

LEWIS, from page 4

because you're on the road alone. I love rock 'n' roll and I love jazz. I love classical music too but rock 'n' roll and jazz really keep me company.

As much as I have a tremendous amount of negativity about humanity and lots of self deprecation, I am truly grateful. That's in the mix somewhere. I don't let it come out too much on stage because I'll disappoint the audience.

S.Z.: Tell me about your friendship with Larry David. Although you are friends now, he was a sort of childhood nemesis. Tell me about the evolution of your friendship with him.

R.L.: Oh God. What an obnoxious human being — the genius he is.

I was a preemie. I was born in Brooklyn but I had to stay around for a week because I was only about an inch tall. Larry was born three days after me, in the same ward. I'm not kidding. We just discovered this at dinner about a month ago or so. We were screaming, laughing. He said, "I knew there was someone trying to strangle me with his umbilical cord!" I immediately had a tremendous dislike for him. I'll say that. But smart and annoying.

I went to this very famous sports camp, as did he, when we were 12. And we were really archrivals. We were good athletes, we hated one another, we annoyed one another and we didn't want to see each other again.

Twelve years later, I was making a name for myself in the comedy scene in New York, and David came on a year or two later, and he was a fan of mine. We hung out at some of the clubs. Finally he went on and he was unbelievably great. At that point we were inseparable best friends. We were about 24. He was never a big druggie or a drinker, and I was a budding addict.

I recall one night just staring at him and it freaked me out. He reminded me a bit of the end of Rosemary's Baby: half a comic, half a sheep. He asked me what was wrong and I said, "There's something about your eyes that scares me." We retraced our childhood and long story short, we realized we went to the same camp and I'm like, "Wait a minute? You're that Larry David?" And he said, "You're that Richard Lewis?" And we almost came to blows at the bar. It was unbelievable. It was a million-to-one shot, primarily because we were best friends at the time. I love him.

S.Z.: With the recent death of Philip Seymour Hoffman the discussion of mental health and addiction is back on the front page.

R.L.: I used to tease Philip because he was just so lovable. He had, I was told, almost 23 years sober. Once you are an addict, you are an addict for life. Of course Philip was one of the greatest actors of all time but he was a person first and sadly an addict as well. I'm sure if he could, Philip would want his death to be a reminder to all addicts who slip and sadly court death, that rather than shoot up, pick up the phone and ask for help before experimenting yet again with a premature death.

Philip's passing, overdosing rather — it bugged me, as much of a genius as he was ... (Lewis trails off to a moment of silence). But what we should really focus more on is that there are a lot of people in his position and if he had picked up that phone instead of the needle, he'd still be with us.

The disease is unrelenting, and it's just waiting for someone not to pick up the phone. I'm really heartbroken by it.

I read a quote, I'm paraphrasing, he (Hoffman) was talking to another addict and

he said something like, "Hey, you know if I die, it will probably save another 10 people." I guess what Phillip meant was probably that he was famous and that if he dies, maybe it will stop a handful of people from using heroin.

That's hardly the real issue. It's an epidemic — drug addiction and alcoholism. The bigger issue is not for famous people to overdose, but for anybody to know that you don't have to overdose.

Change the laws. This absurd war on drugs and putting people in jail for life rather than putting them in treatment. Spending taxpayer's money for keeping them in jail when they should be talking to counselors is insanity.

Clearly, people who are homeless and on the street, are far more prone to want to forget their misery and get high. That's how it all happens.

There is no way that I know what was going through his head. I do know that the reasons why I had a 20-year run: I was filling up all sorts of holes in my feelings. Or I was afraid to feel. There are a million reasons why you don't want to see life on life's terms. I don't know what he was going through in his life. But it's not a question of, Hey! What a great year ... four movies ... one of the most well-respected actors ever. How could he do this? Well he could do this because he loved how it felt. So did I.

But the thing was, when I was high I screwed up a number of great things. I wasn't a great friend. I quit stand-up for three years. I lost a ton of money. I burned bridges. If they trust me to be on a TV commercial two out of the last three years in front of 120 million people for a Super Bowl ad, I guess I'm not a drug addict in their eyes. (Lewis had a cameo in Hyundai commercial during Superbowl XLVIII.)

