

A brief biography: Mark W. Osteen

The day of my birth (January 21, 1954) in the small logging town of Libby, Montana: <http://www.libbymt.com/> might have seemed auspicious—it was my father’s twenty-second birthday, and a record-breaking snowstorm hit that night—but I recall only modest consequences: we always celebrated two birthdays instead of one on January 21st. But I’ve never once forgotten my dad’s birthday.

As soon as I learned to read, I acquired a love of books that has lasted throughout my life. My family invariably had a dozen or more books checked out, and usually overdue, from the Lincoln County Free Library. By third grade, I was addicted to the sports novels of writers such as John R. Tunis and Duane Decker. Not surprisingly, my first paying job was at that library.

In sixth grade, we were given an assignment to predict our future vocation. Night after night I’d observed my exhausted dad return from work, wearily remove his boots and soiled clothes, devour a huge dinner, then fall asleep. The other adults I knew were also loggers, or else housewives, millworkers or merchants. None of those jobs appealed to me at all. But what other jobs existed? At the time I’d been reading an etymology book called *Why We Say It*. That gave me an idea: I’ll be a linguist! I had no idea what linguists actually did, but knew it something to do with words. My ignorant prediction wasn’t far off, as it turned out: I ended up getting a PhD in English, and have been a professor of literature since 1987.

My parents were quite musical: blessed with a beautiful alto voice, my mother, Lois, led the singing in our church, and belonged to a famous (in Libby, at least) gospel trio. For many years my dad (his name is Narven) played rhythm guitar and sang in The Kootenai Ramblers, a country-western band. The group sometimes rehearsed in our living room. I was fascinated by the guitar cases’ velvet lining, and by the books filled with lyrics and chords. But I was most

impressed by the way that music transformed these ordinary guys into glamorous performers. Now *that* seemed like a cool job!

I started piano lessons at age seven, and music has been a constant presence in my life ever since. In fifth grade, I took up the saxophone (it was the only instrument I could get a sound out of), and continued to play piano (pretty badly: I seldom practiced) throughout junior high and high school. I was a little more interested in the sax, which seemed much less dorky than the piano, and managed to make the Montana All-State Band in my senior year. I enjoyed playing in the band and stage band, but what really turned me on was rock 'n' roll!

The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Three Dog Night, Elton John, Edgar Winter's White Trash, Janis Joplin, Hendrix, Cream: these were my idols. I sang with their records, memorized lyrics, imitated the scatting of Robert Plant and Edgar Winter (much to the annoyance of my parents and sister Nancy), learned harmony from Paul, John, and George, and grew my hair. At sixteen I auditioned as a singer for a rock band a friend was putting together. After sing one song by the Yardbirds and another by Grand Funk Railroad, I was a member of Isvara. It was a classic power trio: guitar, bass, drums; plus me. We performed in Libby and nearby towns (our biggest gig: my junior prom), playing tunes by Black Sabbath, Grand Funk, Zeppelin, Creedence, and others for a year or so, until the bass player moved away. But I had caught the bug.

While attending the University of Montana, I finally got serious about the saxophone, took lessons, and bought the two Selmer Mark VI horns that I still own. I played bari and then tenor in the U of M Jazz Workshop big bands. My stint on bari appealed to my self-image as a nonconformist: not only was I the only real hippie type in the group, but I also played an unusual instrument.

In 1975, I joined a local rock band, Bailey Flyer, whose lead singer, the former bass player

in Isvara, was quitting. In their previous incarnation, they'd been a guitar-oriented group doing Lynyrd Skynyrd, Blue Oyster Cult, Allman Bros., Doobies, and Wishbone Ash covers. Once I joined, we branched out, working up tunes by Average White Band, Climax Blues Band, Steely Dan, and other material on which I could play saxophone. In any case, the group was torn by internal conflict: two members wanted to play only stuff they liked (e.g., Zappa, Chick Corea, heavy blues, oddball R & B tunes)); the other two wanted to be popular. I fell between the two camps, but couldn't make them agree. This band was great musically, but our disagreements generated some weird set lists: Zappa, followed by ZZ Top, Return to Forever, and Steve Miller's "Big Old Jet Airliner." Bailey Flyer's repertoire was eclectic—or perhaps simply incoherent.

