

Life



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR

Alan Shiner gave up dentistry because of car crash injuries. Now he writes music and started a production company.

Musician who knows the drill

Brief Encounter

SAN GREWAL

Dr. Alan Shiner doesn't regret turning show business down in favour of becoming a dentist, even though it could have been him instead of Paul Shaffer playing for millions every weeknight on TV.

"I was offered the job of piano player for the pilot of *Saturday Night Live*. I recommended Paul and he took the job instead of me," he says nonchalantly, with a roll of the eyes and a shrug of the shoulders.

Sitting in the living room of his North York home, next to his grand piano, Shiner says if he knew then what he knows now, he probably wouldn't have gone to dentistry school in the early '70s, just as his music career was starting to take off.

"I talked to Paul a few years ago, we still keep in touch. I sort of wish I had what he has, but I was scared to take the chance. There wasn't a lifelong dream to become a dentist, it was a practical thing. I was influenced to become a professional — Jewish conditioning, 'Don't become an artist, don't become a musician.'"

So he went to dentistry school at the University of Toronto and played mu-

sic on the side. He cut his morning classes because he played gigs around the city most nights till 1 or 2 in the morning, squeezing in some anatomy while on stage by studying a skull, which he kept on top of his organ.

"I played the Zanzibar, the Embassy, the Mynah Bird, a lot of university gigs. It was almost the same circuit that Rush did, but I didn't go on the road much because of school.

"Dentistry was a compromise. Unlike medicine, I knew I would be able to control the amount of time I had to spend and would be able to pursue my music as well."

While still in dentistry school, Shiner became music director of a CBC variety show called *Mark's Grab Bag*, which featured performers such as Dan Aykroyd, Gilda Radner, Martin Short and magician Doug Henning.

"I was made all kinds of offers to compose music for some of the guests, for various things they were working on. If I had exams while they were taping the show, I would either run back and forth between school and the studio or Paul would fill in for me. He was my substitute."

After graduating, Shiner spent a year playing and composing music, then started practising dentistry in 1976.

Though he never allowed the work to

become too demanding, refusing to practise what he calls "assembly-line" or "roller skate" dentistry, he wasn't able to devote much time to his music. Still, he managed to write some of the more memorable commercial jingles in Canada, including the "Nine six seven, eleven eleven" song for Pizza Pizza.

"I was lucky I had the music to fall back on. After a couple of car accidents I had to stop practising dentistry in the early '90s. I put my music on hold for a long time, but I've got back into it recently — a lot more pop writing."

Including a song that was recorded, but never released, by Mariah Carey in 1997. He also started Nova Sounds, a music production company that works with corporate clients and artists such as Harry Belafonte and the Pointer Sisters.

"Almost all of the dentists I know say 'Allan, I wish I had something to fall back on like you. I hate what I'm doing.' I have nothing against the profession, I'm still called Doctor Alan Shiner, but I guess it made me realize what I knew I was always most passionate about.

"In hindsight, music was the riskier decision. But now I'm on the less-travelled road."

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