S.Z.: Speaking of which, what did you think of Dylan's Chrysler commercial?

R.L.: I didn't see the commercial. Bob Dylan is certainly a genius and one of the most enigmatic artists, and he should be. He's always said, you can lay anything you want on me, but I'm not a political guy. I just write what I want to write. It's like going to an art museum and someone going, Woah! and someone going, Huh? That's how I perceive Bob. Everyone is boxing him in. Sell out? Come on. I'm not Bob Dylan, but did I sell out because I made a commercial? No. I had fun doing it. I made some bread. I worked my ass off for 45 years, it was a good payday. If the commercial was stupid and I didn't like what it was, I wouldn't have done it. But my wife says, "When you dress up like a hamburger, I don't care how much they pay you: When you're Mr. Burger, our marriage is over."

I try not to sell out on my own feelings about my artistic integrity and I don't think Dylan... I couldn't care less. It's none of my business, basically. I have all of his music.

He even asked me to open for him once, for six days in a row. I didn't. It seemed to be a little crazy to do that. Plus I was bottoming out. That was about a year and a half before I bottomed out on crystal meth and I knew going on six nights in a row — it could have been the end.

The bottom line is: I don't care. I don't speak for Bob Dylan and when people start judging him, put on his music and if you don't like what he did, so be it. But just don't forget to vote.

S.Z.: That's what you have to say about Bob Zimmerman (Dylan). What about George Zimmerman?

R.L.: The guy was acquitted. Even if he

was a great guy, what I saw on the news led me to believe it never should have happened. Even if he was a racist, if I knew he was a racist and he hated blacks, he still should have sat in his car. The kid was walking down the street with a candy bar. It wasn't as if the kid was attacking anybody. It never should have happened. The kid should be alive and the cops should have come.

I'm a Jew. There's going to be people who hate Jews just like they hate African Americans or Mexican Americans. I love this country. However, there is no getting around the fact that there are people who don't realize that hatred is just insanity.

We're making strides with gay rights and immigration reform that is going to happen sooner or later because the population is changing.

I'm thrilled that the white population is becoming a minority because it's going to be easier for all people. I'm color blind. So all people will be able to have equal rights. I'm gonna be pretty old watching that from the retired actors' home, but I'll be happy.

S.Z.: You've talked about Dick Shawn's death (dropped dead on stage in 1987 from a heart attack, he was 31 years old) and more recently your good friend Lou Reed passed away. What is your relationship with death these days?

R.L.: Last year, I had a show for a charity in Milwaukee and I didn't want to cancel. It was sold out. But what they didn't know, was I hadn't slept in three days. I was on a run (work, not drugs) that was so crazy that had I not had this sort of hallucination in my hotel room from fatigue and insomnia, I might have kept going because I had gigs for the next seven months. And I might have dropped dead, so I called up my representatives and I said, "For all intents and purposes, I'm retired until I come back." And I took six months off. It was the greatest thing I've ever done. I hadn't taken a break like that, certainly, since I was 20, it saved my career. It saved my life. So when I think about death, obviously, it's down the road, but it doesn't have to be premature. I saved myself from probably some really bad physical ailment, and it gave me time to focus on my addictions and why I was an addict, and spend more time doing service in the community, in the area of recovery. It was just a good time. I was able to connect more with my wife.

We also got a (rescue) dog. I was always afraid of dogs, but now I know what puppy love is. The dog was ready to be euthanized. She's a Maltese mix: Bella Luna Lewis. My wife's the master. Bella follows my wife around. She is the cutest ... there are actually pictures on my Twitter account of her.

S.Z.: You'll be at Helium next weekend.

R.L.: I'm really looking forward to coming to Portland — every show is different. One show could suck, the other could be brilliant. I don't have an act. I'm the act. So it depends on what kind of mood I'm in. Hopefully I'll be in a crummy mood and you'll have a blast.

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Richard Lewis will perform at the Helium Comedy Club, two shows on each night, Friday, Feb. 21 and Saturday, Feb. 22



Dignity



Poverty