Meanwhile, I pursued my studies, rather aimlessly taking courses I liked, switching my major several times. I was on the five-year plan. At last, influenced by two charismatic professors—a Shakespeare scholar with a hawk-eye and a penchant for intoning soliloquys, and an elderly female philosophy professor who regaled us with stories (no doubt apocryphal) of her ventures in the French Resistance in WWII—I ended up majoring in English and philosophy. I graduated in 1977 with no plans for a job other than playing rock 'n' roll.

So when Bailey Flyer broke up in early 1978, I worked at odd jobs (surveyor, dishwasher, substitute teacher), then formed a new band with a Libby friend and three other guys I'd met in my travels. This band, Daily Planet, was really good. Our drummer sang like Paul McCartney and covered all the high falsetto parts; the keyboard player could pick out even the most difficult tunes by ear and teach the rest of us. When our first guitar player quit, we hired a kid just out of high school, a musical prodigy who also sang well. Our repertoire—Steely Dan, late Doobie Bros, Beatles, Atlanta Rhythm Section, Queen, fusion and commercial jazz—was all executed meticulously. But our booking agent, who'd managed several other successful Pacific Northwest

bands, didn't know where to put us. Her clubs were all oriented to metal and hard rock. We were neither. I remember starting one gig with ARS's "I'm Not Gonna Let It Bother Me Tonight," to be greeted with, "no %\$*?# disco!"

Adding to the lack of money were the inevitable personal conflicts. The drummer was volatile; I was a control freak. We clashed. One Saturday night, after a successful four-nighter, we argued over whether to pack up that night or the next day. I called him a baby, and a wrestling match ensued, right there stage, in full view of the club owner.

In 1977 I'd started dating Leslie Gilden, a beautiful girl from Libby whom I'd met in college, and though we were embarrassed by the hometown connection, we ended up living together. Leslie endured all the trials of the rocker's wife: I was frequently absent, and when I was around, I insisted on going out to hear other bands—criticizing them harshly, of course—and spend hours catching up on current music. For some reason, she got tired of these habits!

That's why, in August of '79, I quit Daily Planet and returned to school. I really had no plans, other than to put another band together. Then a stroke of luck changed my life path: one of U of Montana's English TAs left on short notice, and the department desperately needed a composition teacher. Even though I wasn't even officially a grad student, I got the job. Thus, in January of 1980, was my teaching career born.

By then I'd put together another rock band, Straitlace, along with the guitar player from Daily Planet. This group stayed together until 1982, playing a very commercial repertoire (though we mixed in some jazz and fusion) giving a highly polished show. Straitlace went through several personnel changes (at one point our guitar player was African American—in a state with fewer than a thousand black citizens), but by early '81, we were the top one-nighter band in the region, playing proms and dances all over Montana, Idaho and Washington. We were intrepid travelers:

one Friday we played a prom in Chester, Montana, a good 300 miles to the northeast of Missoula, where we lived. The next evening, we performed in Moscow, Idaho, about 200 miles southwest of Missoula. We just wanted to play, man!

I finished my Master's in English in 1982, then, with applied to a few graduate schools. I knew nothing about Emory University, but they had these new Woodruff Fellowships, funded by Coca-Cola, for grad students in the humanities, so I applied for one. To my immense surprise, the Emory English Department chair called me in February of '82 and told me I was a finalist for a fellowship. I packed my only suit—an ugly brown tweed, totally unsuitable for Georgia—and took my first plane trip, to Atlanta. Although the chair implied that I'd spent the whole weekend shouting at people (“you're no shrinking violet, that's for sure”), I somehow landed the fellowship. Not only didn't I have to teach for three years; I'd earn the princely sum of \$7500 per year just to attend classes and write.

