



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

Episode Fifteen: So Long, Everybody!

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment, and Sony Pictures TV

Buzzy Cohen: On Wednesday March 6, 2019, Alex Trebek took a moment to address *Jeopardy!* viewers.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Hi everyone, I have some news to share with all of you and it's in keeping with my longtime policy of being open and transparent with our Jeopardy! fan base. I also wanted to prevent you from reading or hearing some overblown or inaccurate reports regarding my health. So, therefore, I wanted to be the one to pass along this information.

Now, just like 50,000 other people in the United States each year, this week I was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer. Now normally, the prognosis for this is not very encouraging, but I'm going to fight this, and I'm going to keep working. And with the love and support of my family and friends and with the help of your prayers also, I plan to beat the low survival rate statistics for this disease. Truth told, I have to! Because under the terms of my contract, I have to host Jeopardy! for three more years! So help me. Keep the faith and we'll win. We'll get it done. Thank you.

Buzzy Cohen: While Alex was on the stage, contestant coordinator Maggie Speak was backstage. Alex asked her to read the same statement so the contestants would know what was going on — before their day began.

Maggie Speak: He wanted to make sure that they were aware of the situation, and James Holzhauer was playing. It was in the middle of his run. I'm shaking right now talking about this.

And I remember James Holzhauer looked at me and he said, *How is he gonna do the shows, Maggie?* It went to what — how's Alex gonna be? And I think that's where my head went. *How's Alex gonna be?*

Buzzy Cohen: That was the question on everyone's mind: *How's Alex gonna be? What's going to happen to him?* The announcement swept the news.

ARCHIVAL:

News Announcer: *It was devastating news to the legions of Jeopardy! fans and all of us who have watched him for over three decades. Alex Trebek telling the world that like 50,000 other diagnoses in the U.S. each year, he has advanced pancreatic cancer and he's vowing to fight it.*

News Announcer: *I have to say it was an emotional night in my family when we heard the news. We watched Jeopardy! every single night. It is appointment television in our house and we're wishing him well.*

Buzzy Cohen: And there was another question too. One that felt incredibly daunting...what would happen to *Jeopardy!*?

Longtime *Jeopardy!* producer Lisa Broffman remembers when she first heard about Alex's diagnosis.

Lisa Broffman: **Rocky and Harry Friedman and myself were in Rocky's office, and Alex called and Rocky put him on speakerphone. And Alex told us that he had stage four pancreatic cancer. And I remember Harry had a stack of papers on his lap and he picked them up and threw them on the ground.**

And Alex, from the very beginning, said, *This is not gonna affect anything. I plan on fighting this. Let's get back to work.*

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: This is Emily Trebek, Alex's daughter.

Emily Trebek: **There was no possibility of him not working. That was never an option.**

Buzzy Cohen: But how? For the next 20 months, *Jeopardy!* and Alex faced an uncertain and difficult future – one full of challenges – *and* moments of great appreciation for everything they'd built together.

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.

This week: Alex's Final *Jeopardy!*

ACT 1

Jean Trebek: *It's a shock when you are presented with a diagnosis, especially one like stage four pancreatic, because it's almost handing you a death sentence.*

Buzzy Cohen: This is Jean Trebek, Alex's wife.

Jean Trebek: *And I think the way Alex looked at it and perceived it was very much in alignment with his personality as a late 70-year-old man was that, we'll just deal with it. We'll just deal with it. I'm not gonna make it more than it is, or less than it is. I know he was asked, *Would you do things differently?**

And he said, No.

Buzzy Cohen: This is Emily.

Emily Trebek: *And I think some of us, maybe for a moment, were questioning that, like, *Oh, is he gonna keep working? Or is he just gonna take the rest of this time to, you know, do other things?**

*But I think when we maybe even said that out loud, we were like, *Oh no, look at who we're dealing with.**

Buzzy Cohen: He was not about to do anything differently now that he knew the news. This is Alex's son, Matt.

