



## Bryant, Anita (b. 1940)

by Nikolai Endres

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This fundraising card featuring a likeness of Anita Bryant was distributed by the Save Our Children organization in 1977.

Anita Bryant's career started out as an American success story: born into poverty in rural Oklahoma, she won a beauty pageant, became a popular singer, and was eagerly sought by Fortune 500 companies to advertise their products. She sang at the White House, was featured in *People* magazine, and co-hosted eight Orange Bowl parade telecasts for NBC. But after becoming the poster-girl for homophobia, her marriage dissolved and her career tanked.

Bryant became a controversial figure in 1977, when she successfully campaigned against a local ordinance in Dade County, Florida that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. She then helped repeal similar laws in Eugene, Oregon, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Wichita, Kansas. She also inspired a major anti-gay initiative in California, which failed, and an anti-gay law passed overwhelmingly by the Oklahoma legislature, which was ultimately ruled unconstitutional.

While Bryant's "Save Our Children" crusade in Miami relaunched the religious right's involvement in politics, it also galvanized gay men and lesbians to come out of the closet, become politically active, and fight for equal rights. "It was the beginning of two movements, the Christian Coalition and gay rights," the person who introduced the ordinance remembers.

In later years, Bryant somewhat modified her negative stance on homosexuals, whom she once compared to human garbage, though mainly she self-pityingly cast herself as a victim of others; and a large audience was reminded of her anti-gay past in the recent movie *Milk* (2008). Although Bryant has been out of the spotlight for several decades, her name continues to be a byword for bigotry and homophobia.

### Rags to Riches

Anita Jane Bryant was born March 25, 1940, in Barnsdall, Oklahoma. Her parents, an oilfield worker and a housewife, divorced soon afterwards, remarried, and broke up again. Since her father had a Native American background, Anita was one-eighth Cherokee.

Bryant was raised primarily by her mother and her maternal grandparents in a strict Southern Baptist home. In her autobiography *A New Day* (1992), she claims that she suffered long-term sexual abuse from an adult authority figure, though not a family member. Because she felt her father had abandoned her mother, she also confessed to a life-long hatred of men.

When she was two years old, Bryant's grandfather taught her to sing "Jesus Loves Me." She then sang publicly at local events, in churches, and on the radio. While enrolled in Will Rogers High School in Tulsa, she competed in Arthur Godfrey's *Talent Scouts* show in New York, the breakthrough in her singing career. As a result, Carlton Records offered her a contract.

Bryant was chosen Miss Oklahoma in 1958 and was the second runner-up in the Miss America beauty pageant the following year in Atlantic City (she tied for Miss Congeniality). She received a scholarship to

Northwestern University but rather than attend college she sought a show business career.

In 1960, Bryant married Bob Green, a Miami disc jockey with Robert Redford looks, whom she converted to Christianity the night before their wedding. He subsequently worked as her manager. The couple had four children: Bobby (who was adopted), Gloria, Billy, and Barbara. They divorced in 1980.

### **Singing Career**

Bryant released several albums of pop tunes and religious anthems. At the peak of her career, she charged almost \$10,000 per show. Her repertoire ranged from love ballads to gospel tunes to patriotic songs. Some of her biggest pop hits were "Till There Was You" (1959), "Paper Roses" (1960), "In My Little Corner of the World" (1960), and "Wonderland by Night" (1961). She switched from Carlton to Columbia Records in 1962.

In the 1960s, Bryant traveled with the Bob Hope Holiday Tours, singing for soldiers in, for example, Guantanamo Bay and Vietnam, for which she received the United Service Organization's Silver Medallion Award from the National Guard for the most outstanding service by an entertainer, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars Leadership Gold Medallion. She also sang for Billy Graham Crusades in Madison Square Garden, New York.

Bryant performed at several White House functions between 1964 and 1969, sang at both the Democratic Convention in Chicago and the Republican Convention in Miami in 1968, performed the National Anthem at the Super Bowl in 1969, and sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" at President Lyndon B. Johnson's funeral in 1973.

### **Florida Orange Juice**

In 1969, Bryant became involved in advertising. Her most prominent televised commercial was for the Florida Citrus Commission, which had her sing "Come to the Florida Sunshine Tree," followed by the tagline "A day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine."

Other companies Bryant worked for include Holiday Inn hotels, Kraft Foods, Singer (the manufacturer of sewing machines), Tupperware, and Coca Cola. In all, Bryant made 86 television commercials, appeared in hundreds of print ads, and spoke at conventions and fairs on behalf of the industry.

