

Bee's portrait of Alexander Kingdom Birkin, otherwise known as Anno, aged 17

FEATURE ■



**The  
lost  
boy**

Report by Angela Neustatter

the times  
magazine  
12·4·2003

■ FEATURE

**ANDREW BIRKIN, THIN AS FUSEWIRE,** his face ragged with pain, paces the tiny studio where he stays in London, restlessly making tea, picking up documents, turning on the computer so that the screen fills with images of his son Alexander Kingdom Birkin – “Anno” as he was always known. His words come in a torrent as he remembers the telephone conversation he had with Anno, phoning from Italy where he was working on a CD with his band, Kicks Joy Darkness (KJD). It was the evening of November 7 2001, and Anno and some friends were planning to go off to a nightclub to celebrate the 26th birthday of the band’s drummer Alberto Mangili.

At his home in Wales Andrew settled down to a long chat: “Anno told me they had had an amazing day recording backing tracks. We discussed Hamlet, which he had just read, and he asked

avoid the gathering, but did not see a big truck on the hard shoulder. The car crashed into the back of the truck and the three KJD members were killed instantly, along with one of the other young men. The fifth passenger was seriously injured, but survived.

It is an age-old story of loss: young men pursuing a dream, revelling in living on the wing, caught up in the excitement of newly forged autonomy, and with a sense that the world was there for them to explore and to conquer. And then it was all cut down in one

random, fatal moment. It is this that Anno’s family – his parents, his younger brother, Ned, 18, and his half brothers and sisters, David, 25, Barnaby, 36, and Lissy, 37 – are trying to reconcile.

Andrew learned of Anno’s death the morning after their conversation, when Alberto’s mother, Isa, called. “She told me, ‘Anno is dead.’ I thought, he can’t be dead,

18-year-old Ned, whose sweet, serious face is still redolent of the nine-year-old who starred in his father’s production of Ian McEwan’s *The Cement Garden*. He still feels the cruelty of loss acutely. He and Anno had just made a trip to Amsterdam, where they had bonded in a new way as friends. “What was happening with us then was really wonderful,” Ned says quietly.

In the immediate aftermath of learning about Anno’s death, each family member wondered what to do with feelings that seemed at times unbearable. When David first arrived back from Milan, bringing Anno’s acoustic guitar, he recalls putting it down and seeing Bee’s eyes fix on it: “I thought she might crack.” Bee can still see the black hard case with stickers on saying “fragile” as vividly as she could then: “I carried it like a child’s coffin to my bedroom. I just kept saying to myself, ‘don’t open it yet’.”

Most upsetting for Ned was feeling isolated among people weeping and expressing grief while his emotions were frozen: “A week after it all happened I didn’t feel anything. I didn’t feel sad and that’s more frightening than anything else, because you want to burst into tears, but you can’t. I thought, ‘Am I a psychopath?’” For each family member the

bereavement process has been different, and they have had to learn to allow each other that difference and to try to understand it.

Anno and Ned grew up in the untamed landscape of Wales, living what friends describe as a Bohemian lifestyle where the house was forever full of friends. The children spent much time with their cousins, the children of Andrew’s sisters, Linda Jephson and performer and singer Jane Birkin.

After Bee and Andrew separated in 2000, Bee’s large house in Kensington became the family home. It was here that people ▶



CORBIS SYGMA

## ‘My daughters were devastated at losing Anno. They had never known anyone could be touched from their generation’

what we would do for our joint birthday – December 9.” It was the last time Andrew would speak to his second son.

For Anno’s mother, photographer Bee Gilbert, the last meeting and the definitive memory she holds of her son was “the magical day by Lake Garda in September. We swam, talked and had dinner together. He was this beautiful golden boy, all suntanned and excited. I felt he was at his happiest.”

It made her happy, too, sensing that this boy of complex sensitivities had found his way, and reassurance came in the unsent letter, discovered later, in which Anno wrote: “Everything has fallen into place around my skull thanks to this opportunity [of recording in Italy]. I know what I’m doing and I’m doing what I know...” It was a relief after the difficult time he had been having, described by his half-brother David Birkin: “Anno had been feeling blue at the beginning of 2001, unsure what to do with love and music.”

At 3.30am on November 8, 2001, it all ended. Anno, Alberto, Lee Citron, bassist with KJD and two other friends (the band’s fourth member, Billy Scherer, had stayed at home because he was tired) were driving home from the nightclub, with Alberto at the wheel. Suddenly, through the thick fog shrouding the motorway, they could make out a broken-down car with a crowd of people around it straddling the inner and middle lane of the road. Alberto swerved to

and then it kicked in and I let out a howl and put the phone down.” By chance Bee, who is separated from Andrew, rang just minutes after this. What she heard in Andrew’s tear-choked voice only properly hit her 20 minutes later, when her daughter and Anno’s half-sister Lissy came home. She recalls: “Then I went. I was screaming, writhing on the floor saying, ‘I can’t bear it. I can’t breathe.’ Lissy was holding me saying, ‘You can. You must. You are strong.’”

After a preliminary explosion of anger and tears, everything went numb for

Above: Anno’s aunt Jane Birkin (centre) with her daughters Kate Barry and Charlotte Gainsbourg  
Below: Anno, bottom left, with his band Kicks Joy Darkness



DAN PARMENTIER

## ■ FEATURE

came, filling the place, as they heard of Anno's death. He had been known as an idiosyncratic child, and then a chubby teenager absorbed in alternative rock music, but had grown as though by developmental sleight of hand into a finely honed young man, wildly articulate and fierce in his opinions. The people who came brought food, lit candles and listened to Anno's music.