Matt Trebek: *Maybe he wouldn't go as long or be able to work as hard for, for the amount of hours that he did, but he was already doing more than most people in their late seventies anyway.*

Jean Trebek: I think he just liked being around life, you know, and at our home it started getting, uh, *When is your next doctor's appointment? How's your, how are you feeling? Do you need more pain medicine? The doctor's calling?*

Uh, so when he got to Jeopardy!, when he got to the studio, it was more about the studio and the show.

Buzzy Cohen: *Jeopardy!* was a way for Alex to maintain some normalcy in his day to day.

The team at *Jeopardy!* did everything they could to make Alex feel at ease. And Alex did everything he could to keep going.

But backstage, his routine had started to become more and more difficult to maintain.

Rocky Schmidt: When he was sick and he was taking medication, I mean, the pain the man had.

Buzzy Cohen: This is Rocky Schmidt, longtime producer at *Jeopardy!*

Rocky Schmidt: You could watch him and it's like, he's not gonna make it to the conference room table.

Buzzy Cohen: For the morning meeting with the writers.

Rocky Schmidt: And, and then he would sit through the meeting and get through it and then he would leave and go to get made up and, and ready for the show. And everybody would look at each other and go, *I don't know if we're gonna be taping today.* And then somehow he rallied.

Buzzy Cohen: Rocky would check on Alex in his dressing room between tapings.

Rocky Schmidt: I'd go in and knock and just walk in and find him on the floor. I mean, crying in pain and saying, *We can cancel taping. We can go home. We've already taped three shows, Alex. No, I just — gimme a minute. Just gimme a minute.*

And to see him laying on the floor and then...you know, he said, *Just gimme a minute.* And then I would leave him alone and wardrobe would leave him alone. And then pretty soon he'd come out of the dressing room.

Buzzy Cohen: This is Johnny Gilbert, the voice of *Jeopardy!*

Johnny Gilbert: There are, I guess a couple of times when I started to introduce him on the show, I wasn't sure he was gonna come out on stage. I really didn't know. But the bottom line is he always did. And when he came out on stage, he was Alex Trebek.

Buzzy Cohen: And the audience never knew differently.

Johnny Gilbert: Sometimes he would say that when, uh, we were backstage, before we got started for the show and say, *Okay, Johnny, introduce me.* So I knew he was looking forward to that. Which made me wanna do it even more — with even more vigor, more excitement. And he always came out.

MUSIC: Energetic, reflective beat with momentum

Rocky Schmidt: I mean, we would've done anything. We'd have followed him anywhere. And, and so if he wanted to tape, we were gonna try.

Buzzy Cohen: The team worked tirelessly to attend to every detail. Sandy Goodman, Alex's makeup artist, went to great lengths to make him look as good as ever.

Sandy Goodman: One day Rocky called me and he said they have him on a special chemo cocktail. And they told him, he's gonna look really tan.

Buzzy Cohen: According to Sandy, Alex was a blue-ish brown.

Sandy Goodman: And I thought, *Oh my God. Oh my God, what in God's name am I gonna do?* So as a makeup artist, you think of the color wheel, you go with the opposite. So if he's blue, I've gotta use something orange. So I put down what we call beard stipple all over his face. And then I took a beauty blender, those pink sponges, and I physically tapped his base on over the orange, trying to neutralize it.

Harry Friedman: He kept up a good face right until the very end when he lost his hair because of radiation and chemo.

Buzzy Cohen: This is Harry Friedman, former Executive Producer of *Jeopardy!*

Harry Friedman: And we had to get wigs for him. And he grumbled about that a lot.

Renee Ferruggia: I had a wig maker actually make the wig.

Buzzy Cohen: That's Renee Ferruggia, *Jeopardy!*'s hairstylist.

It worked for a while — but all of these measures required constant adjustments for Alex.

Harry Friedman: As he lost weight, we had to have those wigs, those full head, you know, complete wigs, refitted, because they didn't fit his scalp anymore.