She also published a cookbook in 1975: *Bless This Food: The Anita Bryant Family Cookbook*, described as a "wondrous personal compendium of spiritual wisdom, down-to-earth everyday experiences, and heavenly recipes. Much more than a cookbook, this is the story of a family devoted to Christ."

### **"Save Our Children, Inc."**

When Ruth Shack, a friend of Bryant's and the wife of her booking agent, ran for a seat on the Dade County Commission in 1976, Bryant supported her with a radio commercial and a \$1000 donation. However, the first action Shack took after her election was to introduce an ordinance that prohibited discrimination in housing, public accommodations, and employment on the basis of sexual orientation.

When Shack and her fellow commissioners refused to vote down the ordinance at her request, Bryant became very angry. Declaring that she feared for Shack's soul, and claiming that she had received a divine message ("God spoke to my heart"), Bryant vowed to use her celebrity to repeal the ordinance via referendum. However, she also struggled with the idea of a woman heading a movement, for she firmly adhered to scriptural tenets about a wife's submission to her husband. "Where are the men?" she repeatedly asked at anti-ordinance meetings.

Under the slogan "Save Our Children," Bryant perpetuated prejudices that associate homosexuality with child abuse: "The recruitment of our children is absolutely necessary for the survival and growth of homosexuality," she declared, "for since homosexuals cannot reproduce, they *must* recruit, *must* freshen their ranks" (her emphases).

A devastating campaign commercial contrasted Miami's Orange Bowl Parade and San Francisco's Freedom Day Parade: the former featured wholesome high school marching bands, the latter men in leather snapping whips, dykes on bikes, and drag queens in fabulous dresses. A voiceover intoned, "In San Francisco, when they take to the streets, it's a parade of homosexuals. Men hugging other men. Cavorting with little boys. Wearing dresses and makeup."

Absent scientific or legal evidence, Bryant turned to the Bible and focused on highly controversial passages (mostly Sodom and Gomorrah, the Holiness Code from Leviticus, and injunctions from the Pauline epistles) that have been widely perceived as condemning homosexual behavior. "If homosexuality were the normal way, God would have made Adam and Bruce," she summed up.

Since Bryant believed that American law should be aligned with the Word of God, her campaign became a "crusade" and enlisted the help of notable conservative preachers such as Jerry Falwell, who would found the evangelical right-wing organization Moral Majority two years later. Notoriously homophobic Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina praised her as a "fine Christian lady," and the Southern Baptist Convention commended Bryant for her "courageous stand against the evils inherent in homosexuality."

As Shack remembers: "[The ordinance] turned into a discussion of sexuality and bestiality and pedophilia, as opposed to discrimination in the workforce."

Not since the Scopes Monkey Trial and the ensuing debate about evolution in the 1920s had religious conservatives been thus aggressively engaged in politics. Even the backlash to *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and legalized abortion paled in comparison to the right-wing campaign against homosexual activity.

How did gay people react? By 1977, several years after the Stonewall Riots, the gay rights movement, though still in its infancy but before the AIDS catastrophe, could be credited with important achievements: several cities and counties had adopted gay rights measures; state sodomy laws were being legally challenged; and the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

In Miami, gay men and lesbians formed the Coalition for Human Rights and the Miami Victory Campaign, which enlisted help from several out-of-state activists. A nationwide boycott or "gaycott" of Florida orange juice was organized, which received the support of many celebrities, including singers Barbra Streisand and Bette Midler, director John Waters, and actors Mary Tyler Moore and Jane Fonda. Gay bars in particular refused to stock Florida orange juice.

Bumper stickers proclaimed "A day without human rights is like a day without sunshine"; t-shirts read "Squeeze a Fruit for Anita"; the joke "We don't want your children, Anita. We want your husband" circulated; buttons were sold showing "Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges"; a disco song entitled "Hurricane Anita" was used as a fund-raising tool; a company in Coconut Grove marketed an Anita Bryant dartboard.

Unfortunately, however, there was no large-scale popular mobilization, no door-to-door canvassing, no concerted effort to win over Miami's large Jewish, African-American, and Cuban populations (who might have been made sympathetic to the issue of discrimination). Most damaging of all, no evidence of discrimination against gay men or lesbians was produced, which for many voters rendered the ordinance

unnecessary and raised the specter of "special rights."

The Bryant camp, on the other hand, was well-focused, well-organized, and well-financed, especially because it was able to draw on a powerful network of southern churches and religious volunteers.

On June 7, 1977, the ordinance was repealed by a margin of 69% to 31%. Soon after this triumph, the Florida legislature passed a bill banning homosexuals from adopting children.