So Les and I (we'd been married in August of '81) packed the 1982 Corolla she'd received as her graduate present, and made our trek to Georgia. We were reverse pioneers! For these two rubes, the culture shock was unsettling—not only were we in the Deep South, but also in a big city. For at least two years I was afraid to drive. Nonetheless, I made my way through the PhD program, along the way forming a '60s rock band with another grad student, which performed about three dozen gigs over three years.

I'd come to Emory partly to study with the eminent Joyce scholar Richard Ellmann. Although Ellmann wasn't even in residence for much of the year, I felt very lucky to work with him. Alas, Prof. Ellmann contracted ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) just as I was beginning my dissertation on Joyce's *Ulysses*, and died soon after. I managed to finish anyway, taught a year at Emory, then looked for an academic job. For two years I attended interviews without an offer. In

what would have been my final year of searching, 1987, I finally received several offers, and accepted the one from Loyola College, a Jesuit liberal arts college in Baltimore. Click here to visit the English Department website. <http://www.loyola.edu/english/>

So we loaded up the truck and we moved to Baltimore. Maryland, that is; crab cakes, bouffant hair. But we no longer felt like hillbillies; in fact, after six years in Atlanta, Charm City looked like hicksville: a decaying downtown, no good bookstores, a provincial air. It was several years before we felt at home.

Les got pregnant that first year in Baltimore, and on July 4, 1989, our son Cameron Scott was born, six weeks early. Cam was an unusual child: at age one, he wanted to read books, but he never played with toys. By 18 months, he'd lost most of his words; by age two-and-a-half, we learned he had autism. Our life with Cam has been an enormous struggle, a difficult learning experience, but also a peculiar sort of triumph. I detail these experiences in my book *One of Us: A Family's Life with Autism*. [Click here](#) to visit neurodiversity.com, one of the best and least-biased autism websites.

I've stayed at Loyola since then, publishing many articles and five books, and teaching a wide variety of courses; in 1995 I was tenured, and in 2001 I was promoted to full professor, and in 2000 I won Loyola's Nachbahr Award for outstanding research in the humanities. In 1996 I decided also to cultivate my long-held interest in movies, and founded a Film Studies minor at Loyola. I particularly enjoy research and teaching that combines different disciplines. For example, I've edited two books dealing with the intersections of literature, economics and anthropology, and last year I edited a special issue of *Genre* on jazz and jazz writing. In October, 2005, I organized a conference called Representing Autism: Writing, Cognition, Disability, which was the first conference devoted to autism and the humanities. Click here to see the conference

program and other information. <http://www.cwru.edu/affil/sce/Representing%20Autism.html>.

Currently I'm editing a collection of essays drawn from the conference.

I've continued my musical avocation. After hanging up the horns for three years, in 1991 I picked them up again to join the Loyola College Jazz Ensemble. In 1993 I met Brian Smith and Phil Ravita, and we began rehearsing at Loyola with an ex-student of mine, guitarist Greg Schlimm. Within a few months, Cold Spring Jazz Quartet was born. Greg left in 1996, and we replaced him with another Greg, drummer Greg Mack. With this lineup, CSJQ performed in the Baltimore-Washington region until 2002, when we started working with a new bass player, Gary Kerner.

CSJQ is a mainstream jazz group, but our diverse repertoire features everything from blues to standards, bop to contemporary jazz. In 2003 we recorded and released our first CD, *Same Place. Different Time*. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.coldspringjazz.com>. I also work as a freelance sideman on saxophone, whenever I get calls from other local jazz groups. [Click here for my musical resume.](#)

In 2004 I helped found a new not-for-profit organization called Baltimore Jazz Alliance, devoted to furthering the interests of jazz in this region. I'm now president of this organization. Please click here to visit our website: <http://baltimorejazz.com>.

Writing, reading and teaching literature, and playing music remain the three most important areas of my intellectual and artistic life. Each of them offers challenges and delights sufficient for multiple lifetimes. But my greatest joys come from spending time with my wife and son. They matter much more than any achievement, vocation or hobby.