



Bass, Lance (b. 1979)

by Linda Rapp

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Lance Bass at a book signing in New York City in 2007.

Singer Lance Bass gained fame as a member of the popular boy band *NSync. In more recent years he has also become an actor and producer. Since coming out in 2006, he has spoken on behalf of glbtq rights.

A native of Mississippi, born May 4, 1979 in Laurel, Bass spent his earliest years in nearby Ellisville before the family settled in the town of Clinton. Bass called his family "a completely traditional Southern" one. They were active members of the Southern Baptist Church. Leisure activities included pheasant-hunting with his father and grandfather.

Bass's childhood had a touch of the exotic as well: at the age of nine, on a family trip to visit a great-uncle who lives near Cape Canaveral, Florida, he witnessed a space launch and immediately began to dream of becoming an astronaut. He has never lost his fascination with space flight nor his hope that he may someday experience it himself.

In his memoir, *Out of Sync* (2007), Bass described his childhood as "extremely happy." Nevertheless, he also stated that he recognized that he was "different" at around the age of five but that he knew his attraction to other males was considered wrong and even evil by his family, his church, and his community.

The fear of hurting his beloved parents and grandparents prevented him from coming out as a teenager. "I understood in my heart it wasn't wrong to be gay," he wrote. "But I also knew instinctively that I had to play the game in order to live in the world I was born into As for dating guys, it never even entered my thinking that such a thing was possible. At least not in Mississippi."

In Clinton, Bass sang in the Baptist church choir but also began to explore other musical horizons. He successfully auditioned for the Mississippi Showstoppers, a musical group sponsored by the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum that toured to state fairs and political fund-raisers. Bass and six of his fellow Showstoppers eventually formed a spin-off group called Seven Card Stud that performed at venues as far away as Washington, D.C. and New York City.

On his tours with Seven Card Stud, Bass "got [his] first exposure to the phenomenon of screaming girls." While he "loved the energy that was behind it," he did not experience the same sense of titillation as his band-mates, but he kept his feelings of difference to himself.

In his freshman year at Clinton High School, Bass was chosen to be a member of a prestigious show choir called Attaché. The young singers traveled to other states in the American South and Midwest for competitions with other Attaché choirs.

Despite spending time on the road, Bass was actively involved in school activities and was elected vice-president of his junior class.

During his junior year, Bass was invited to join a professional pop group called *NSync after Bob Westbrook, his vocal coach from the Showstoppers, recommended him when Justin Timberlake, another of Westbrook's former students, sought his help in finding a bass to complete the fledgling ensemble.

Bass's audition was successful, and he joined the band, which was centered in Orlando, Florida. His father, a medical technologist, took a job in that city while his mother and sister remained in Mississippi. The family had to sell their home in order to afford apartments in both states.

*NSync first made a name for themselves in Europe. Bass got on well with his band-mates, but two weeks into the tour, the homesick teenager asked his mother to come to his side. Without hesitation she quit her job and joined him.

The tour began in Stockholm, where *NSync recorded their first two singles, "I Want You Back" and "Tearin' Up My Heart." The band kept up a frenetic round of concerts, radio and television shows, and interviews with European teen magazines. They released their first album, **NSync*, in Germany in 1997, and it immediately went to the top of the chart there.

*NSync's songs were beginning to get some play on American airwaves, and the band began touring in the United States. They did a one-hour special for the Disney Channel that featured both performances and interviews. The show was such a hit with the channel's young viewers that Disney ran it frequently for some six months.

*NSync's debut album was released in the United States in 1998 and quickly sold in the millions. The band also put out a "specialty" recording, *Winter Album / Home for Christmas*, in 1998, and sales of it topped a million as well.

Known for their cheerful pop melodies, group harmonies, and energetic dancing, as well as for their good looks, the group quickly found a large following, especially among teen-age girls. Along with Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears, *NSync came to dominate the teen pop explosion of the late 1990s.

Despite the success of the band, the performers were not seeing any money. At Thanksgiving 1998 *NSync's manager, Louis Pearlman, handed the boys checks for their work to date—checks for twenty-five thousand dollars each. Bass was so disgusted by the inadequacy of the compensation that he tore up the check and marched out of the room.

*NSync filed suit against Pearlman and the RCA record company over improprieties in their contract. Pearlman and RCA countersued for one hundred fifty million dollars. The matter was settled out of court in December 1999. The agreement severed the managerial relationship between Pearlman and the musicians but granted him a portion of the group's future earnings—reportedly one-sixth, as if he had been a member of the band.