Bryant then announced a national campaign to save the country from homosexuality. Renaming her organization "Protect America's Children," she led successful campaigns against anti-discrimination ordinances in St. Paul, Minnesota, Wichita, Kansas, and Eugene, Oregon, though her efforts were rejected by voters in Seattle, Washington.

### **Defeat in California and After**

Also in June 1977, California State Senator John V. Briggs, inspired by Bryant's success, sponsored a bill that could have led to the dismissal of any teacher who made a pro-homosexual statement in a public school. When the bill was voted down in the Senate, Briggs organized an initiative petition for a referendum that he thought would propel him into the governorship.

Proposition 6, which qualified for the ballot in November 1978, called for the firing of any school employee who was found to be "advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging, or promoting private or public homosexual activity directed at, or likely to come to the attention of, schoolchildren and/or other employees."

This time, the gay movement successfully initiated a grass-roots organization in the large urban areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Its most prominent spokesperson became Harvey Milk, who had been elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors the year before. Appropriating Bryant's rhetoric, he exhorted the glbtq community: "I want to recruit you for the fight to preserve democracy from the John Briggs and Anita Bryants who are trying to constitutionalize bigotry."

Bryant had become a rallying cry for gay people. "Anita Bryant is the best thing ever to happen to American homosexuals" was now the slogan. Attendance at gay pride marches swelled, especially in San Francisco. Large anti-Bryant protests were held across the country, and some of Bryant's appearances were picketed, most notably in New Orleans, Chicago, Houston, and Atlanta.

Other important opponents (who spoke out with varying degrees of enthusiasm and for a number of reasons) included President Jimmy Carter, former President Gerald Ford, Governor Jerry Brown, former Governor and future President Ronald Reagan, the Log Cabin Republicans, many members of the California Democratic Party, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the California Teachers Association.

On November 7, 1978, the Briggs Initiative was defeated by a two-to-one margin.

(However, the Oklahoma legislature overwhelmingly adopted a law with the same wording as the Briggs Initiative. After much litigation, the Oklahoma law was declared unconstitutional by the U. S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit in 1984, a ruling that was upheld when the U. S. Supreme Court deadlocked 4 to 4 on the issue.)

### **Vilification of Anita Bryant**

In the process of her campaign against gay rights, Bryant became badly injured professionally. An entertainer and advertising spokesperson must above all be perceived as likeable and popular, as indeed

Bryant had seemed before undertaking her crusade. However, she soon became better known for her intolerance than for her talent.

Part of her vilification was indeed due to a concerted effort on the part of gay men and lesbians to fight back against her assault on them, though she also happily fueled the fire with inflammatory comments of her own, referring to gay people as "garbage" and worse. Revealing a heretofore unseen coarseness and ugliness to her personality, Bryant in effect engineered her own makeover from beloved "good girl" to self-righteous bigot.

In 1977, Des Moines, Iowa gay activist Thom Higgins threw a pie at Bryant. Unperturbed, she quipped "At least it's a fruit pie." This could have been a reference to her involvement in the fruit industry, but "fruit" is also a pejorative term for gay people, and that, no doubt, was her intended reference.

That Bryant intended the pejorative meaning is clear from a May 1978 interview she gave to *Playboy* (she later complained that she had been led to believe it would appear in *Rolling Stone* magazine), where she conjectured that homosexuals are called "fruits" because "they eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of life . . . , which is male sperm." (For someone who constantly relied on the Bible for her arguments, Bryant frequently revealed ignorance about what it actually says: here she mixed up the tree of life with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, only the latter of which was off-limits to Adam and Eve. By redundantly referring to "male sperm," she also implied that there is such a thing as female sperm.)

But perhaps most damagingly for her career, Bryant became an object of ridicule as well as scorn. *Tonight Show* host Johnny Carson and other comedians constantly mocked her, quickly turning her into a caricature of the prudish, self-righteous church lady.

Bryant claimed that she and her family received death and kidnapping threats, hate mail, bomb scares, and crank phone calls, though she never documented such charges. Despite the absence of documentation of such threats, however, it is clear both that Bryant was under great pressure and that she did not handle that pressure very well.

While it was kept from the public at that time, she descended into a severe depression, grew addicted to sleeping pills, and became irrevocably alienated from her husband.