And again, he grumbled about that and he said, *Oh, okay. Wait, wait till I'm well and I don't have to do this anymore. Oh, I'll take care of you.* I mean, he, you know, sort of joked about it and you know, took it all in stride. It was, um, it was, it was hard to watch, though.

Nicki Trebek: He had a routine way of doing things. And if that routine was interrupted, it was uncomfortable for him.

Buzzy Cohen: This is Alex's stepdaughter Nicki, who was working at *Jeopardy!*

Nicki Trebek: He had that bracelet that he always wore, and there was a time when he was sick that he forgot the bracelet all the way in the office. Like halfway across the lot. And he seemed so disturbed about it. Like, *Oh, I can't*, you know, but there was, he knew that there just wasn't gonna be time to go get it.

And I said, *I can get it.* And I ran to get it, and I ran all the way back. Just...don't know why that's coming to mind, but just especially when he was sick, like just anything to make it easier.

Buzzy Cohen: But it wasn't always easy to do things for Alex. For someone who liked to control his own destiny, he wasn't ready to give up certain freedoms, such as driving.

Nicki remembers how she and Rocky would try to convince Alex to just let someone drive him home from the studio.

Nicki Trebek: Well, Rocky would usually go first and go in the dressing room and, *Well, I think I might've convinced him to let you take him home, Nick, but I'm not sure, you know, because he might go, Yeah, I think you should take me home.* And then 10 minutes later, *I think I'm good.*

And we'd be like, *Ahhhh*, you know, we just don't want him to get in a car accident on the way home because he doesn't wanna give in. But on that day, I remember exactly what I said to him. I think I said, *You know, I'm gonna say a word that you said to us and you still use it. And I'm gonna tell you, it's called stupidity.*

It was one of his favorite words: stupidity. He could not deal with stupidity. And I said, Literally, if you drive home, Dad, it's pure stupidity. And I remember him looking up at me and going, All right, take me...you know, like, all right.

Buzzy Cohen: From March 2019 until the end of October 2020, Alex worked. He taped, traveled. And kept making jokes all the while. Here's Renee again.

Renee Feruggia: We went to Canada, just him and I and I, I was, I was nervous. I'm not gonna lie, I was petrified because he was sick and you know, oh my God, what if something happened?

Buzzy Cohen: She knew what everyone else who traveled with Alex knew: you're only allowed to bring a carry on. But they were going to Canada for five days.

Renee Feruggia: You know how hard that was for me to take a carry-on? But I stuffed it and then I had his, like, a wig case with his hairpiece in it, right? And then I had a backpack for myself.

Buzzy Cohen: Except when they tried to board, Renee wasn't allowed on with all three bags...even though one was a wig case. So Alex started putting her stuff into his own bag.

Renee Feruggia: And it was so funny how Alex and I...on our hands and knees at the airport with him putting my stuff in that messenger bag of his.

MUSIC: Reflective slow beat

Buzzy Cohen: Alex gave updates on his treatments. And used his public platform to raise awareness about pancreatic cancer. He donated. He spoke with other people undergoing treatments. He did experimental trials.

But the disease was taking its toll.

Johnny Gilbert: As the weeks went on, it became more and more difficult for him just to live life.

Buzzy Cohen: As the *Jeopardy!* team worked furiously backstage to keep Alex's spirits high, the public was also doing their part too.

More, after the break.

ACT 2

Buzzy Cohen: On stage, Alex received an outpouring of support.

At the start of season 36, in 2019, Alex announced he had finished treatment. Weeks later, he had to start again.

In those difficult weeks, during one memorable game, contestant Dhruv Gaur gave a surprising answer during Final Jeopardy!

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: They're dealing with famous phrases and this clue. In the title of a groundbreaking 1890 expose of poverty in New York City slums, these three words follow "How The." 30 seconds. Good luck.

[Final Jeopardy! music plays.]

Alex Trebek: Dhruv, you're smiling. I like that. Let's take a look at your response. Did you come up with the right one? No...what is...we love you, Alex. That's very kind of you. Thank you. Costs you \$1995. You're left with five bucks. Okay.

