

Celebrating Jesse Ryan Fisher

Jesse was born June 8, 1987 in New York Hospital in Manhattan. He was premature by more than eight weeks, and was expected to spend two months in the neonatal intensive care unit. Instead, he surprised his parents (again) by meeting the medical criteria for discharge after only 11 days.

His first home was a music studio in downtown Brooklyn. Jesse's parents, David Fisher and Jan Ryan, were typical young New Yorkers who worked professional jobs while nurturing shared musical and cultural interests. Outings for the threesome grew to include museum visits, walks in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and across the Brooklyn Bridge, live music at local restaurants, the Ringling Brothers Circus, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and even a city council meeting.

So how did Jesse come to grow up on Maui? The family had to leave their neighborhood in Brooklyn when it was torn down for an urban redevelopment project. Most of the residents and businesses relocated elsewhere in New York, but Jesse's family was ready for someplace greener. In 1988, they celebrated Christmas on Maui with David's brother Guy. Jesse, 18 months old, had a thrilling encounter with Uncle Guy's puppy and worked his charm on many new people. The natural beauty and kindly spirit of the island felt right, and Jan and David made the decision to move to Maui.

In the spring of 1989, David and Jan called in the movers, sent Nimby the cat ahead to start her quarantine, packed up their station wagon, and headed west with Jesse in his car seat. They took a meandering, scenic route, staying with relatives and friends along the



June 8, 1987–January 17, 2017

way. In San Francisco, they put the station wagon on a boat and themselves on a plane, arriving just before Jesse's second birthday.

On Maui, the family circle grew to include other children and their parents. Among the first were Denise (who babysat for Jesse) and her son, Scott, who was also two. There were neighbor girls who didn't mind playing with a younger kid, and classmates from Montessori preschool. Guests at Jesse's fourth birthday party included Christian, Levi, and others who remained close in later years. His circle of friends widened further at Haiku Elementary School. It was there that he got his first theatrical part, as the lead in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

At Kalama Intermediate School, Jesse joined the band program. He loved playing saxophone and was never more at home than when hanging with friends in the Kalama band room. Outside of school, he

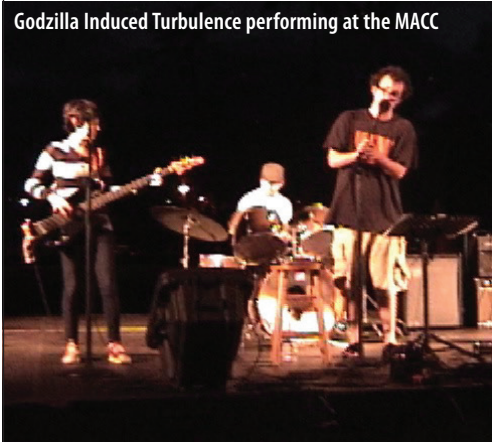
joined a precociously good rock band led by Bryan. From then on, there was usually a band in his life.

When it came time for Jesse to go to high school, the natural sequel would have been to attend King Kekaulike High School. However, a large contingent of Jesse's friends from Kalama, including the talented and charismatic Ginger and Marikah, chose Baldwin High School instead, in order to participate in its vibrant theater program established by Sue Anne Loudon. Jesse chose Baldwin for the same reasons. It was his first significant life decision that was largely self-directed.

During his four years at Baldwin, Jesse was deeply involved in Baldwin Theater Guild and took part in most of its productions. He played musical roles in *The Wiz* (Lion), *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (Naphtali), *Grease* (Roger), and *Hibiscus Pomade*. He played in a teenage band called The Bipolar Express, and in two mixed-age bands, The Wailuku Garage Band and Island Schmyland, with his parents and their contemporaries. Later bands were Godzilla Induced Turbulence and Evil Whale Eye. He also kept up with his coursework.