Discovering that Bryant's endorsements had become more of a liability than an asset, her sponsors dropped her. The Singer company not only declined to renew her contract as a spokesperson for the company, but also nixed a planned television show that she was to host for them. The Florida Citrus Commission, which had initially supported her crusade but came to feel acutely the effects of the boycott against Florida orange juice, also declined to renew her contract. In 1978, NBC dropped her from the Orange Bowl parade broadcast. Bryant complained that she was being "blacklisted" for her political views.

In 1980, Bryant, the Bible-quoting born-again Christian, divorced Green, notwithstanding clear Biblical injunctions forbidding divorce. The divorce created controversy and confusion among her supporters in the religious right, many members of which found it difficult to reconcile her divorce with her rhetoric about traditional moral values. (Her husband, who refused to recognize the civil divorce, continued to regard her as his wife "in God's eyes.")

Invitations to speak before conservative religious groups and congregations were cancelled, thus depriving Bryant of much needed income. Since most of her secular bookings had also dried up, the singer found herself in deep financial trouble, and her career in a downward spiral, until it finally became practically nonexistent despite sporadic attempts at comebacks.

## Later Developments

After leaving her husband, Bryant moved with her children to Selma, Alabama, and, then, to Atlanta, where she lived until 1990.

In later years, Bryant showed a small measure of contrition for her anti-gay initiatives, though mostly for the toll her crusade took on her career and private life. In an article in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1980, she distanced herself from "Save Our Children." (In 1978, a poll by that journal among junior and senior high school students had named Adolf Hitler and Bryant as the two people "who have done the most damage in the world.")

Bryant stated in the interview: "The answers don't seem quite so simple now. . . . As for the gays, the church needs to be more loving, unconditionally, and willing to see these people as human beings, to minister to them and try to understand. . . . I'm more inclined to say live and let live, just don't flaunt it or try to legalize it."

She also made an attempt to reclaim her career in music. Together with her second husband, nuclear physicist and former astronaut test crewman Charlie Hobson Dry, whom she married in 1990, she performed in small venues in Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee. Her plans failed and she filed for bankruptcy at least twice (in 1997 in Arkansas, in 2002 in Tennessee), leaving employees and creditors to whom she owed hundreds of thousands of dollars in the lurch. Efforts to set up an Anita Bryant Museum fell through as well.

Bryant then returned to her home town in Oklahoma, where the city honored her by naming a street after her. She is now in charge of the Anita Bryant Ministries International.

The website for Anita Bryant Ministries International contains a biography, apparently composed in 2006, that not only includes manifest lies about her crusade against homosexuality--recasting it as an attempt to prevent churches and private schools from being forced to hire known homosexuals--but also elides many details of her private life, including her bankruptcies. Not only is it riddled with inaccuracies and misrepresentations, but the biography also contains numerous misspellings and grammatical errors, unintentionally reminding the reader of Bryant's lack of education.

It self-pityingly presents her as a victim: she is both "an entertainer who was willing to stand up to the vilest and most scurrilous kind of abuse for the sake of family, morality, simple decency, and the Word of God" and someone who was misunderstood and shunned by other Christians who maliciously judged her.

Tellingly, in the biography Bryant never acknowledges the damage she did to others or the suffering they experienced as a result of her crusade. (For example, at the height of her anti-gay campaign, a young man, Robert Hillsborough, was murdered in San Francisco by four gay bashers, who shouted, "This one's for Anita!") She is focused exclusively on the injustices she believes she has suffered as a result of her Christian beliefs.

Efforts by journalists or academics to contact her usually meet with no response.

In 1998, controversy returned to Bryant's former home turf when the Miami-Dade County Commission, on a 7-6 vote, amended its human rights ordinance and banned discrimination based on sexual orientation. A repeal drive, "Take Back Miami-Dade," failed to gather enough signatures in 2000. When a vote was finally held in 2002, the law was affirmed with a 56% vote in favor. Bryant was not personally involved, but the memory of "Save Our Children" powerfully pervaded the political debate.

In 2008, a circuit court in Miami ruled the Bryant-inspired ban on adoption by homosexuals unconstitutional. After further litigation, in 2010 an appeals court agreed that the law was unconstitutional

and the state agreed to no longer enforce it.

### **Bryant's glbtq Legacy**

Bryant's influence on the gay (and straight) imagination is indisputable. Doric Wilson's *The West Street Gang* (1977), a satire set entirely in a gay bar, includes a character named Brita Bryant, among others an allusion to Nazi ideology. Patricia Nell Warren's novel *The Beauty Queen* (1978) bases Jeannie Colter, a New York state politician running for governor on a homophobic agenda, on Bryant.

