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20 Years of Dykes to Watch Out For

Rex Wockner and Alison Bechdel Go Post-Gay in Vermont to Celebrate the Anniversary of Dykes

By Rex Wockner
Contributing Writer

She draws *Dykes To Watch Out For*, the most fabulous gay cartoon ever, in my opinion. I caught up with Alison Bechdel recently in her home state of Vermont, we turned on a tape recorder, and let our brains meander. The strip is celebrating its 20th birthday this year.

Rex: We're sitting on the steps of the Court House in Montpelier, Vermont. We were going to do this on the steps of the state Capitol but then we had to go buy batteries for the tape recorder, the first three stores were closed, and then we didn't feel like walking all the way back to the Capitol, where the civil-unions bill passed.

Alison: We had to walk a mile.

Rex: This town, this court house, is like something out of Petticoat Junction, but you say the state is not like Petticoat Junction. It's a liberal place, you suggest.

Alison: It's more like Green Acres. The city folks have come up. It's a rural place with progressive politics and sort of citified culture that has seeped in.

Rex: What do you like about it?

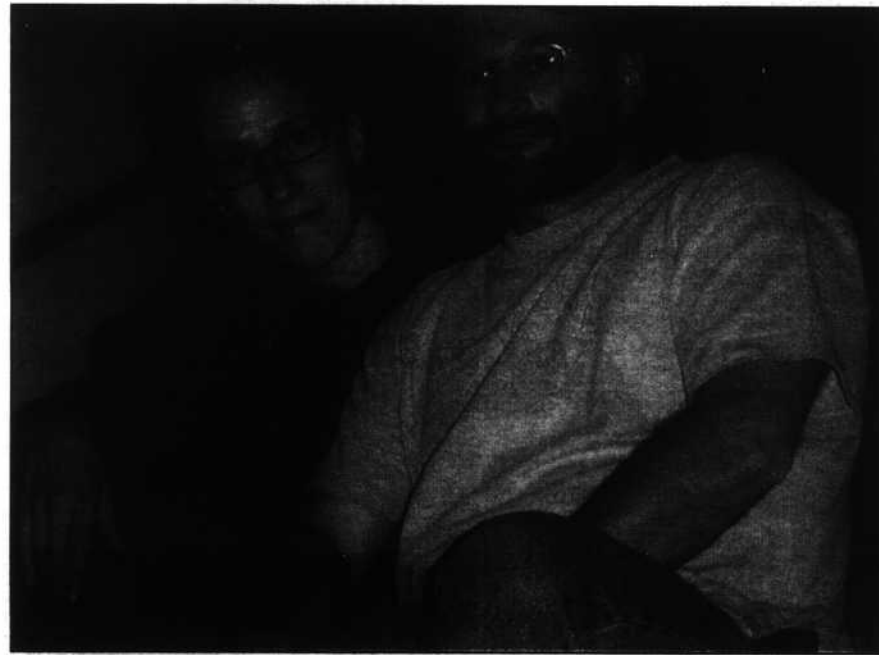
Alison: I like being able to live a rural life but still feel safe as an out lesbian.

Rex: I noticed you have a lesbian Subaru. Is it four-wheel drive?

Alison: Yes, of course it is.

Rex: Over dinner, we talked about how we both don't spend a lot of time anymore in the gay community.

Alison: Yeah, it used to be for me that being a lesbian, being a queer person, was the main thing in my life. Gay



Alison Bechdel and Rex Wockner

pride day was like my national holiday. This year, I had to drag my ass to gay pride. I went completely out of obligation.

Rex: Where do you go to it?

Alison: To Burlington [Vermont].

Rex: They have a parade?

Alison: Of sorts. I shouldn't say that. Yes, they had a lovely little parade. I just sort of swooped in and left.

Rex: When you do come out of your studio and socialize, do you socialize mostly with lesbians, or with straight people?

Alison: I have to say that I don't socialize very much at all.

Rex: I had an easy time talking you into coming to dinner.

Alison: No, you didn't. First, I didn't let you come to my house, I didn't let you stay at my house, I didn't let you

eat at my house. I'm like a total recluse. I didn't used to hang out with straight people but now some of my main friends are straight, which is kind of interesting.

Rex: I've said publicly that I'm post-gay. I guess what I mean by that is: Been there, done that, no longer feel like I have to hang out in gay environments in order to be who I am. All the straight people in my life are fine with my sexual orientation, which doesn't even come up as a topic very much. It's a background thing. Is that the kind of experience you have as well?

Alison: I'm not as resolved about it as you are. I remember when the 'phrase post gay' first came out, it infuriated me. I just thought it was the most obnoxious thing I'd ever heard. And I still think, you know, people are getting

beaten and harassed every day for being gay.

Rex: But not in Vermont and San Diego. When I write about this [being post-gay], I get hate mail from people in Nebraska and Mississippi saying, "How dare you?" And, of course, they're right.

Alison: They are right. But you're right, this is also a reality, too -- that we're sitting here on the steps of the Court House loudly talking about queer stuff. I wouldn't identify myself as post-gay, but I would say that I'm tired of having to be a lesbian -- of having to be a lesbian cartoonist. I used to be very proud of that. I would make a point of saying that I was a lesbian cartoonist. But [now] I just want to be a cartoonist, you know? Why can't I just be a cartoonist? That's my new goal. ...

Rex: In reality, less than half the topics in *Dykes To Watch Out For* are gay topics.

Alison: It's true, and that's dwindling as time goes on, especially now that there's kids in the strip and there's this heterosexual couple, and just a lot of world events and politics that come into play. But that's not to say that I'm not really committed to reflecting authentic lesbian lives. I'm writing this strip about everything, but it's from a queer perspective, through a queer lens. And that, I feel like I'm uncompromising about.

Rex: Some of the characters are queerer than others. Mo is sort of the quintessential trapped-in-the-70s lesbian. Sydney is quite another story.

Alison: I see Mo and Sydney as old-school and new-wave lesbians. Mo has these old feminist values that are very important to me. ... I get letters all the time from people who think that Mo should leave Sydney. For me, the question is, why's Sydney staying with Mo?

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