

Excerpted from JessAnderson.org

Exceptional Friends, by Jess Anderson

As I get older, I value my long-term friendships more and more. Nostalgia increasingly becomes our companion as we age, it seems. I always wondered about that and didn't believe it would happen to me, but now it seems perfectly fit and proper that it should. Looking back on my life, I find that much richness rests on the unique experiences great friendships have provided.

I've been blessed with many good friends. But these few are the cream of my particular crop, people I would go (or would have gone) to the ends of the earth for, had circumstances required.

With two of these friends I developed great closeness before ever meeting them in person, thanks to electronic mail and participating in the main LGB-related internet discussion group. Some people find it hard to feel intimately connected to others in cyberspace, but we certainly didn't. The rest are present or former denizens of Madison.

Chet Biscardi, by Jess Anderson

Chester Biscardi did not set out to be a composer. It fell to his Wisconsin composition teacher, Les Thimmig, to convince him that pursuing a degree in Italian made little sense; he simply was a composer, no two ways about that. It was at just this crucial juncture in his career that we met, introduced at a fairly hectic party by our mutual friend Ron McCrea in 1971. A lot of history has filled these 26 years.

In the summer of 1997, it was my great privilege to introduce Chet at an awards ceremony held by the Lesbian and Gay Interest Group of the Wisconsin Alumni Association, which each year recognizes two Wisconsin graduates for outstanding achievement. Chet was the first person in the arts to be so honored. It was a powerfully emotional occasion for us both, and indeed for most of the audience as well. The mere fact that there even was such an event added to the intensity of the experience. Chet gave a characteristically moving acceptance speech.

Born and raised in an intensely emotional and somewhat chaotic Italian family in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Chet went from Madison to Yale, where he continued his composition studies, eventually completing a Doctorate of Musical Arts. Along the way he collected the coveted Prix de Rome, a year-long retreat (1976-77) supported in fairly luxurious style at the American Academy in Rome. The Rome Prize is steeped in long tradition; Ravel was a now-famous recipient. The house where Chet lived that year, the Casa Rustica, had previously been occupied by Franz Liszt during one of his Italian sojourns.

Since Yale he has been on the faculty of Sarah Lawrence College in New York. I love visiting him, because he is endlessly fascinated by anything and everything that sounds, and his tiny apartment is crammed with bells, gongs, music boxes, rain sticks, little drums, chimes, and of course a piano. I love to listen to music with him, too, because he one of a very small number of people I know who can communicate a whole universe with a mere glance while music is playing. Even other musicians do not always have this facility, this just knowing.

In June 2005, I got a phone call from Chet, telling me that I'd been selected for one of this year's two Distinguished Alumni Awards by the Wisconsin Alumni Association's GLBT Alumni Council. Chet himself had received this award in 1997 and I had introduced him. This year it was the other way around. When he got the award, I didn't keep a copy of my introductory remarks, though I did record his. This year, I have both his introduction and my own speech.

[Introduction of Jess Anderson](#), by Chester Biscardi

My first sighting of Jess Anderson was in 1971. It was late afternoon, and a group of us were gathered together at a birthday party for a man I happened to be dating at the time. In the middle of the room was Jess, sitting at a grand piano, passionately playing a Beethoven sonata. The only thing that could have possibly distracted me from my focus on Jess -- and, believe me, I was mesmerized -- was the sight of my boyfriend descending the staircase in full drag. But that's another story.

Jess has been one of the most significant people in my life, and I would like to share with you why he is such an extraordinary man. Jess has been a prominent member of the Madison community since he first arrived. While a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he had been hired as a research applications programmer by a high-energy physics consortium named MURA. He remained with MURA when the project relocated to Madison in 1956.

In 1965, MURA moved again, to create the National Accelerator Laboratory (Fermilab) in northern Illinois. The University of Wisconsin purchased MURA's Madison facilities, creating the Physical Sciences Laboratory (PSL), which retained Jess as a software programmer. In 1969 he joined the campus academic computing effort (now known as the Division of Information Technology) as a technical writer and network engineer, until his retirement in 1999.

