be in 1776. In the early 1970s, he wrote an ad campaign to promote the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, in an effort to help us get out of the Vietnam War and bring the troops home safely. He was equally patriotic and peace loving, reverent and irreverent.

He was also a teacher, not just an ACTUAL teacher (ahem, professor) at USC’s famed school of communications, but a teacher of me. From a young age, he taught me all manner of things, often keeping me home from class long before it was fashionable to homeschool. He is seen pictured on both volumes of “Stan Freberg Presents” holding the infamous map of the USA suitcase. When I was eight and found out that there were states OUTSIDE the continental US, I asked my dad, “Where is Alaska on your magic suitcase, Daddy?” He told me it was inside, in a secret compartment, “Along with Hawaii and Puerto Rico…right next to my sunglasses, some aspirins, and a leftover tuna fish sandwich that your mother made me for lunch.” My mother, by the way, produced “Stan Freberg Presents The United States Of America, Vol. 2, The Middle
Years," as well as co-produced Volume 1, alongside the legendary Ken Nelson. Without Donna Freberg, there would be no “USA” albums, or any legendary Freberg albums, for that matter. She was his muse and maestro for nearly half a century. Frank Sinatra introduced my parents in 1958, and it was a match literally made in Hollywood. Frank was also a fan of the USA, both the country and the album.

But I digress.

My father was always delighted for the shouts and accolades from celebrities, crooners, comics, rock stars, authors, auteurs, astronauts, Muppets, Beatles and other friends, not to mention cavalcades of everyday folks who would quite literally approach him on the street and quote the album verbatim, proudly yelling out famous excerpts like “Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!” to which my dad would respond, “Mutiny! Mutiny! Mutiny!” We would be on a plane and hear a strange noise coming from the engines, and my dad would nervously ask the flight attendant, “What was that?” to which they would reply, “French horns.”

This was an everyday occurrence. The records fan base was massive, and spanned the gamut from the streets to space, from cab drivers to presidential cabinet members, waiters to nuclear physicists, senators to sales people. It smashed all demographic boundaries. Its fans are anywhere and everywhere, from eight to 80, and from all walks of life. Vocal fans, who poured adoration and admiration on my dad like gravy on an eagle, err… turkey. My father ate it up, he was proud of it, too. As he should be. It was a love letter to his country.

But my father was perhaps most touched by the piles of fan mail he would receive every year, from teachers, specifically humble and hip history teachers across the United States who told my father that they used the record in class, to help teach high school history. This is a strange twist of fate, because as my father told the “Chicago Tribune,” “I flunked American history (in high school) because I had such a boring history teacher, and in order to graduate I had to make it up over the summer, and I had the same boring teacher in summer school! And I thought: I don't ever want to think about American history again.” But think about it he did. And not just in 1961, when he created the album, but decades prior, when he was drafted into the US Army at the end of World War II.

My father would start out as a cook in the Army commissary, but rise in rank and go on to win a Purple Heart, as he worked as a writer and editor for the army newspaper. He then went on to entertain troops as a corporal in the early USO, then called the “Special Services.” It was there he would meet the Marx Brothers, begin to get a taste for his talents, and find the voice to spin straw into gold (records). I believe it was there, in the service, where he learned the importance of service, and found that patriotism and humor were blood brothers in arms. He spent his off-duty hours rehearsing routines and reading comics and history books, and when he was on-duty, he made night and day rounds in Army hospitals, doing stand-up, fashioning impromptu puppets out of bedsheets, and making badly injured soldiers laugh, a captive audience of brave men who didn’t have much to laugh about. My dad was good at that, giving hope to the hopeless, and finding the light in the dark. And find the spotlight he did, in countless careers that spanned from animation to advertising, film to television, radio to records, and THIS record leaps from the platter to the ear like a jackrabbit on Easter morning.

It’s brilliant from the moment the needle hits, from the overture to the finale, and in every pitch perfect and beautifully crafted moment in-between.