Around junior year of high school, he once again chose his own unique direction. He did not pursue a theatrical career (although he later acted in Bryan's first fulllength movie, and in the Maui Onstage production of *Sweeney Todd*), but he also rejected the default option of applying to a roster of liberal arts colleges in pursuit of acceptance at a prestigious one with good financial aid. Jesse liked the idea of a broad education, but saw the expense of a private college as unconscionable, especially if it involved

Godzilla Induced Turbulence performing at the MACC



Jesse with his parents, Jan and David

With the puppet from *The Emperor and the Nightingale*.



taking on a large debt. His solution was to live at home, get an Associate of Arts degree from Maui Community College and defer specialization until the last two years of college.

The summer after graduating from high school, Jesse took part in a two-week exchange program with a homestay on Okinawa. Taking Japanese in high school had been a nod toward building a resume for college, but the program changed that mindset. He came back with a *sanshin* (an Okinawan three-stringed instrument), an epic volume of photos, and a passion for all things Japanese. He joined the Obon ensemble at Rinzaï Zen Mission in Paia where he received sanshin instruction from Norman Kaneshiro.

At MCC, Jesse sought out Japanese students who had come to Maui to study, finding common ground with them at Kumu Keli'i Tau'a's Hawaiian culture classes at the Maui Language Institute, where he played ukulele. Jesse also found inspiration in his Japanese teacher, Hiroko DeLeon, who encouraged him to spend his junior year abroad at Konan University in Kobe. In addition to contacts with faculty and students, he lived with two different host families and studied with a famous calligrapher. He also met and fell in love with a spirited young woman. He enrolled at University of Hawai'i at Manoa upon his return, having already completed much of the basic coursework for a Japanese language major.

Graduating in 2009, Jesse faced the uncertainties of an economic recession as well as his own questions about how to harness his interests to a viable career. He tried a number of different jobs and locations. He was accepted as an assistant language teacher in the Japan Exchange

Teaching program, which took him to the remote island of Tsushima. He found he enjoyed teaching young children and was proud to introduce them to elements of his own culture. He was earning enough to travel often within Japan, and to Korea and Europe as well. He continued to make friends, old and young, Japanese and foreign, and of course, he joined a band and performed with a community theater group.

After his return to Maui, Jesse visited some longstanding friends to see how they were doing with their new locations and new choices. He explored moving to New York City, Portland, Seattle or Colorado. Back on Maui, he apprenticed in permaculture and put his new skills to work on his family's land. He also got his one and only professional acting job, touring most of the elementary schools in the state as a puppeteer in Maui Academy of Performing Art's production of *The Emperor and the Nightingale*.

Next, he took another turn as an English teacher in Asia, this time with preschoolers in Taiwan, where his friend Nick was breaking into filmmaking. Jesse's Taiwan experience was overshadowed by a devastating illness that sent Nick to the DC area for expert treatment. Jesse returned to Maui and started substitute teaching in the public schools and saving up for another foreign adventure.

This time he knew he wanted to be in Japan, and he found his opportunity as an assistant language teacher with Interac in Hikone, starting in March of 2016. There he made new friends and rejoined old ones in Kyoto, Osaka and elsewhere in Japan. He even visited friends in Sendai. By January of 2017, his financial situation and prospects were looking up. Hikone, with its famous



With Kali and their sanshins



In a kimono fashion show



At a wedding in Nagoya



Giving thanks for lunch

scenic castle and beautiful temples, was beginning to reveal itself as an ideal place to live, and he was beginning to hope he could meet "the right woman" even without moving to a big city. In the last of his near-weekly video calls with his parents, he was ebullient, full of good news about his recent activities, and delighted by the record-setting snowfall Hikone had received. The next day, rather than test his limited snow-driving skills, he walked to and from work and posted lovely photos of white covered landscapes and children playing. In the early hours of the following morning, Jesse passed away in his sleep from a previously unsuspected heart condition.

All who knew Jesse will cherish the memory of his freshness and spontaneity as a songwriter, performer and teacher, and his unfailing warmth and good cheer as a friend. ∞