I have known Gian-Carlo Rota for about half a century. I saw him very frequently during the periods that we overlapped in the Boston area (i.e. 1958-68 and 1996-97) and also on many other occasions. I remember Gianco as one of the most stimulating, insightful and witty persons. Here I will recall some of the indelible impressions he left on me.

Both Gian-Carlo and I went to the American School in Quito, Ecuador. We were in the same class, however we did not know each other then, I left for the US in 1945 and he came to Quito in 1946. Nevertheless I knew of him through my friends and relatives, he was an outstanding student and very popular. One of our common friends and classmates from those days was Alberto Muggia. He recently wrote me about Gianco:

“I think of him often. He is the person that really made me what I am. He taught me that what we learned at school was a negligible part of our educational experience. He taught me to separate my free time by the clock, devoting an hour to French, an hour to Latin, an hour to history etc. After school, a few of us went to his house, at least four times a week, and he showed us some of his books, and told us what we learn from them. He taught us to play many games such as chess and tarocchi. He taught me to read Flaubert and Balzac, stimulated me to learn French on my own, and helped me to translate Molière’s L’Avare from French to Spanish at the age of 13. It was more fun to go to his house, to study after school rather than doing anything else. He even tried to get me interested in Mathematics and Physics, but I was not a good pupil. I preferred the poets and writers of the 19th century, though I remember learning all about Galileo”. Thus Gian-Carlo (or Gianco as he was frequently called) was a teacher and a scholar already in high school.

As an undergraduate Gianco went to Princeton in 1950 at the same time that I went to MIT. Gianco did his graduate work in Yale and I in Princeton. We finally met in Cambridge in 1958. At the time Gianco was working on his joint book with Birkhoff (see [1]). He worked in a closet which was just about large enough to fit a small desk and chair. The desk was covered with papers and there was a pile of books on the floor. Gianco said that working in such a crammed position forced him...
to concentrate and kept him away from distractions. Many years later I visited Gianco in Los Alamos. We took a small trip through the neighboring hills. Gianco was greatly inspired by the spectacular scenery. The panorama, which changed with each turn, stretched out for miles in all directions. The contrast between these two physical surroundings parallels Gianco’s strengths. On the one hand his ability to zero in on the critical technical details that underlie any discipline and on the other his ability to see the “big picture” and to deal with the ideas that drive any intellectual endeavor.

For many years Gianco was editor of the Advances in Mathematics. He had a very clear view of how a journal should be run and followed it. In that way he reminded me of Lefschetz when he was editor of the Annals of Mathematics. As with Lefschetz, his top priority was excellence. Thus many authors who submitted important articles were left waiting because outstanding took precedence over important and Gianco had very strong convictions about what was truly outstanding. A case in point is the a truly remarkable paper written by Charles Fefferman (see [2]). When I heard Fefferman’s lectures on these results I was very impressed, I told Gianco about them, he asked for a preprint and after receiving it he called me. He was very excited, he declared that this paper was a “tour-de-force” and that, despite its length, he would like to publish it in the Advances as soon as possible. He did publish it promptly, even though it delayed the publication of a long line of previously accepted shorter papers.

A groundbreaking feature of the Advances were the short reviews written by Gianco. These were very succinct snap judgements which were almost always on target. Here are two examples:

“J. Passmore, *Recent Philosophers*, Open Court London 1985. When pygmies cast such long shadows, it must be very late in the day”.

This review illustrates two recurring themes that were part of Gianco’s “Weltanschaung”. One is the disproportionate influence that mediocre thinkers have. When decrying the “fashions” in mathematics his usual example of a “pygmy” is a “Professor Neanderthal”. This refers to a fussy pedant who refuses to see the woods for the trees. The other theme (the lateness of the day) is Gianco’s repeated insistence that we (especially mathematicians), in order to prevail over the “pygmies”, must change our ways before it is too late. He was especially concerned with the neglect of good exposition. He was also preoccupied by the fact that mathematicians are unable, or unwilling, to unite to advance the influence of their profession. I was amazed how masterfully he could fight for this cause when he led the Mathematics Section of the United States National Academy of Science. The main problem for mathematicians in the Academy is their underrepresentation as compared with the physicist and chemists. Gianco mastered the Byzantine politics involved with great skill and was successful in enhancing our section.

The following review illustrates Gianco’s unbounded enthusiasm when he encounters something that he really likes.