After 24 hours, David left for Milan where Anno's body was being kept ready for cremation. "I went to Alberto's house where the band had been staying," he says. "I saw the room they shared, their last cigarette stubs in the ashtray. There was graffiti in huge capitals on the wall, written by Anno: 'WHO THE F\*\*\* IS ANNO?' That brought him close because in the morgue all I saw was a waxwork. Anno wasn't there."

Andrew followed soon after with Ned and he was, he says, much weaker than his youngest son when faced with the body behind a glass screen: "I was seeing him on this slab with clothes that didn't fit right because he'd been in the morgue for 12 days. And he had cut his hair short so he didn't look like Anno as I'd known him.

## 'I told Ned when I felt hollow, and we were like two leaning towers of Pisa propping each other up'

I went and put some hair of Bee's under his shirt next to his body. I rolled a very big joint and put it there as well. Then I put in a penny for the ferry man, but I thought prices may have gone up, so I put a quid in."

Bee wanted to hold the memory from Lake Garda and chose not to go to Italy and see Anno's body, nor did she want it transported back to England – he was cremated in Italy, and Andrew brought the ashes back. Instead, Andrew's sister Jane Birkin went in her place, and put a little diamond Anno had given Bee against the boy's lips. "I went for Bee and for my daughters," Jane says. "They were devastated at losing Anno. They had never known anyone could be touched from their generation."

For many people it is the time after the rituals of saying goodbye that the finality of death becomes most terrible. Bee, whose childlike faith in life and unguarded optimism were still with her, albeit in small measure, sensed how deep Andrew's agony went: "I was frightened for Andrew," she says gently. "He was so devastated. Ned spent a lot of time with him in Wales for a while."

Andrew, too, understood how far down he could go and promised Ned he would not commit suicide. "I said it because then I could not go back on my promise." In fact, it was discovering Anno's poems and other writings in 26 notebooks and 700 written

pages that provided Andrew with solace. Very soon after the death, Andrew began organising the poems and writings, and produced a small booklet containing them for friends and relatives. He also plans to publish a volume of Anno's poems, which had already won praise from writers Margaret Atwood and Bruce Robinson, later in the year. Robinson is writing a forward for the collection, which will be published under the title *Who Said the Race Is Over?*

Andrew also collected more than 5,000 photographs of Anno, 200 hours of video footage and 25 hours of recorded music.

A compilation double CD of Anno's work with Kicks Joy Darkness, entitled *Dreams of Waking in May*, is also set to be released.

Andrew realised that giving himself this sense of purpose and the task of bringing Anno's work to the world was vital. Evenings and weekends he worked on it, carving out time alongside writing the film script of Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume*.

"I couldn't progress with my life feeling I hadn't done what was needed for

Anno," he explains. "Doing it has been a way to re-absorb the son who was part of my life for 20 years."

But there was conflict for Bee, who knew how much David and Ned needed their father at this time. "I watched Andrew give his life over to working on Anno's material," she says. "And although I think it saved Andrew and I don't think he could help it, I saw how hard it was for Ned and David to reach him, except through Anno."

"In a way I failed as a father," acknowledges Andrew. "I knew I should be spending more time with Ned and David – I needed them almost as much as they needed me – but I knew if I didn't do this for Anno I would feel I was betraying him."

It is well known that siblings can find it impossible to compete with one who has died, and how much harder that must be when the sibling's exceptional talent is being recognised and reified. Ned admits that the attention being paid to Anno's talent has felt diminishing: "I have thought, 'Would I be remembered for anything I do after I die?'" But, like Bee, he has drawn comfort and much pleasure from what Andrew has done with Anno's work.

The hardest thing for Ned even now is to grasp fully that the brother who should

have been there to share his life is gone. "I find myself going over and over where we would be now, what we would be doing. It's like a parallel universe. Everything is screwed up." His sadness is palpable, although he adds: "I do now get days of feeling good, it's just that the medium of life is lowered a bit."

David talks of an "unhealthy depression" which he experienced for a few months in 2002, and of a new pressure he now feels to make something of his life: "There was the sense of somebody who lives their life in such a productive way cut short that leaves you feeling you shouldn't waste your life."

Bee turned to therapist Julia Samuel, wanting to protect Ned from her grief: "Julia told me it was better I showed Ned my sadness and tears because it allowed him to do it, too," she says. "So then I told Ned when I was feeling hollow and desperate and we were like two leaning towers of Pisa propping each other up."

At the beginning of 2002, actor Nick Reding, a family friend, suggested Bee photograph him in Africa where he was working on an Aids-awareness programme. For Bee, it was an escape from being immovably stuck in pain. "There I was among women who understood grief and I had something useful to do," she says. "Nick and I have now formed

a charity, and I shall go back later in the year. I can do this because I feel I have Anno inside me, like an embryo in my heart."

As time passes, friends often want to help the bereaved move on, as Jane Birkin experienced when her husband Serge Gainsbourg died 13 years ago. "But they should let us grieve," she says. "Sometimes we want to be sad." She is now expressing her love and admiration for Anno by bringing his poems into performances she is giving around the world. "I keep his poems in my handbag and hand them out so the world can know what a gift he had," she says.

Through all this the family have come closer, finding new ways to nurture and care for each other. And for Bee and Andrew, who are still separated, it has created a space to be parents, finding poignant meaning in a favourite poem of Anno's, *Close to the River*:

I have both your madnesses inside.  
I am in constant disagreement with myself.  
But I cannot leave me.

You both cannot leave me. ●

For more information on buying the CD, visit [www.kicksjoydarkness.co.uk](http://www.kicksjoydarkness.co.uk)



