



Arianna Huffington and Harry Shearer

# Linked for Life

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON HAS BEEN A WRITER, A POLITICIAN, A RADIO HOST, A POLITICAL WIFE, A NEWSPAPER COLUMNIST AND IS NOW THE COFOUNDER AND EDITOR IN CHIEF OF THE HUFFINGTON POST (HUFFINGTONPOST.COM), ONE OF THE MOST VIEWED BLOG AND NEWS SITES ON THE INTERNET. HARRY SHEARER IS AN ACTOR, WRITER, DIRECTOR, SATIRIST, MUSICIAN, RADIO HOST, PLAYWRIGHT, MULTIMEDIA ARTIST, GRAMMY-NOMINATED COMEDIAN AND RECORD-LABEL OWNER. BEST KNOWN, PERHAPS, AS THE VOICE OF SEVERAL CHARACTERS ON *THE SIMPSONS*, HE ALSO BLOGS FOR HUFFINGTON AND HAS HIS OWN TV STATION ON THE WEB SITE MY DAMN CHANNEL (MYDAMNCHANNEL.COM). THOUGH BOTH WORK IN CYBERSPACE, THEY LEAD TRI-COASTAL LIVES. WE CONNECTED HUFFINGTON IN LOS ANGELES TO SHEARER IN NEW ORLEANS FOR THIS LATEST IN OUR SERIES OF BG CONVERSATIONS.

**BERGDORF GOODMAN:** Harry, your official biography starts with a list of all your professions. Arianna, you're a Jill of as many trades. Is there anything that either of you hasn't done that you still want to do?

**HARRY SHEARER:** I'll go first. I cowrote the book for a Broadway musical based on the life of J. Edgar Hoover, and it's not yet been produced on stage. So I yearn to be a produced playwright. Only partly because of the Writers Guild strike, because the playwrights have what screenwriters long ago gave up, copyright. And I like to go where the copyright is.

**ARIANNA HUFFINGTON:** [laughs] I yearn to be a playwright, period, not even a produced playwright. It goes back to my twenties, when I was dating Bernard Levin, a columnist and drama critic in London, and he and I would be at the theater practically every night.

I fell in love with the whole drama of theater—the curtain about to go up and the dark auditorium. So that's definitely an unfulfilled, maybe never-to-be-fulfilled, wish.

**BG:** It's fascinating that both of you, who are now stars in cyberspace, should long for the fabulous invalid.

**HS:** Yes, indeed so. But I've at least gotten close through acting in theater and had that experience of being backstage, looking out at the many-eyed monster and wondering whether it was going to be charitable. I think more and more, as the movies become more technological and more about computer graphics, if you want to do human-scale stories, the focus shifts back to theater.

**BG:** Harry, you grew up in L.A., right?

**HS:** Yes, to the extent that I grew up.

**BG:** But you also live in New Orleans?

**HS:** Over the years, I've spent my time pretty much half-and-half between L.A. and New Orleans. There are work and family and friends and pet reasons, as well as being near the sea, why I will never leave L.A. But there are equally profound reasons why I spend more and more time in New Orleans. If you have to put one word to it, it's community. When I was a kid growing up in L.A., I was the only child in a very small family, and growing up in a city with a very individualistic ethos appealed to me greatly. Having been through that, when I came to New Orleans, I discovered a piece that was missing, which was community, real community. It's like a tightly woven fabric. That, of course, is one of the reasons why the episode that is known as Katrina was probably more socially devastating to this city than it would have been to Los Angeles or New York or Chicago, given the same amount of physical damage, which was immense. But

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in such a tightly woven fabric, when a lot of the threads are ripped out, it tends to have a more profound effect on mental health than it would in a city of individuals. That being said, it's still an incredible community. People talk, as I do, about the food and the music and the architecture and all of that, but you can remove all of that and there would still be something very seductive about it.

**BG:** How did you two meet?

**AH:** On the set of *Politically Incorrect* in New York. It was the first season, right, Harry? In 1993 or 1994. Our next adventure together was the idea of a show about the media that we called *Eat the Press*, which later became part of the Huffington Post, with Harry as its first blogger.

**HS:** I went to the 1996 Republican Convention in San Diego with Arianna, when she was still, uh, uh . . .

**AH:** . . . a Republican?

**HS:** A Republican.

**BG:** Harry, you had trouble with that word.

**HS:** And then we went to a convention in Vegas to try to sell that TV concept, and I think it was on the flight back when I said to Arianna, "You know, your friend Bill Bennett is the most dangerous man in America," and our friendship flowered from that point on.

**AH:** Yes, he was certainly instrumental in my seeing the light. Honestly, this is not a joke. I got to know Harry and really respected his brilliant mind and what he was saying made me look at some of my beliefs, especially around the role of government. Because that is really what made me a Republican. On the social issues, I was always pro-choice and pro-gay rights and pro-gun control. It was my belief that the private sector could step up to the plate and take care of all the social problems that we were facing that had made me a Republican. But talking to Harry and looking at the evidence, which is something that Republicans don't like to do, made me change course. I'm a big believer in that. I think that the country has suffered a lot from a stubbornness about not changing course, the idea that staying the course is always the right thing—it's not. The right-left way of looking at American politics is very obsolete, and if you look at the biggest issues we are facing—Iraq, and the crisis in health care, and Katrina—these big issues transcend right and left. You don't have to be on the left to be in favor of doing something real about what happened in New Orleans. You don't

have to be on the left to be in favor of bringing the troops home, because the war, whatever the public relations spinmeisters at the White House may be saying, is not working. And you don't have to be on the left to believe that if we don't provide health-care insurance, we are letting our citizens down, and we are also letting down American business.

**BG:** That sounds like an endorsement of Ron Paul! You're both deeply involved with the Internet now, and that has scrambled politics to a very great extent, hasn't it?