Whoever listens to this timely and timeless album, whether for the first spin or the hundredth, is immediately pushed into a time machine that tilts towards the demented, as we witness an alternate, but somehow perfectly plausible history of the USA, brilliantly narrated by the late great Paul Frees, orchestrated by the legendary Billy May, and peppered with talent from June
Foray to Jesse White. Listen to it and sing and dance along, as you break bread with our forefathers (and mothers), as you witness the national bird accidentally turned into Thanksgiving dinner, as you “Take An Indian To Lunch,” as you listen to Betsy Ross discuss the American flag design with a dandy art directing George Washington, and as you hear Benjamin Franklin (played by my dad of course) sign the Declaration of Independence, and discuss Life, Liberty, and...the “Purfuit of Happinefs” with a befuddled and impatient Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson: Well, all your “S’s” look like “F’s.”

Franklin: Hey, it’s stylish. It’s in, it’s very in.

Jefferson: Oh, well, if it’s in.

And now, it’s IN the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry.

As it should be.

My father had always hoped to take the album to Broadway, and it may still go there.

For now, forever, it goes here. Perfect. I trust my father would be proud of this achievement. I know he would be. He often introduced himself as a historian and now we have irrefutable proof. He was indeed. All the “S’s” look like “F’s”! Or in this case, straight “A’s.” Take that, high school history teacher! With Honor(s),

—Donavan Stanley Freberg, Los Angeles, California - 2021

Post Script, No Reservation Required:

In the 60’s, before he befriended and often guested on Johnny Carson, my dad was on the earlier incarnation of “The Tonight Show,” with Jack Paar, promoting the album. Dad and the full cast performed “Take an Indian to Lunch” exactly as it was done on the record. The audience lit up with cheers and applause. Then he sat down to chat with the ever sardonic Paar, who chided him, and said, “You know, Stan, you're a hypocrite. When's the last time YOU took an Indian to lunch?” Laughter swelled from the audience. My dad responded that of course he hadn't, but then he looked directly into the TV camera and said that he would gladly take any Indian who showed up at his hotel there in New York the next day to lunch. Cheers broke out. After the applause died down, Paar said, “That's great Stan. Tell me, exactly which hotel are you staying at?” Without missing a beat, my dad said, “Well ironically, The Algonquin!”

The next day, dad goes out to do some business and returns to the hotel just after 12 noon. There, the doorman is frantic. “Mr. Freberg, Mr. Freberg, we've been trying desperately to find you. There are dozens of Indians in the lobby saying you offered to take them to lunch!” My father looked around to see a room full of Native Americans, in full ceremonial garb. A man in a beautiful headdress and his wife (with a baby in a papoose) walk up. The man introduces himself, “Mr. Freberg, I’m Chief Russell Moore. I play trombone with a Dixieland band in the Village. This is my wife and son. We don’t normally walk around dressed like this, but after I saw you on the show last night, I called around, and we decided to come in costume.” My father was moved to tears and immediately hugged the man. The kindly but nervous manager of the hotel, Andrew Anspach, said, “Uh, Stan, I think this is all well and good, but what now?” My dad and my Uncle Bill (my dad’s VP of business affairs) proudly walked the group into the famed Rose Room and my dad asked his new friend how many had come. “Twenty-six, including the baby,” Russell responded. My dad told the maitre d’, “TABLE FOR 28!” to which the waiter replied, “Uhhh...reservation?” My dad said, “No. They’re not from a reservation. They live right here in New York City.”
Decades later, the Navajo nation gave the song a standing ovation at a Kennedy Center “First Americans” gala, which again, brought my father to tears. Seeing this album in the Library of Congress, would no doubt, do the same. May it live on forever, and may we all play it and pay it forward, in reverence and reparation, and may we all “Take An Indian To Lunch.” My dad would approve.

Donavan Freberg is an American photographer, advertising creative, voice actor, and writer. He is probably best known for appearing in a series of commercials for Encyclopædia Britannica produced by his father, satirist and advertising legend Stan Freberg. Currently, he works as a professional portrait photographer, copywriter, social media influencer and branding consultant in Los Angeles.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.