

WHY I LOVED LOUIE

Story by NEAL JUSTIN • neal.justin@startribune.com • Photo by TOM WALLACE • Star Tribune file

There was a time when I felt sorry for Louie Anderson.

After a stupendous run in the 1980s and '90s that included a legendary debut on "The Tonight Show With Johnny Carson," an Emmy Award-winning children's series and sold-out shows in clubs across the country, the comic had hit a rough patch.

The highly anticipated CBS sitcom "The Louie Show" was axed after just six episodes. He lost a gig hosting "Family Feud." By 2003, he was largely relegated to doing an act in Las Vegas, far from the Strip.

During that slump, Anderson would call me at the office, hoping I would plug some of his upcoming local appearances. There were pleasant conversations, but I always hung up feeling a little sad. Poor has-been.

Boy, was I wrong about Anderson, who died Friday at 68 from complications of cancer at a Vegas hospital.

In late 2015, I received advance screeners of an FX sitcom called "Baskets" in which the red-hot Zach Galifianakis played

battling twins. I was shocked to see Anderson pop up as the brothers' overbearing mother. Even more surprising — he was tremendous.

Over dinner at the Mall of America's FireLake Grill House a few weeks before the premiere, I told Anderson I thought he would get an Emmy nomination.

"You really think so?" he said, sipping Champagne.

When he got that Emmy nod, the first of three in a row, Anderson could have shunned me — sweet revenge for not giving him enough attention when he needed it most.

Just the opposite happened. Anderson offered me a front-row seat to one of the greatest comebacks in show business history.

Less than 15 minutes after he won the Emmy for Best Supporting Actor in a Comedy, he called me to share his thoughts.

"Oh, my God, I won! I can't believe it," said an emotional Anderson. "This is like a reboot for me."

See **LOUIE** on E6 ▶

WHY I LOVED LOUIE ANDERSON

◀ **LOUIE** from E1

At comedy shows, he ushered me backstage to gossip right up to the minute before he took to the mic. There were late-night phone calls where he wanted my thoughts on a new routine. When I was in Vegas last February, Anderson went out of his way to ring up local venues to find out which standups I should check out.

He even invited me to the "Baskets" wrap party in Los Angeles. I didn't attend, but I did get to be with him when the last episode of that series aired. That's because he chose that date in 2019 to perform at the Withrow Ballroom and Event Center in Hugo.

He was there in the Twin Cities suburbs partly as a favor to his longtime buddy Scott Hansen, who was organizing the show. When Hansen died last September, Anderson was one of the first people to text me with the news.

But he also chose off-the-grid cities like Hugo to hone his act.

Like Jerry Seinfeld and George Carlin, Anderson sweated every word. He taped almost all his performances and

would dissect them in his hotel room afterward.

One evening, we sat next to each other in the back of a club. He offered play-by-play analysis of each act, whispering in my ear how the slightest tweak could land a joke a little better. It was a graduate class in comedy.

He was committed to his craft. As a stand-up, he was only getting better.

Toward the end, he was digging deeper: more a storyteller than a joke teller. He was opening up in new, more challenging ways about his battle with his weight and his relationship with his father, a sometimes violent alcoholic. It wasn't just funny; it was touching.

Through the ups and down, he stayed loyal to Minnesota, old friends and the local paper.

During one of our late-night phone calls, he sensed that I was feeling down.

"If you ever need to talk, give me a ring," he said. "I'm good at cheering people up."

I wish I could call him right now.

612-673-7431 • Njustin@startribune.com

A pioneer of the Twin Cities' stand-up scene, Anderson's four-decade career as a comedian and actor included his own sitcom, a cartoon based on his life and the unlikely and Emmy-winning performance as mother to twin adult sons — played by Zach Galifianakis — in the TV series "Baskets."