Buzzy Cohen: Alex gets choked up — it almost sounds like he's about to cry. The We <3 You Alex clip went viral. The public continued to cheer Alex on — finding creative ways to reach out to him. This is Rocky.

Rocky Schmidt: **The easiest and best part of it, of this whole process with Alex was seeing the people's reactions. I would go to the house with boxes, banker's boxes of letters and cards and blankets and prayer cards. And we would go through that stuff.**

Buzzy Cohen: Alex's kids would come over — and the whole family would look through letters and messages together. Sometimes they'd even do a little work.

Rocky Schmidt: **About the time that Alex was going through all this, Funko came out with Alex Trebek figurines. We were getting hundreds of 'em and asking — people were asking him to sign them. So we create this whole assembly line because, you know, you'd have to flatten out the box and, and he would sign it and then we'd repackage it all up and stuff.**

All those moments of seeing that support and seeing...and him getting to see that, you know, most people don't get to see that support. Most people are laying in a coffin

when, when you hear all these wonderful things said about you. And he got to hear it and see it and read it.

Jean Trebek: If you sent him a card, if you even had a good thought about him, sent him a blanket, tea bags, whatever it was, you know, he got it.

Buzzy Cohen: Jean again.

Jean Trebek: It did not land on deaf ears. He received it. And it was really beautiful. I think that buoyed him for a few months.

Buzzy Cohen: Alex taped his last game on October 29th, 2020.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: But congratulations and Merry Christmas to you both, and thank you ladies and gentlemen for spending the time with us. We'll see you again next week.

Buzzy Cohen: Alex planned to have a surgery — and the show had already lined up Ken Jennings as a guest host while Alex was out.

On the 29th, Nicki drove her dad home.

Nicki Trebek: I remember driving home and like saying, *Are you gonna go back? And he said, I don't think so, Nick.*

Buzzy Cohen: On November 8th, 2020, surrounded by his family and close friends, Alex passed away.

Emily remembers her dad's last day. They sensed it was coming, and they were all at home. Alex was present, happy to be surrounded by the ones he loved.

Emily Trebek: The whole family was together. My brother was in town. We had a few family friends over and we sat outside at the swing that he loved where he would sit a lot — that's another place you'd find him is on this swing, just maybe reading or just sitting, you know, by himself. So we were all sitting there, we were looking at photos of old memories, of old trips we took, or funny photos we had, and just kind of reminiscing on those special memories.

It was very, very nice, very surreal, but very nice.

MUSIC: Reflective beat

Buzzy Cohen: And later, when the *Jeopardy!* staff heard the news...

Lisa Broffman: We had planned on having Ken come in to rehearse on November 8th, 2020. So we had a crew in, and that morning, Rocky Schmidt called me and said, *He's gone.*

So we canceled the rehearsal day.

Buzzy Cohen: Lisa Broffman again.

Lisa Broffman: I've been with *Jeopardy!* for 33 years. And in looking back on those years, I think the most meaningful to me is my love for Alex Trebek and what kind of human being he was.

He wasn't the host, he wasn't the celebrity. He was part of our team and extremely involved in all the day-to-day activities. He was a friend, he was a mentor, he was a symbol of strength and his passion for life was...extraordinary.

Buzzy Cohen: Alex had been with *Jeopardy!* for an exceptional 37 years — and for the people who had worked with him for decades, they now have memories and mementos to remember their beloved colleague by.

Renee recalls Jean asking her if there was anything of Alex's she would want. She mentioned his green messenger bag, the one he always carried with him.

One day, Alex's son, Matt, showed up at her door with the bag.

Renee Feruggia: Believe it or not, I have his Sony *Jeopardy!* pass attached to it. And I asked Jeanie, I said, *I don't know if you realize this, but Alex's badge is on the bag if you'd like it?* And she said, *No, I want you to have it. And that meant the world to me.*

Buzzy Cohen: Many staff members have pictures of Alex. Rocky keeps one on his desk.

