



Maddow, Rachel (b. 1973)

by Sara Anderson

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Rachel Maddow.
Image courtesy Air
America Radio.

On September 8, 2008, Rachel Maddow became the first out lesbian to host a prime-time television news program when *The Rachel Maddow Show* premiered in the 9:00 p.m. weekday slot on MSNBC.

Maddow has been a rising star of political commentary during the protracted 2008 presidential campaign. Widely noted for her keen intelligence, self-deprecating wit, and ever-present kindness and good cheer amid the often belligerent world of cable television, Maddow has been described as post-gay (or post-homophobic) in the same way that Barack Obama has tried to portray himself as post-racial.

Although she instructs the television make-up crew to "do me up like you'd do a dude" (as she recounted in an interview in *Velvet Park* magazine), Maddow ventures onto the subject of her orientation only when others bring it up, because she believes deeply that she--and every other glbtq person--is just the same as everyone else. No explanations are necessary, no apologies owed.

In silently asserting her right to be treated as a first-class citizen, Maddow lays claim to that right for all marginalized groups and individuals.

Though a Rhodes Scholar with an Oxford doctorate, "Dr. Maddow" also exhibits more "regular-person" charm than anyone could possibly hope for, using expressions like "Holy mackerel" and "Duh-h-h" with abandon. She is a joyful specimen of a lesbian completely comfortable with herself.

Maddow's personal political development makes for a "great American story," as she remarked to Howard Kurtz in a pointed recollection of her youthful decision to vote Democratic in her first presidential election in 1992. Just 19, and only two years after she had come out, Maddow was horrified to hear Pat Buchanan's infamous speech at the Republican convention, in which he called for a "culture war" against left-wing ideas such as "homosexual rights." Feeling that her "country was declaring war on [her]," Maddow found welcome with Bill Clinton and never looked back.

Not until August 25, 2008, that is, when she recalled the experience as she sat as a member of the MSNBC political panel at the Democratic convention in Denver, with none other than Pat Buchanan himself seated to her left, occupying his own position as an MSNBC analyst. The two are frequent sparring partners on the network.

Born on April 1, 1973, Rachel Maddow is the daughter of a school program administrator mother and a lawyer father. Her father served stateside during the Vietnam War as a U.S. Air Force captain. She has one brother, named David.

Maddow grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and graduated from Castro Valley High School in Castro Valley, California. During high school she lettered in three sports and "started to figure out [she] was queer."

Although her athletic ability garnered her several small-college athletic scholarship offers, they would have

required her to delay enrolling in college in order for a shoulder injury to heal. She opted instead to attend Stanford University because she "decided [she] couldn't stay at home another year during [her] coming-out process!"

At Stanford, Maddow majored in public policy, receiving her B. A. in 1994. She became active with ACT UP and the AIDS Legal Referral Panel. She found her niche in the nexus of AIDS activism and the radical prison reform movement of the 1970s. She worked for such reforms as allowing secure hospices to take dying prisoners.

In her senior year at Stanford, Maddow was awarded the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship, which allowed her to attend Oxford University. To prove to her friends that the scholarship did not mean that she had sold out to the establishment, she shaved her head save one lock of hair, which she died blue.

Upon completing her coursework at Oxford, Maddow moved back to the United States to write her dissertation, which focused on the intersection of the AIDS and prison movements. She received her D. Phil. from Lincoln College, Oxford in 1999.

Upon completing the doctorate, Maddow returned to prison AIDS work, but had to take a variety of odd jobs to support herself.

One of those jobs was as a landscaper, and one of the assignments proved providential. As Maddow told Jacques Steinberg, when one landscaping client--artist/photographer Susan Mikula--opened the door, "We both went, 'Aaaaah.' It was love at first sight."

Maddow moved in with Mikula eighteen months later. In an interview with Rebecca Traister in *The Nation*, Maddow labeled her relationship with Mikula as her "proudest accomplishment." The women now divide their time between a Manhattan apartment and an 1865 house in the country near Northampton, Massachusetts.

Another job Maddow providentially stumbled into was as a news reader and wacky sidekick on a local FM radio station. As she told Rory O'Connor, although the position was not exactly what she had had in mind for a career--occasionally she was required to appear at a Ford dealership wearing an inflatable calculator costume--as soon as she spoke into the microphone at the open-air audition, she knew "this is what I'm supposed to be doing."

After this unlikely beginning in the broadcasting field, Maddow began a rapid ascent that has culminated in the MSNBC show.

After the wacky-sidekick stint, she lobbied her way into the debut of Air America Radio, a liberal talk-radio station where she still has her own program, also called *The Rachel Maddow Show*.

There, she can do what she prefers, which is to report the important news of the day and to engage guests in politically-oriented, rigorous discussions of significant developments in policy or in the lives of the leaders who execute it.

Maddow's own expertise extends far beyond her academic background in prison AIDS work. A self-styled "national security liberal," she embodies the paradox that term suggests, possessing deep knowledge in such areas as the Constitution, counterterrorism, military policy, and the IAVA (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America).

She is a liberal in the purest sense of the word, not advancing anyone's agenda and coming down equally

hard on all candidates as she demonstrates over and over again--firmly but good-naturedly--that we should always remember to listen to the voice of reason.

Air America chairman Charles Kireker worries that he is about to lose Maddow, but she apparently relishes the challenge of doing both television and radio simultaneously. "If O'Reilly, Hannity, and Beck can do that, so can I," she declared in an e-mail to Traister.

Traister's article goes on to confirm Maddow's "post-gay" label. The reporter observes that "the blogosphere is dotted with posts like 'I'm totally gay for Rachel Maddow,'" a meme that "appears to transcend gender and sexuality. Women, men, straight and not straight: they're all gay for her."

For the inaugural *Rachel Maddow Show* on MSNBC, the new host did not disappoint her post-gay fans. Staying true to her trademark androgyny, Maddow sported a men's-style pinstripe suit with only a hint of a more feminine maroon sweater peeking out, and wore normal television make-up but no lipstick or jewelry.

Moreover, one segment of the show, which featured her customary opponent Buchanan, was titled "IT'S PAT," words that were printed across the screen in huge block letters, a laugh-out-loud allusion to the classic *Saturday Night Live* androgynous character, played by Julia Sweeney but eternally undistinguishable as male or female.

In yet another tribute to the Maddow phenomenon, *Time* magazine's Richard Corliss published an article on her show's opening day (September 8, 2008) that merely mentioned in passing that she was an "utterly uncloseted lesbian," while spending the better part of three pages extolling her warmth and good humor.

The hope, Corliss concluded, is clearly that Maddow will, with her "chipper intimacy" and "essential decency," offer a "beguiling option for cable-TV news talk: that nice is the new nasty."

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About the Author

Sara Anderson holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from Louisiana State University. She is presently writing a nonacademic book, a spiritual memoir that revolves around a lesbian love story. Details can be found at petitioninggod.com.