

# Jim Bessman

Music Journalist

Perhaps you've heard the saying "music writers are just frustrated musicians." That is not the case with Jim Bessman. "When I was a child I was given piano lessons, and I halfheartedly tried to learn the guitar," he admits, adding, "oh—and I did learn how to get single notes out of a harmonica—but I'm not a musician."

During the 25 years he's spent as a freelance journalist, however, Bessman has had the chance to meet, interview, and write about most of his favorite musicians, from country-pickers to punk-rockers. When we caught up with him at his apartment in New York City, he was busy drafting a story for *Billboard* magazine, for which he writes a weekly page. Some folks spend years looking for such a cool career. For Bessman, it found him.

## How did you begin your career as a writer?

I wasn't interested in being a music journalist until I was asked to become one. I'm from Madison, Wisconsin, where, in the mid-'70s, there was a throw-away newspaper called the *Madcity Music Sheet*. I ended up meeting the publisher at a show. He asked, "Why don't you write for us?" And I said, "Because I'm not a writer." But apparently, that wasn't a prerequisite. So when I heard that Cajun fiddler Doug Kershaw would be performing in Oshkosh, I had to meet him. The publisher got me a backstage pass so I could do the interview, and that's how I became a writer. They say that sometimes you back into things, and I most certainly did.



## Tell us about the *Madcity Music Sheet*.

It was written by people like me—music fans, not writers. We just wanted to get into concerts free! It wasn't *The New York Times*, but we were excited about music, and we conveyed that in our writing.

## Who were some of the musicians you interviewed early on?

I talked to everyone from Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash to George Jones and Merle Haggard. But I was also into punk rock, and I ended up writing a book called *The Ramones: An American Band*. I had been friendly with the band since they first came through Madison. They've since been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but 10 years ago they were still so overlooked, and I was afraid that might continue unless someone sat down and wrote a book about them.

## Have you written for other publications?

Yes. A freelance writer is like an independent contractor; you do a variety of different jobs for different magazines. I have been closely associated with *Billboard* for 20 years, but I'm not on staff, and I work out of my apartment. My regular work for *Billboard* consists of album reviews, features on artists, and stories about the music business itself.

## What are you writing at the moment?

This morning I was working on a story about Michelle Shocked, who now has her own record label and publishing company. I write mostly about people who mean something to me.

## What is your biggest career highlight?

When I was presented the key to the city of Mamou, Louisiana. It's a tiny little Cajun town, and the home of Fred's Lounge, a well-known tavern where they have great live Cajun music.

## What's the most rewarding part of your job?

I've enriched myself immensely through learning from other people—getting to meet other people, getting to know other cultures and ways of life.

## Do you still go to shows?

Yes. I love hearing live music, and it's an important part of my research. That's how you learn what's out there, and how you maintain relationships with musicians. I could be a record reviewer and just stay home and listen to records, but going to shows is how I got into this in the first place. 