



## Bono, Chaz (b. 1969)

by Tina Gianoulis

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As the child of one of the most flamboyant couples to emerge from the 1960s rock scene, Chaz Bono grew up in the public eye, with every family spat and adolescent identity crisis a subject for Hollywood gossip columns and roving paparazzi. All this public scrutiny made the process of coming out, first as a lesbian, then as a transgender man, an even more daunting process than it would have been in a more private family situation.

In spite of the public spotlight and family resistance, Bono not only revealed the changes in his sexual and gender identity, but also became a national spokesperson and glbtq rights activist. Through his own example of public honesty and his work with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Bono has attempted to increase tolerance and acceptance through education.

### Early Life

The man now known as Chaz Salvatore Bono began life as Chastity Sun Bono, the daughter of rock icons Sonny and Cher. Born on March 4, 1969, Bono entered the world as his parents' career was turning from hippy folk-rock to glitzy Las Vegas-style showmanship.

He was conceived while his parents were making the film *Chastity*, which Sonny Bono produced and in which Cher starred. Although the film was a flop, his parents nevertheless named him for the film.

Chastity was only three years old when he was first brought onstage at *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*, dressed in miniature versions of his mother's glamorous costumes and waving goodnight to the audience.

Even then, the tomboyish Chastity felt something wrong in the gender role he was expected to play, wishing that, if he had to dress up, he could wear suits like his father's.

Bono's childhood, like that of many queer youth, resonated with the uncomfortable conflict between parental and societal expectations and growing internal passions and pressures.

In 1987, soon after graduating from the High School for Performing Arts in New York, he came out as a lesbian to his parents. Despite the freewheeling image they cultivated in their rock music days, they were less than supportive.

Following his divorce from Cher in 1975, Sonny Bono became first a Palm Springs businessman, then Mayor, and later a conservative member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He consistently voted against the advancement of gay civil rights. He died in 1998.

Cher continued her music and acting career, but, despite a large gay following, found it difficult to accept



Chaz Bono at the 2010 GLAAD Media Awards. Photograph by Greg Hernandez. Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Generic license.

a lesbian daughter.

In spite of their differences and mutual disappointments, Chaz and his parents maintained loving, if sometimes painful, relationships.

### **Activist and Author**

In the early 1990s, Bono was a member of the rock group Ceremony. He contributed vocals and played the acoustic guitar and percussion instruments. The group issued an album, *Hang Out Your Poetry*, in 1993.

Although he had previously been outed by tabloids and had been the subject of intense speculation for several years, Bono came out publicly as a lesbian in a cover story interview in *The Advocate* in 1995.

By this point, Cher had become more accepting of having a lesbian daughter, and a year after Bono's coming out in an *Advocate* cover story, Cher herself "came out" as the proud mother of a gay child in an *Advocate* cover story and subsequently became an outspoken supporter of glbtq rights. Bono's father, however, was never as accepting as his mother, and when he died in 1998, the two had not spoken for two years.

Following his coming out, Bono began a more public career as a queer activist. He became a contributing writer for *The Advocate*, a speaker for the Human Rights Campaign, especially for the annual National Coming Out Day event, and Entertainment Media Director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

Bono also wrote two books based on his life experience, *Family Outing: A Guide to the Coming Out Process for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Families* (1998) and *The End of Innocence: A Memoir* (2003).

In *Family Outing*, Bono recounts his own experience coming to terms with his lesbianism: "as a child, I always felt there was something different about me. I'd look at other girls my age and feel perplexed by their obvious interest in the latest fashion, which boy in class was the cutest, and who looked the most like cover girl Christie Brinkley. When I was 13, I finally found a name for exactly how I was different. I realized I was gay."

In *The End of Innocence*, Bono discusses the experience of being outed by the tabloids, his stint with Ceremony, and the death of his partner Joan from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Though he has frequently found his celebrity roots troublesome, Bono has used the public's fascination with him to advance his work as an activist. He has also exploited his celebrity in other ways, as for example when he appeared on VH1's weight-loss reality show, *Celebrity Fit Club*, in 2006.

### **Transition**

In his *Advocate* coming-out interview Bono remarked, "As a kid I thought I was a little boy." Six years later he began to consider the possibility that he was transgender.

He delayed acting on that possibility for several years, fearful that sexual reassignment might prove an embarrassment to his mother.

When he finally decided to make his transition, he determined to use the media spotlight that had always illuminated his life to educate the public about trans issues, though he followed his mother's advice not to do a reality television show about the experience.

In mid-2008, at age 39, Bono began the process of transition. Soon after turning 40, he underwent gender-reassignment surgery.

On May 7, 2010, Bono officially became a man, when a California court granted his petition for a change in gender and name. He changed his first name to Chaz and adopted his father's name Salvatore as his middle name.

In transitioning, he had the support of his partner of four years Jennifer Elia, his stepmother Representative Mary Bono (R-CA), and his famously glamorous mother Cher.

There is some irony in the juxtaposition of Chaz, who has undergone both surgery and hormone treatment in order to approximate society's idea of a "real man" with his mother Cher, who has undergone her own numerous surgeries and medical treatments in order to approach a societal ideal of a "real woman."

## Conclusion

Bono continues to work as a glbtq activist, and enjoys his new identity. As he told *Entertainment Tonight*, "I feel like I'm living in my body for the first time, and it feels really good."

Radical queers may be less pleased with his characterization of his transition's effect on his relationship with Elia, "Our relationship always modeled a heterosexual relationship, emotionally and intellectually. So now it does physically as well."

He recently contributed a video to Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" campaign targeting glbtq youth. In the video, he speaks of the value of coming out, of honesty, and of embracing difference.

Bono produced a documentary about his gender transition, *Becoming Chaz*, directed by Randy Barbato. The film, which premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, was also presented on television on the Oprah Winfrey Network.

Bono's book *Transition: How I Became a Man* was published in 2011.

In 2011, Bono competed in the 13th season of the U.S. version of the television program *Dancing with the Stars*, paired with professional ballroom dancer Lacey Schwimmer. Although the selection of Bono as one of the contestants was derided by some conservative commentators, who warned that he would somehow confuse children, he acquitted himself well. He and Schwimmer were eliminated well into the season.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.