In Armistead Maupin's *More Tales of the City* (1980), the protagonist Michael Tolliver comes out to his parents when they praise Bryant's campaign: "That, more than anything, made it clear that my responsibility was to tell you the truth, that your own child is homosexual, and that I never needed saving from anything except the cruel and ignorant piety of people like Anita Bryant."

In strong language, the American punk band The Dead Kennedys takes aim at Bryant and Phyllis Schlafly (who was instrumental in defeating the Equal Rights Amendment) in their song "Moral Majority" (1982): "Blow it out your ass, Phyllis Schlafly / Ram it up your cunt, Anita / Cos God must be dead / If you're alive."

In Michael Moore's documentary on the automobile industry *Roger & Me* (1989), a cheerful Bryant preaches to the unemployed of Flint, Michigan: "Thank God for the sunshine and the fact that you're not starving to death."

Brian Christopher Williams' play *Anita Bryant Died for Your Sins* (2004) juxtaposes Bryant's anti-gay campaign and a teenager's coming out at the same time. Michael Yawney's *1,000 Homosexuals* (2008) is a documentary/fantasy/comedy casting Bryant as a musical Joan of Arc battling an omnipotent gay mafia and surrounded by talking penises and wagging dildos.

Performance artist Elizabeth Whitney channels Bryant in a one-woman show, *A Day without Sunshine* (2008). In this portrayal, Bryant is presented as a religious whacko, but is nevertheless curiously sympathetic.

Gus Van Sant's film *Milk* (2008) evokes Bryant as the epitome of the anti-gay bigotry of the 1970s. It uses archival news footage of her, including one of her most infamous pronouncements: "If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nail biters."

References to Bryant as a synonym for bigotry and homophobia pervade popular culture generally, including on favorite gay television shows such as *Will & Grace*, *Designing Women*, and *Golden Girls*, among many others.

### **Conclusion**

When on election night in 1977, a jubilant Bryant told her supporters that homosexuals had "learned a lesson," she undoubtedly failed to realize the ironic truth of her statement. While she energized the religious right, which resulted in the foundation of the Christian Coalition and the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, she also brought together the gay and lesbian community as never before.

As a minister observed at Houston's Gay Pride parade in 1978, "It took Anita Bryant to bring this many of our brothers and sisters out of their closets. And after tonight, they'll never return. God works in mysterious ways."

There is something undeniably sad about the wreckage that Anita Bryant made of her successful career and apparently happy life, and perhaps even more about her continuing refusal to recognize the damage she did to others. Despite her spectacular fall, however, she reveals too little self-knowledge to be seen as a tragic figure. Still, insofar as the implosion of her career is some evidence of the country's rejection of the raw bigotry that she came to personify, the Anita Bryant story is by no means entirely negative.

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## **About the Author**

**Nikolai Endres** received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert,



Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.

Biography of Anita Bryant (excerpt). Anita Jane Bryant (born March 25, 1940, in Barnsdall, Oklahoma) is an American singer. She is widely known for her strong views against homosexuality, and for her prominent campaigning in the mid-1970s to prevent gay equality - specifically her successful move to repeal a local ordinance in Miami, Florida, that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.Â Early Life and Career Bryant's belief in God and the Bible had their roots in her childhood. She was initially declared dead at childbirth in her grandparents' tiny frame house in Barnsdall, Oklahoma, but her grandfather would not accept that the baby was dead. Astrological portrait of Anita Bryant (excerpt). Bryant, anita jane (1940â€“). Although her family lived in Oklahoma City, entertainer Anita Bryant was born on March 25, 1940, at her grandparents' house in Barnsdall, Oklahoma. She lived in Velma-Alma, Tishomingo, Midwest City, and Tulsa. As a child she worked in radio and television in Oklahoma City. In 1958 Bryant claimed the Miss Oklahoma crown and became second runner-up in the Miss America competition. That year she signed with Carlton records and released a string of successful pop songs. In 1962 she changed to Columbia Records and continued to have a successful career. Anita Jane Bryant is an American singer, former Miss Oklahoma beauty pageant winner, and outspoken critic of homosexuality. She scored four Top 40 hits in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including "Paper Roses", which reached #5. She later became widely known for her strong views against homosexuality and for her prominent campaigning in 1977 to repeal a local ordinance in Dade County, Florida that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientationâ€”an involvement that... Anita Jane Bryant (born March 25, 1940) is an American singer, former Miss Oklahoma beauty pageant winner, former spokeswoman (brand ambassador) for the Florida Citrus Commission (marketing orange juice), and outspoken opponent of homosexuality. She scored four Top 40 hits in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including "Paper Roses", which reached #5.