Self-supporting since he was 16, Jess worked full-time while in college, at UIUC from 1953-1956 and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1957-1968, majoring in music, mathematics, philosophy, art history and Russian. He received a BA in Russian in 1963, and did graduate work in Slavic Literatures and French from 1963-1968, serving as a Teaching Assistant in Russian language and literature.

In the early 1970s, Jess was a pioneering member and supporter of the newly emerging gay organizations in Madison, including the Gay Liberation Front, which was devoted to political action, as well as the Gay Center, a meeting place on Johnson and N. Hamilton streets.

He continues to be an active member of the LGBT community. His personal web site (www.jessanderson.org) includes discussions about gay life in Madison. He also oversees the Soc.Motss Document Collection (www.soc-motss.org), a lesbian and gay internet discussion group that has been in existence since 1983.

Jess is at once a musician, a poet, a literary scholar, a reviewer of musical events, a computer genius, and those of you who know him know that, among many other things, his hobbies -- not necessarily in this order -- include model airplanes and flight simulators, model trains, racing bikes, motorcycles, photography, submarines, camping (outside, that is), working out, and, of course, computers, and, of course, loving men -- although I'm not quite sure that that fits under the category of "hobbies".

Although I first heard him playing Beethoven on the piano, his real love is the harpsichord, and in 1973 Rutkowski and Robinette in New York City built for him one of the most undeniably beautiful harpsichords ever made. He best describes it on his website as "a late-French double, with a sumptuous Louis XVI case of inlaid mahoganies, satinwood, and ebony, replete with considerable gilding. The egg-tempera paintings on the soundboard are absolutely spectacular. Splendid would be a massive understatement. [Sound like Jess?!] Most important of all, it is a fine-sounding musical instrument." He would readily play you some Bach or Couperin if you were to stop by his recently-remodeled, warm and inviting home on Stevens Street where he has lived for the past 41 years. I have had the privilege of commanding private performances when I'm in town, but I have also heard Jess play in public. I particularly remember Jess's debut recital at the Elvehjem Museum of Art (now the Chazen) in April of 1974, which featured soprano Bettina Bjorksten. The recital, which launched the series that was to become "Sunday Afternoon Live at the Elvehjem" on public radio, was attended by 1600 people. By the way, Jess studied with Bjorksten, with Rudolph Kolisch, the violinist and founder of the famed Kolisch Quartet and then leader of the Pro Arte Quartet, and with the amazing pianist-composer, Gunnar Johansen, all former and noted members of the UW music faculty. There was also the famous road trip in July of 1974 which involved transporting the precious harpsichord to the Kranert Art Center in Indianapolis where Jess performed in Bach's D minor Triple Concerto at a festival directed by Igor Kipnis.

Over the past forty-five years Jess -- who is always reinventing himself -- has also been involved in the cultural life of the University and the larger Madison community as a radio announcer, a critic and a patron. He was an announcer for the local listener-sponsored WORT-FM from 1977-1988, and I would imagine that those

of you who were living in Madison during that time woke up to Jess's "Classical Omelette" show which aired 9:00 AM-to-noon every Sunday.

He was also a music critic/writer -- first for Press Connection and then for Isthmus from 1972 to 2001 (see his Madison Music Reviews website). He wrote reviews about every musical organization in town, groups that he still supports with enthusiasm, from the Madison Symphony Orchestra and Madison Opera, to the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society, the Pro Arte Quartet, the Wisconsin Union Theater Concert Series and School of Music events. He even traveled to New York in 1999 to cover the premiere of John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* at The Metropolitan Opera. I was fortunate when my own opera, *Tight-Rope*, was premiered in Madison in 1985, and Jess was at hand to not only design the libretto written by Henry Butler, but also to write pre-production articles and post-production reviews of the work -- favorable, I must say. It's nice to know the critic!

