

On knowing that your free time is limited



Author and editor Albert Mudrian (Decibel Magazine) discusses multi-tasking, time management, and doing what you love.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3477 words.

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You're a media mogul now. Beyond Decibel magazine, you're publishing books, you're booking tours, you're curating festivals, you're putting out records. How did this happen?

"How did this happen?" is the question I've asked myself the last 20 years. What led me here? The short answer is, I don't know. But it's funny, the magazine is probably the easiest thing I do, honestly, which doesn't sound right, but it's the thing that I probably still derive the most joy from just because it's almost like a little escape from everything else these days, and it's just something I know how to do really well, having done it 236 times as we talk now.

But I guess there's always been an unspoken plan in place to develop different arms of a business. There certainly wasn't at the onset. It was just a magazine. When we started it in 2004, it was a much different landscape. It wasn't one that was still particularly inviting to print media, but it was one where you could say, "I'm about to start a magazine," and people wouldn't look at you like you were insane. It was probably the last period that you could do that.

And now you've built an empire.

Ultimately, *Decibel* is rooted in the stuff that I like. It's the same with the things that grew out of it. With the books, it was books that I would like to read—so we would just write them and publish them. With the tours, it was bands that I would want to see together. With the fests, it was this idea of putting craft beer and extreme music together, which also came from, "This is something I would want to do." I don't know if this is the best approach from a sound business perspective, but it's always been like, "What do I want to do? What do I want to see? What would I be excited about?" And once I have that idea, it turns into, "All right, is there a way to actually monetize that?" Rather than, "We need to make money—think of some ideas."

That attitude has helped everything we do in a lot of ways because I think people understand it's coming from genuine fandom. The records that we're releasing, they're not going to sell a ton, but they'll do fine. If Decibel Records goes away tomorrow, it's not really going to impact the bottom line that much, but it's something we want to do. And I guess we're in a sound enough financial position that we can do that just as long as we don't spend a ton of time on it.

What about the books and festivals?

The books are an important part of what we do these days. We sell a lot of books. The festivals are an important part of what we do—a lot of people come out to them, they're a big deal at this point, which is pretty wild. And

obviously the magazine is still relevant even though I don't know how, because newsstands are just disappearing by the day. So, it's really almost like our subscriber base is driving it, which is just how business has been trending, in a way. People don't go shopping anywhere, they just get their shit delivered. But all of it happened the same way that *Decibel* itself happened. It's just something that I wanted to do, nobody else was doing it, so it became, "Let's try it."

Plenty of people sit around with their friends, have a couple of drinks, and go, "Wouldn't it be cool if we did this?" or, "Wouldn't it be cool if we did that?" But you're actually doing all this stuff. Have you always been like that—a self-starter?

No, I don't think I have always been. But keep in mind, I'm 48. I started *Decibel* when I was 28. I started working on *Choosing Death* when I was 25 or 26. So, I was just barely an adult at the point when all this stuff started. I think anything that anybody does pretty much up until they're 20 you can just erase from the record. As long as you got through life without killing anybody for those first 20 years, you can reset whatever the narrative of your life was, I think. You're not beholden to, "Oh, you did poorly in school," or you weren't a great worker, or you weren't motivated, or whatever it is.

I don't remember feeling like I particularly had a direction until I started working at [*Decibel's* publisher] Red Flag Media. I started writing for their in-store publications back in 1996, and then I started full-time in the spring of 1997. Once I started doing that, and I became a magazine editor, I think that's really when there was direction, there was drive, there was motivation to do something—whether that was the old-school kind of chasing stories, trying to get the Radiohead interview, or whatever. I was motivated then. And it all just organically led me to what *Decibel* became when it launched.

It's impressive enough that you run a successful print magazine in 2024. It's even more impressive that it's a successful print magazine dedicated to a very specific musical genre. What's the secret there? Does it have to do with all the branching out we've been speaking of?

No, I think the secret is what you touched on in the question: It's a niche magazine. Those are the only things that can survive in 2024. Think about all the general audience magazines that have come and gone in the 20 years that *Decibel* has been around. You couldn't sustain *Spin*. Think about that. Think about us growing up, how huge that magazine was, how totally influential that magazine was, and it didn't have a fucking prayer. But a niche publication, I think that's really where you have a shot because you're limiting your ceiling to begin with. You're not saying, "I'm going to print half a million copies. It's going to be in every gas station in the Midwest, and everybody will find it." You can do that, but those magazines will sit there forever.

But having something that you know there is a passionate audience for—even if it's not the biggest audience in the world—is still a significant audience. And we see it every year with people buying the books or buying the magazine. They're showing up at the events; it's a real thriving community. Having been a part of it for so long, I have my own bullshit detector, as does pretty much everybody else in this community. For whatever reason, I've been able to avoid setting it off for a long time. And I think that's the other reason that we survive: We're part of something, everybody knows that we're legitimately a part of it, we're not outsiders, we're not interlopers, we grew up with all this. We didn't relaunch, we didn't rebrand. It's always been the same, but there's still an evolution, if that makes any sense.