**AH:** It has. The Internet is a platform for people at the extremes, but it has also helped people recognize that a lot of the biggest issues we are facing cannot be seen in a productive way through that lens of right-left.

**HS:** I was having a conversation here, within the last hour, with some local folks about the incoming Republican governor of Louisiana, Bobby Jindal. They said, "What do you think? How do you think he's going to be?" The woman I was with produces a political talk-radio show here, and she said, "Look at his record in Congress. Even though he's a Republican, he was one of the people to push for coastal restoration, for Louisiana getting to participate in offshore oil revenues," which has been long a sore point, that offshore oil revenues go to the Feds, while the environmental consequences of oil drilling fall on Louisiana. And Jindal is a Republican who is in the forefront of those issues. So, okay then, a party label is not an accurate guide to who can see problems and take a long-range view of the solutions.

**AH:** Harry has done an amazing series of blogs on Katrina and New Orleans on the Huffington Post. He's been ahead of the curve—and stayed on the story when others moved on. Which again, for me, is one of the greatest things about the Web. It allows that obsessive following of a story.

**HS:** Apropos of that, Arianna, I was at my first, and I hope my last, White House Correspondents' [Association] Dinner last spring, and I was complaining to an investigative reporter for a major news organization about the performance of the mainstream media on this story. He said, "Well, you know, I tried to pitch my editors on the story of the levees and the Corps of Engineers and their role in the disaster."

I said, "Yeah?"

He said, "They just kept telling me, 'It's too complicated.'" And those are the gatekeepers who regulate what the country is allowed to know—or they were up until the time of the Internet and the obsessive blogger who, let us hope, has some grasp on

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facts and just keeps hammering despite that kind of editorial blindness.

**BG:** You both come out of popular, mainstream, commercial media. But you seem drawn to matters of substance.

**HS:** I've always been interested in matters of substance, but the new frontier of the Internet allows you to go from the frivolous to the serious, back and forth, much more easily than you would if you had a producer or an editor leaning over your shoulder saying, "Aren't you going to confuse people?" I think the lack of second-guessers, which the mainstream media has in profusion, whether they're called vice presidents or editorial supervisors, allows us to dance where we want to and at times be humorous and at times serious and trust that people will follow us where we go. The impulse of popular media is to not lose the room. I think both Arianna and I are trying to keep them interested.

**AH:** I've always wanted to reach more people. It's never been my goal to just preach to the converted. It's always been about expanding the universe of people who see the world the way I see it. That was partly what attracted me to create the Huffington Post. My frustration as a syndicated columnist was how often my editors would say, "Oh, you wrote about the failures of the drug war last month. You are still writing about it?" Yeah! Nothing has changed, and I have new information to bring to the table.

**BG:** Did each of you have an epiphany about blogging, a "Wow" moment?

**HS:** I did even before the word blogging was invented. I was following the first O.J. trial (and I'll admit it, I was obsessed about it), and then he had the second trial, which was not going to be on television, and the courtroom was five minutes from my house, and I realized I had to see the second act of this drama, and I called my editor at Slate.com and said, "You have to let me write about this." The epiphany was, on a highly eventful day, I could write as long as I wanted to; on a boring day, I could write very little or nothing; I could interpolate factual reporting of the trial with what I imagined as me sitting with you, nudging you with my elbow, saying, "Do you see that guy? Do you notice how he's twitching?"—as if we were watching it together on television. And it went online the minute I was finished writing it. I had no length restrictions, and I could mix the factual with the opinionated. I thought, this is the future.

**BG:** Were you also getting feedback?

**HS:** I'll tell you the honest truth. I was so busy being in the courtroom and then writing, that I didn't even pay attention to the interactive side of it. But for comedians and peo-

ple in comedy, interacting has always had a dark ring to it, because interaction in comedy means heckling by drunks.

**AH:** For me, the moment was when Josh Marshall stayed on the story of Trent Lott making racist remarks at Strom Thurmond's birthday lunch. The mainstream media had decided that this story didn't matter and had moved on, having barely reported it, and Josh Marshall, and then others on the Web, including Mickey Kaus and Instapundit, stayed on the story and stayed on the story, and kept developing it and advancing it and bringing in new facts, and they didn't stop until Trent Lott was the former Majority Leader. That was a moment of awakening for me. I recognized that blogging is an incredibly powerful tool. It had all these elements—obsessiveness, passion, determination to stay with a story until something happens.

**HS:** Speaking as largely a refugee from the mainstream media, the best part is the absence of supervisorial second-guessing, that endless "I don't think people in Iowa are going to care about this." Well, Arianna and I now largely live in a universe free of that. We make our own decisions.

**BG:** That reminds me of what you said when you left *Saturday Night Live*.

**HS:** They said that I had left the show because of creative differences, and a reporter called me and said, "Is that true?" I said, "We had creative differences; I was creative and they were different."

**AH:** I think the future belongs to the hybrids, those who take the best of traditional media—fact-checking, accuracy, fairness—and bring it together with the best of new media—obsessiveness, stick-to-itiveness, passion.

**BG:** Let me ask you both a rude question. Is there any money in this yet?

**HS:** I haven't gotten a cent yet. But I think that I should before long.

**AH:** There is advertising money, and that is the model that I believe in, instead of the subscription model, which increasingly more and more sites are abandoning.

**HS:** The Internet has trained people to want their information and entertainment for free, and the only way to make that work is with advertising.

**AH:** Unless it's porn, and especially weird porn, people won't pay for it.

**HS:** Do you have some links for weird porn?

**AH:** [laughs loudly] Only if you're willing to pay for them. **BG**

THE BG CONVERSATIONS ARE CONDUCTED AND EDITED BY MICHAEL GROSS.