Rocky Schmidt: He might have been a guest on "To Tell the Truth," I think, because I'm not even sure where it's from. And he's almost jumping out of his seat. He's so happy and his arms are — are like extended.

It's not posed. It's nothing. And he's got this huge smile on his face. The man hated to smile. I mean, we would do photo sessions every season for all those years. And you

know, and I would spend half the time at the photo session saying, *Can you just give me at least just this tiniest bit of smile?* And you know, and then we'd make jokes about it and, and everybody would try to get him to smile.

He just hated it. He just hated the way he looked smiling and you could never get him to do it. So this picture, and literally I see that every day.

Buzzy Cohen: Other small and grand touches — ones Alex himself would appreciate — were done in his honor. *Jeopardy!* shared tributes to the host.

ARCHIVAL:

Tribute Song: Once before I go, I want you to know...that I would do it all again.

Buzzy Cohen: And guest hosts thanked him.

ARCHIVAL:

Guest Host: Thank you Johnny Gilbert. Welcome to Jeopardy!, everyone. It is such a thrill to be here guest hosting a show I've watched and loved for years. And of course, a real honor to help out as all of us recover from the loss of the truly irreplaceable Alex Trebek.

Buzzy Cohen: Alex received a posthumous Emmy, accepted by Matt and Emily.

ARCHIVAL:

Matt Trebek: We are so honored to accept his award on behalf of our dad. For as long as we can remember, he was always so proud to be a part of Jeopardy!

Buzzy Cohen: And in September 2021, the *Jeopardy!* stage, known as Sony's Stage 10, was renamed the "Alex Trebek Stage."

His legacy would be forever entwined with *Jeopardy!*'s. But Alex would be the first to say — the show had to go on without him. How, and with who — was another challenge.

Lisa Broffman: It was very difficult to even discuss, *what are we gonna do?*

Buzzy Cohen: This is Lisa again. They'd been having these conversations — haltingly and uncomfortably — since Alex's diagnosis.

Lisa Broffman: You didn't even wanna mention that maybe someday he wouldn't be there. But as producers, we had to consider, we had to think about what we might do. Who might be able to step in for him.

Buzzy Cohen: More on that, after the break.

ACT 3

Buzzy Cohen: *Jeopardy!* finished out season 37 through the summer of 2021 with a variety of guest hosts, myself included. For a show and a team that prided itself on consistency and continuity, this was a challenge.

Alex was gone, longtime executive producer Harry Friedman had resigned the year before as well — and it was hard to see exactly what was next for the quiz show.

But the staff kept going. It didn't feel like they had much of a choice. This is Lisa Broffman.

Lisa Broffman: Everybody just wiped their tears away and hit the ground running in spite of their heartache and in spite of what was going on in the real world around us. It almost felt like we were in the eye of a wicked hurricane.

MUSIC: String beat begins

Buzzy Cohen: I don't have to tell you that this was an incredibly tumultuous time for the *Jeopardy!* staff, but out of all of this came a new executive producer.

Michael Davies and the discussion about who would host continued to move forward and *Jeopardy!*? Well, after some stumbles, it seemed to find its feet again, and this is what the show is like today.

Ken Jennings: This was, um, this was Alex's dressing room. Mayim and I share it now. I came in and found that she had found a childhood photo of herself and left it — this old Polaroid — and left it here. So I brought in one as well.

Buzzy Cohen: That's Ken Jennings, one of the hosts of *Jeopardy!* — showing one of my producers around the set.

Ken Jennings: There's mirrors on one wall and a TV where Alex used to watch TCM quite a bit. He was very good at forties and fifties movies.

He would be like, *oh, well that's, uh, that's Gene Tierney.* You know, he was, he was very good at that. I don't usually have TCM on.

Buzzy Cohen: You might recognize some of these names and voices.

Ken Jennings: Renee, do you wanna do hair now? I don't know what...

Renee Feruggia: What would you like to do?

Ken Jennings: Whoo. Let's do my hair.

Renee Feruggia: I will tell you Ken has a good head of hair. Thank God. Makes my life much easier.