I remember talking to you about various opportunities and collaborations that came up over the years for *Decibel*. Many of them didn't pan out for whatever reason. Did you turn anything down that might've been appealing from a financial standpoint but didn't fit with *Decibel's* ethos?

You're asking me if I resisted selling out. Well, I guess the opportunity wasn't as lucrative as you thought [laughs]. There definitely have been things presented to us where you look at it and you think, "Maybe that's not quite right for us." But no one has ever put a life-changing amount of money in front of me and said, "Hey, if you do this, this is yours." So, I don't think anybody needs to hold me up as some great fucking moral compass or anything like that, in terms of what it is that we do.

But are there opportunities that we had to, like you said, collaborate with somebody or raise our profile by getting involved with a certain band or a certain company? Sure. But all that stuff is fleeting, and I don't think we were ever in a position where we felt so desperate that we seriously considered it.

I did take a meeting once with a business owner who proposed buying *Decibel*. I never had any intention of actually selling it to this person, but I just wanted to take the meeting to hear what they had to say because this person had convinced a bunch of other people to actually sell to him and his company. That was just wild to me. But the things that were being said, it always was like, "Man, does anybody really believe that they would sell what they do and somehow come out in a better position a few years?"

Maybe it even kind of goes back to when I was writing *Choosing Death*. The first chapter I wrote for *Choosing Death* was the Earache/Columbia chapter, and that just really resonated with me on, I guess, a lot of levels. It's a lesson that so many people don't want to learn, but it's real. We've been an independent from day one, and it's never changing unless there's life-changing money involved, where I can be like, "Well, this would set up my kids for the rest of their lives." But who the fuck is going to pay? Who's going to do that? Let's be honest. Like, "Oh, yeah, there's a lot of money in Tomb Mold these days. How does 15 million sound?" That's not happening.

Tell me a little bit about the balance you have to strike between doing what you want to do and the realities of running a business—and how that may have changed over the years.

It isn't so much about money as much as it's just about time management and taking care of your staff and not accidentally killing them because you're all working incredibly hard. I'm fortunate to work with a team of people who are incredibly motivated and talented and dedicated and honestly just emotionally invested in this thing that we do. It becomes a balance of making sure it's healthy for them, but I haven't gotten to the point where I've made sure it's healthy for me. It's like when the oxygen masks drop on the airplane: You're supposed to put it on yourself first, but I'm like, "No, no, I'll get everybody else and will do me if there's anything left."

So, it's kind of like that. It isn't so much that we're limited by these financial constraints. I mean, there are things that like that. Do I wish the magazine could be on thicker paper? Do I wish it had slightly better production value? Do I wish there was crazier shit we could do with our books? Do I wish I could spend more on a headliner at one of the festivals? Sure. But it's not anything that, once the book, or the record, or the fests, or the magazine is out, that I look at and think what should have been or what could have been. I look at it and I'm just proud of what it is.

***Choosing Death* came out 20 years ago. It's been very successful, but much like *Decibel*, it started as a labor of love. Was there any point during the process where you became frustrated or discouraged to the point of not finishing it?**

Did I ever get to the point of, "Fuck, this isn't happening"? No, I didn't. It was maybe just youthful naivety, but there was a vision to just get to the end of it. If anything, what I live with now is the anxiety of, "Oh, I'm going to have to rewrite that one of these days again. I don't know how the hell I'm going to have time to do that." When it came out in 2004, it was a very consistent process from the time I started it a couple of years beforehand to the time it was published. It was very much: you set up the goals, you knock them down. There were the occasional setbacks, but there was never anything that was completely debilitating or put the project in any kind of question.

Since then, I did a revised and expanded edition that we published with Decibel Books. That was the first book we published back in 2015. And then about a year and a half later I did another slightly revised version that came out on Bazillion Points, and that's the one that exists today. But there's almost 10 years of history since I revised it. So, the clock is ticking. Since that version of *Choosing Death* has come out, there's a whole generation of bands that have formed, released multiple records, been on the cover of *Decibel*, been on *Decibel* tours, been on our events...

And then broken up.

Yeah. It's a whole cycle that's happened, so there's going to come a time when maybe it's the 25th anniversary, when surely I won't have anything planned for *Decibel*, so I'll have plenty of time to work on that [laughs]. But no, there was never any doubt about that for whatever reason.

Not long after the book came out, you became the go-to death metal and grindcore authority, appearing in magazine articles, on podcasts, and in documentaries. Was that gratifying—or strange? What's been your experience of that?

There's no way I will ever agree with you about me being the go-to authority. But it's nice to be recognized as somebody who might have something slightly authoritative to say about something that they're passionate about or knowledgeable about. It's a privilege to be asked to do certain things and appear in documentaries, or books, or on NPR, or even just fun stuff. They're cool little things you get to do, and you think, "Well, maybe my mom will see that, and she can get off my case about getting a real job someday." But I don't think much about it.