Jess is one of my best and closest friends, and he continues to be a mentor and source of inspiration and support, musically and humanistically. I am delighted that the Wisconsin Alumni Association has identified Jess Anderson at this particular moment with the distinction of receiving one of this year's GLBT Distinguished Alumni Awards, and it gives me great pleasure to present Jess to you.

-- Chester Biscardi, July 17, 2005

[UW Award Address](#), by Jess Anderson

[Address given to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Alumni Council of the Wisconsin Alumni Association at the Pyle Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison on July 17, 2005.]

To begin with gratitude, two months ago today I turned 70, and I'm glad to be alive and well, and glad to be living in Madison. About three weeks ago I learned that I'd been selected for this honor, and for that and for the existence of the GLBT Alumni Council I am very grateful -- and a little overwhelmed. And just now I've had the great pleasure of being introduced by a truly extraordinary person, Chet Biscardi, my friend since the summer of 1971, nearly half my life. How could one not be thankful for that?

I'm grateful, too, for the friendship of others who are here this morning, for dear friends who can't be here, and for this opportunity to meet new friends.

Faced with giving a speech, I considered a rip-roaring rant about present political conditions, which are arguably more threatening than at any earlier point in my lifetime. But I've cut the ranting down to just two words: Those Bastards!

Barring threat of emotional or physical harm, as individuals our best answer to all political challenges is to come out, to be known as widely as possible as the people we actually are: reasonable and caring contributors to a diverse society.

As I see it, the virtues of being out are chiefly (a) to affirm our own existence, and (b) for others, to make that existence visible – rather than "Don't ask, don't tell," what we need is: "Yo! listen up!"

My own first public coming-out took place when a roommate wanted to present a series of gay and lesbian films on campus. Recognized student groups were required to have a faculty or staff sponsor. I had an academic staff position, so I signed. The film series was a big success, by the way.

Soon after Stonewall, a small group of us -- I think Ron McCrea is the only other founder still in town -- formed the Madison Alliance for Homosexual Equality, and started meeting weekly in a local church. This group was at first primarily social, but we soon became more active politically and restyled ourselves as the Gay Liberation Front. We handed out leaflets, staged public demos, presented teach-ins in high school and university classes and formed coalitions with other progressive campus groups.

Over the Thanksgiving break in 1971, GLF hosted a three-day national convocation of lesbian and gay activists, held in the Memorial Union. Attended by more than 100 delegates from all over the country, the conference was a huge success, complete with discussion sessions, a variety of workshops and a rambunctious plenary session. It was an exciting time, and it had positive results.

During the 1970s, Madison was probably as safe and easy a place to be out as any large urban center. No one gave a second thought to walking along State Street holding hands with a same-sex friend or partner. It was totally normal to kiss our friends hello or goodbye in broad daylight, on the street, in the Union, or wherever.

Today such openness is rare, but we still enjoy legal protections at three levels of government: city, county and state. And it's a huge plus that in the Congress of the United States we have one of our own, the incomparable Tammy Baldwin.

America has a long, tragic history of exploiting minority status to target people for social and legal discrimination. The social aspect we perhaps can't change; people must remain free to think whatever they like and be allowed to say so, crazy or hateful as may be. The answer to such speech, of course, is more speech.

But there can be no possible justification for democratic governments at any level to enact laws that restrict the rights of a minority class of citizens. To forestall that marginalization, we must by every available means be visibly and vocally committed to creating positive changes in majority thinking.

I see this as a powerful inducement to declare ourselves publicly, especially on behalf of countless others who are not so well situated: middle-school and high-school kids in rural Georgia and Alabama; college students in Bozeman, MT or Vermillion, SD; committed partners everywhere who want to raise families in peace; those who are ill or dying and want to have their loved ones close by for comfort and support; and yes indeed, same-sex couples who want to get married. They need our support.

We too cannot be secure unless and until every transgendered person, every bisexual, every lesbian and every gay man can count on full equality, guaranteed under the law, finally making real that historically self-evident truth, "created equal," proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence 229 years ago.

To reach that goal, we must stand up, come out all the way, and, not forgetting why we're here today, we must be proud.

Thank you.
Jess Anderson