Ken Jennings: *But...* sounds like there's a but coming.

[Hairspray sounds.]

Renee Feruggia: No, it's great.

Mayim Bialik: Basically between every episode I have 10 minutes.

That's the other host of *Jeopardy!* — Mayim Bialik.

Mayim Bialik: I mean, basically as quick as I can to come in, change clothes, get my microphone re-put on, put my, you know, ear thing back in...we usually change a hair accessory.

We try not to do anything too long or elaborate. Um, and then I usually get to, you know, hit the restroom, drink some water, and then head right back out and review my game.

Buzzy Cohen: The set feels *alive*. This well-oiled machine is running as well as ever. The hosts are forging their own paths while also remembering, and honoring Alex.

ARCHIVAL:

Sarah Foss: *This is Jeopardy! show 8,886, VTR 43, 2023, air 65, 2023.*

Jimmy Gilbert: *All right, 10 seconds everybody.*

Buzzy Cohen: There's a feeling when you step on that stage — Ken feels it, Mayim feels it. I got the chance to feel it too. And the opportunity to be a host is not lost on Ken or Mayim.

Both of them have felt the pressure of following in Alex's footsteps.

Ken Jennings: I watched some tape of Alex last night and it just makes you wanna walk into the sea. He's so good. Um, you kind of marvel at it, but it's really good. It's good practice.

Kind of reminds you like this is what hosting *Jeopardy!* should be. You know, this is the gold standard. You can't imitate. But it's good to know what the gold standard is.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken remembers how difficult it was to step in as the very first guest host.

Ken Jennings: I remember just feeling I had just been dumped in the — the deep end of the pool. You know, we had done a day of rehearsal, but it was really just like, okay, *Ken's here. Hey Ken, go stand behind the lectern.* And just actually moving to that side of the stage was very weird for me because I'd spent 17 years of my life on the other side of the stage with a very bright line.

Like, you don't go into the host space, you can't walk over by the board. So I kind of felt like I was, you know, walking through a minefield, just walking to the lectern and then suddenly it's like, *Yeah, we're gonna do five shows today. You know, best of luck.* And there was a lot of just learning on the go and it was terrifying.

Buzzy Cohen: Here's Ken, filling in shortly after Alex's passing.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: You know, sharing this stage with Alex Trebek was one of the greatest honors of my life. Not many things in life are perfect, but Alex did this job pretty much perfectly for more than 36 years, and it was even better up close.

Ken Jennings: Honestly, the show kind of did the impossible and survived losing Alex.

Mayim Bialik: It's a huge emotional responsibility.

And Alex, um, you know, was so beloved and is so beloved and was such a magnanimous, generous person. Um, and so, you know, there's kind of that knowledge that, you know, the stage really is kind of, like, alive with his memory.

Ken Jennings: I'll be out behind the host lectern and I'll look over at the game board and I'll think, *That's a Jeopardy! game board. I have to, I have to walk over and like, you know, put my hand on it sometime. Like, I, I can't believe I'm actually here.*

Buzzy Cohen: *Jeopardy!* has done what Alex would want. It kept going.

It was Alex who said the show was bigger than its host, but for all of us who loved him, who welcomed him into our homes each night to teach us something new, it was hard to see that.

But perhaps the greatest testament to who Alex was as a person and a host, is that this show, this institution that he built, must continue and does continue.

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: Next time, on This Is Jeopardy: The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show...

Lori Goodman: My bookkeeper was next door and I walked across the hall and went, I think I'm going to be on Jeopardy! And then I thought, Oh my goodness, how am I going to do this in three weeks? I'm already over my head.

Buzzy Cohen: 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 producers are Serena Chow and Sunny Balkin.

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 music was composed by Hannis Brown. Sam Bair engineered this episode.

Special thanks to Charlie Yedor and Steve Ackerman.

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

If you loved the show, follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.

CITATION

“So Long, Everybody!” *This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America’s Favorite Quiz Show.*, Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV. https://www.jeopardy.com/listen/this_is_jeopardy Produced by Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV.