I think part of that was just because back then, especially a few years into it, there just weren't a lot of documents on this stuff. When *Choosing Death* came out, the only other extreme metal books were really *Lords of Chaos*, *American Hardcore*, and the sections of Ian Christie's *Sound of the Beast* that covered extreme metal. That was it. And now the landscape is nuts. You want a book on Icelandic black metal? You got it, here's 500 pages. So, I don't feel like I even get asked that much anymore, which is also fine. But I do think it was more like somebody googles "death metal expert" and there's only so many results that were available back then.

As you mentioned, *Decibel's* publishing arm started in 2015. What kind of challenges have you come up against in that department?

Working with some first-time authors, guys who go from being regular *Decibel* contributors to, "Hey, I think you have a book in you." Sometimes that ends really well; sometimes it ends not great, and then sometimes you get to a fantastic point, but there's a lot of road bumps, there's a lot of carnage along the way, and that's okay. Writing a book is a daunting process, so you've got to be there to encourage people and get a sense of what they think they can handle versus what they can *actually* handle—whether it's more or less—and just be there as a crutch, especially for the first-time guys.

For somebody like David Gehlke, who has written three books for us and is in the middle of working on a fourth, he and I work great together, and I'm never concerned. We've got five books in various states of production right now, and I think four of them will happen for sure. The other one, we'll see. But four I believe will come to fruition, and it's just trying to get everybody honest with themselves. That's definitely a lesson that I learned.

Some books would get delayed a year, and others just got wiped off the schedule completely. But it's a learning curve in terms of working with the authors. In terms of the production, Mike Wohlberg, our art director, designs all the books, and he and I obviously work incredibly closely and work really well when it comes to production timelines. I completely trust his vision for an aesthetic for these books, and I think they all look fucking great.

But it does become a time management thing. Last year almost killed Mike and I, working back-to-back on the Scott Burns book, a 460-page book, and the revised and expanded edition of Daval Patterson's *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult*, which is like a 900-page book. It was just nonstop trying to do the magazine, trying to run the website, trying to make sure the announcements for Denver were underway, trying to work on what became this year's Metal & Beer Fest that just happened a couple of weeks ago. I'd be sitting at my daughter's soccer practice with printouts, just copyediting. It was nonstop, and it kind of ruined us. Get up early, do some. Stay up late, do some more. I think we were really teetering on mental breakdown. So, I learned that sometimes you have to say no, no matter how good an idea is. There's only so many of us and so many hours.

Speaking of that, you must have some time-management tips. You're doing all this stuff, and on top of that you've got two kids.

Tip one, don't sleep [laughs]. I feel like there's days where I don't see my kids enough, but by the same token, my daughter's 12 and she's happy to just be in her room all day right now anyway. But obviously, just some basic

things like planned family vacations, which of course coincide with their spring break, which unfortunately is always the week before Metal & Beer Fest in Philly. So, I'm standing in line at Dollywood taking phone calls from Biohazard's manager. But it's one of those things that, as long as you don't completely bum out your family, you're good. You can bum out other families in line—that's fine—but my family is really tolerant of the bullshit I have to do to keep this running.

A shared Google calendar helps, and just knowing that your free time is limited. My wife Amy is great—it helps having a partner who has their shit way more together than me. That's another tip: Find somebody smarter and better organized than you. But there's no secret sauce, obviously. It's just working a ton and hoping everybody is cool with that.

Albert Mudrian recommends:

Requiem Metal Podcast. Mark Rudolph and Jason Hundey might be the first metal podcast on record (I'm not fact-checking that, but they've been at it since 2007-2008), and they are still at the top of their game nearly two decades later. The shows are exhaustive, but never exhausting. The latest episode is a five-hour-plus examination of early Samael. If I'm not traveling, I listen to these while grocery shopping, so I'll finish this one in about two months.

Baseball Savant. For true baseball sickos only. If you already armchair general manage your favorite baseball team, the Baseball Savant site provides all the data needed to make informed decisions on your imaginary transactions! 3D pitch tracks, charts for catch probability for every batted ball in the majors, sprint speed and burst graphs—it's all here. I'm a pretty big nerd and even I don't understand half of this shit.

Some More News. Endlessly entertaining YouTube series focusing on deep dives on terrible people and/or terrible things via airtight writing and rapid-fire delivery. If you don't feel completely hopeless and powerless after watching an episode of *Last Week Tonight*, *Some More News* will finish you off.

Running. I've been doing this since 1997, and it's one of the few activities that temporarily empties my head. I'm not fast (we're talking over nine-minute miles) and I rarely run over three miles at a time, but I consistently get out three or four times a week. RIVL: Severe ankle sprains, chronic knee pain.

The Mute Button. If social media use is mandatory for your work, this is the only thing that's going to save you from the horrors of Twitter. I recommend muting virtually every account you interact with, even people you like. When they eventually write something stupid, you'll never have to hold it against them.

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