Bass—along with his band-mates and their families—had trusted Pearlman and never envisaged a court fight. They were, however, content with the outcome. "We're the happiest we've ever been," Bass told *Daily News* reporter Jim Farber in 2000. "We're finally in charge of our lives—and until this happened, we didn't even know we weren't in charge of our lives."

Freed from their contract with Pearlman, *NSync signed with Jive Records and quickly put out a new album, *No Strings Attached*. The title was inspired by the band members' feeling that they were no longer puppets controlled by Pearlman.

Released in March 2000, *No Strings Attached* was an immediate sensation, with two and a half million

copies sold within a week, making it one of the fastest selling albums of all time. The album achieved the lofty status of a "Diamond" record when sales reached ten million copies. The eventual total far exceeded even that: sales in the United States alone topped eleven million copies.

*NSync's next album, *Celebrity*, which appeared in 2001, was enthusiastically received as well and also sold copies in the millions.

While *Celebrity* was in production, Bass, who had explored acting opportunities with a guest appearance on the WB television series *7th Heaven* in 2000, and fellow band-member and close friend Joey Fatone commuted to Canada to make a film called *On the Line* (2001, directed by Kevin Gibbons). Unfortunately, the low-budget production did not enjoy commercial success.

*NSync performed at the 2002 Winter Olympics, but they then decided to go on a six-month hiatus from performing and put plans for future albums on hold, mainly because lead singer Timberlake was working on a solo album.

While awaiting developments on that front, Bass signed to do a reality show that would allow him to realize his dream of becoming an astronaut. The Russian space program had already permitted two civilians to fly on their mission after going through training and paying a twenty-million dollar fee. The plan for the show was to follow Bass through the process.

A physical exam revealed that Bass had an irregular heartbeat. Although this put him at virtually no risk in his daily life, it would disqualify him from the space program. He chose to have elective surgery to correct the condition and was then able to resume training in Russia.

Preparing for the flight was arduous, and on top of that, Bass's daily routine included four hours of Russian language lessons. He remained dedicated to his goal, however, and in July 2002 was accepted to fly on a Soyuz mission scheduled for October.

Funding had plagued the television project from the outset. The original production deal fell through, and Bass's managers had to scramble to arrange new sponsorship. They secured support from the Discovery Channel, MTV, and several corporations. In the end, however, MTV pulled out when it proved impossible to insure the return of their investment if the Russians cancelled the flight.

Time constraints had also loomed large for Bass since *NSync was planning to begin work on a new album in early 2003. The production of Timberlake's solo album was taking longer than expected, though, and so the other band members agreed to a further delay before resuming collaborative work.

*NSync reunited in the summer of 2004 to sing the national anthem and participate in a celebrity basketball game to benefit a children's charity. Immediately afterward, Timberlake informed the others that he was quitting the band. The remaining four members briefly considered continuing as a quartet, but in the end they decided to go their separate ways. *NSync did, however, release one more album, *Greatest Hits*, in 2005.

While performing with *NSync, Bass had remained closeted out of fear that revealing his homosexuality might adversely affect the popularity of the band. He even sometimes dated women to keep up appearances. During the extended hiatus, however, he met and fell in love with a young man identified in his memoir only as Jesse. The two began living together in Orlando.

Although the couple attempted to hide the true nature of their relationship by having a female friend accompany them when they went out, Bass's sexual orientation became something of an open secret in

Orlando. After the break-up of *NSync, Bass and Jesse decided to move to Los Angeles to pursue career opportunities and, they hoped, to escape the inevitable scrutiny that comes with living in a small city. Even with the change of venue, however, the burden of maintaining secrecy put intolerable stress on the relationship, and the two parted ways in September 2003.

After the failure of another romantic relationship, Bass met Reichen Lehmkuhl, who had been the winning contestant in the 2003 season of the reality show *The Amazing Race*. Their friendship soon grew into a romance.

Since both men had relatively high public profiles, the chances of keeping their relationship secret were poor, and indeed rumors soon began to swirl in the tabloid press and on the Internet.

While Bass was out to a number of friends, he had hesitated to speak to his Southern Baptist family about his sexual orientation. The first relative he approached was his sister, who, he felt, "was best equipped to handle it." The revelation came as a total surprise to her, though, and she "broke down and cried." Nevertheless, Bass stated, "I was relieved that I could tell her and sensed in that instant we were closer than we had ever been before in our lives. But I also knew my parents were going to be devastated."

Bass attempted to ease into coming out to his parents by introducing Lehmkuhl as a friend rather than a boyfriend. He did not anticipate that his mother would look Lehmkuhl up on Google and find Internet reports that he was gay. When she did so, Mrs. Bass immediately spoke to her daughter, who acknowledged that Bass had come out to her.

In an ensuing conversation, Bass's parents expressed their love and support for him although the news had been difficult for them to receive. His mother was concerned about his eternal salvation, but he assured her that he still believed in God and continued to go to church. His mother also hoped to keep his grandparents from learning of his sexual orientation—an impossibility because of his celebrity. His maternal grandmother, for one, though, was quite able to take things in stride, telling Bass, "I love you just the same, and you're welcome in my house anytime."

Bass came out publicly shortly thereafter, in an August 2006 interview with *People* magazine, which featured the news as its cover story. He was candid about how difficult it had been for him to come out to his family but stated that he was happy to have received support from them and from friends.

Bass admitted to some missteps as a newly out, very visible gay man. "When most people come out, they deal with it out of the public eye, and they start getting educated about it. Me, I had 24 hours [at the time of the *People* interview] to say what I had to say on a subject that I had no clue about," he explained to *Advocate* reporter Kyle Buchanan.

Bass's initial announcement was well received by the glbtq community, but he eventually drew some criticism for his lack of knowledge about glbtq issues. When Bass, together with Lehmkuhl (from whom he would split in 2007), were given the Human Rights Campaign's Visibility Award in October 2006, some decried the selection as inappropriate because they had not made significant efforts on behalf of glbtq rights. In January 2008 Buchanan wrote that Bass "seem[ed] both adored and scorned by gays in equal measure."

Bass admitted that the criticism stung, but he also realized that he needed to "get way more educated about myself [and] the community." He has since become active in a number of efforts, including participating in the Logo television network's "Visible Vote" project, doing public service announcements for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), and taking part in protests against Proposition 8 in California in 2008.

Bass continued his acting career with roles in Randal Kleiser's *Lovewrecked* (2005), which he also produced, Dennis Dugan's *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry* (2007), and G. Lewis Heslet's *Girl Camp* (2007). He also appeared as himself in Ben Stiller's *Zoolander* (2001) and *Tropic Thunder* (2008) and Wes Craven's *Cursed* (2005). Bass made his Broadway debut in August 2007, when he began a six-month engagement as Corny Collins in *Hairspray*.

Bass founded Lance Bass Productions with an eye to developing television series. None has yet made it to the small screen, but Bass was a contestant on the ABC network's extremely popular *Dancing with the Stars* program in its 2008 season.

Bass and professional dancer Lacey Schwimmer were not among the pairs touted as favorites when the season started, but they survived the early rounds despite some criticism from the judges for their sometimes unorthodox choreography. As Bass grew in proficiency as a member of the dance team, their scores improved, and they defied the odds by making it to the finals, where they finished third. When the competition ended, judge Carrie Ann Inaba told Bass, "You never took the safe road once, and so I applaud you."

A fan favorite, Bass was invited to join the "Dancing with the Stars" nationwide tour that began in January 2009.

Bass has been generous in supporting charitable causes, including children in need, the environment, and animal welfare. In October 2005 he participated in a benefit concert at the University of Mississippi to raise funds to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina.

In September 2013, Bass announced his engagement to fellow Southerner Michael Turchin and revealed details of his proposal in a special edition of his SiriusXM radio show, *Dirty Pop with Lance Bass*.

On the broadcast, Bass explained why he decided to propose in New Orleans' Jackson Square. "New Orleans is my favorite city in the world," Bass said. "I've been coming here my whole life. I was born just across the border here [in Laurel, Mississippi]. . . and Turkey also has roots here." He added, "I got down on one knee and I proposed, right in front of Jackson Square, my favorite place."

In March 2014, Bass and Turchin released a YouTube video urging Southerners to become involved in the Freedom to Marry movement. In the video, Bass and Turchin place their relationship in the context of Southern values of family and tradition. They stress their commitment to each other and to building a family together.

Bass and Turchin emphasize that there is a lot of support for same-sex marriage in the South, but that it is sometimes obscured by a generational divide. They urge the younger generation to lead the way to make it possible for everyone to have the freedom to marry the person they love.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.