

On having patience with the time it takes to succeed



Journalist Brian Anderson discusses the long journey from idea to finished project, the power of obsession, and how to persevere

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As told to Laura Feinstein, 2246 words.

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You just published your first book. I'm going to ask the question all writers hate - how long did it take?

Each book is its own journey, but it's been an exercise in time and patience. I got the deal in late 2022, and by January 1st, 2023, I had to sit down, roll up my sleeves, and start writing. A year and a half later, I had the full first draft.

I had started thinking about this project ten years ago when I published an [initial feature](#) on the Wall of Sound while on staff at Motherboard, Vice's science and tech vertical. I had spent a year working on it, and it clocked in at around 9,000 words. By sheer coincidence, it ran during a series of shows celebrating the band's 50th anniversary that generated additional attention. I remember thinking I'd gone so deep, "surely this will be the definitive take." I quickly realized I had barely scratched the surface. I filed the idea away, but couldn't stop thinking about it. I kept gathering bits here and there, reading everything I could, staying obsessed. I couldn't shake it. I was so captivated.

Why do you think?

If you don't know, the Wall of Sound was a groundbreaking technology consisting of hundreds of speakers, dozens of amplifiers, custom staging, and scaffolding, and stood over three stories tall. It was between 70 and a hundred feet wide and 40 feet deep. It was a custom sound reinforcement system-like a public address or PA system-that The Dead and their circle of roadies, audio engineers, sound consultants, and technicians built over several years, beginning in the mid-sixties through 1974. It revolutionized sound reinforcement. To this day, if you see live music, from a stadium to a small punk club, you'll see some principles first forged through the Wall of Sound. If you talk to anyone in the sound world-a sound technician, a recording engineer-they will know about the Wall of Sound.

I see why it was so inspiring.

From that first feature in *Motherboard* to the book's publication, it's been almost 10 years to the month. One thing I learned is that a project is going to take the time that it needs. There was a point in 2018, early 2019, when I started putting together an initial proposal. But the agent I was working with saw the book as something different, so nothing came of it, which I learned is a rite of passage.

Can you explain?

The first time you shop around a book proposal, you might not get any bites, and that can sting and be

demoralizing. But if you feel strongly, you just have to keep going.

After that initial round of rejections, the final proposal took shape. The real lesson was that you'll probably get rejected, and that's just part of it the first time around. But you have to keep going. And if you get a great agent, which I am so grateful for, good things can happen.

That's a great point.

I feel like I've been working on this book my whole life. Being raised by two Deadheads, this music was always in the background. But the TLDR is that it will take years from idea to proposal to landing the book deal and then actually writing it. It's an ultra marathon, not a sprint. If you're going to get impatient at all, this might not be the thing for you. But if you're committed to the vision and in for the long haul, you can totally do it.

You have very specific insight into the Dead through your parents. Was it more complicated that this topic was such a part of your personal narrative?

A funny part of my book journey has been what I call being "an insider-outsider." I'm not a Dead Instagram hype beast. I'm not even a music journalist, per se. I've been an editor for various science, tech, and health verticals at major publications. But at the same time, I've listened to this band my entire life and absorbed so much knowledge. I also just appreciate a good yarn, and I always knew this story was entertaining.

I'm not a Grateful Dead fan, but still found myself invested.

It's a psychedelic romp and ultimately a story about obsession. This group had to put aside any interpersonal drama or tensions in the name of driving toward this greater collective good. But having something of a personal stake helped because I could thread the needle.

There have been dozens of books written about The Dead. It's this massive cultural institution. For so many on the outside, it can be overwhelming. Many don't even bother trying to find a way to enter this world and see what it's about.

Right.

Having that personal angle helped tell a story in a way that folks who might think they have no interest will be able to understand and keep turning the page. St. Martin's is a big five publisher for a general audience, so I had to keep that in mind. Having absorbed so much information throughout my life crystallized what aspects of Dead history and lore I had to mention and what I could dispense with.

You actually bought a piece of the Wall of Sound.

Yes! I came to own a part of it through a Sotheby's auction in 2021. Sotheby's had partnered with the Grateful Dead Organization to auction decommissioned items from the Grateful Dead Warehouse in Northern California. There were around 150 lots, and I didn't bother looking through until there were 24 hours left until bidding closed. The night before, I started scrolling through, wondering which item had the lowest starting bid. That was this object. Having a piece of the Wall fall into my life got me reconnected with old sources, people I'd first spoken to years ago, and reaching out to entirely new sources. One thing led to another.

Kismet!

To own a part of it, it's special. Thinking of all of the places this artifact has been, all the miles it clocked-tens, even hundreds of thousands-and all the people who experienced The Grateful Dead partly through this thing that's sitting in my office, my mind reels. It gave me a unique window into this gigantic story. There's a part that just feels cosmic, or fate.

Truly.

Another lesson was that you can have something as iconic as The Grateful Dead, where so many books have been written and so much scholarship, but still find unique windows in. I can't believe nobody has written this book yet, and I'm the one who did it. As a writer, there's this feeling that nothing is new anymore. Everything has been covered. Everything's been written about and explored to death. But it's not true. You can still find fresh and interesting avenues into storytelling. You have to trust the process and know it might take time.

As a journalism professor, you must have students hoping to write books. What advice do you give them?

There is this idea that the book proposal-to-book-to-docuseries pipeline is a surefire thing, and it will happen quickly. But no, the first and foremost thing is that it will take time, and that's something you'll have to make peace with early on. In the formative stages of getting your idea together, putting the proposal together, and getting an agent, it might be something you'll need to chip away at on nights and weekends. Even if it doesn't feel like you're getting as much done as you would hope to in the beginning or throughout any stage of the process, it will add up if you keep chipping away. At a certain point, you will look back and think, "holy shit, I've come this far."

One thing I did learn is that working on a book can completely consume you. You get sucked in, so you have to ride that fine line between being totally committed and being totally uncommitted. If you don't watch out, it will take you. With all of the work that goes into this process, maybe you have the time and the resources to work on it solely, but I know I couldn't. I had to work on editing while the proposal was coming together.

But a book deal with an advance can free you up to put your head down for that first full draft and focus entirely on that, if you want to. I'm not pretending to know everyone's exact situation, but in my case, I did a lot of chipping away early on it, got an advance, and the pressure was off a bit.

Just giving you the time and space and the encouragement too.

It felt very validating when I got the book deal. When you're putting a proposal together that, in your heart of hearts, you know is a good idea and are fully committed, even if it gets rejected. I always knew this was a good idea, but the time it takes to make these sorts of things happen, you go through stretches where it feels like it's you against the world. It can feel isolating. But if you stick to it, it can happen.

There are various milestones along the way that feel validating. Much of it is just you out on the trail, and then every once in a while, you come to an intersection, and there's someone holding up a sign that says "keep running" or "good job." You see people hold up signs during marathons—that's what it feels like because so much of the work is just getting up every day and chipping away.

In the book, I loved the character of Bear, the band's original soundman and key architect of what would later become the Wall of Sound. I kept imagining his dogged perfectionism was a stand in for the entire creative process.

He was a polymath. He could drive the others in this scene crazy, but he was the original force behind the Wall of Sound. He also needed others to help actualize those ideas — sound engineers, technicians, and classically trained audiophiles. He was brilliant and largely self-taught, and the Wall of Sound couldn't have existed without him.

It took the crew ten years to realize the Wall of Sound. There were fits and starts and trial and error. Many take credit for the Wall of Sound, and while it was a group creative effort, Bear was highly influential. He was sensitive to "unclean signals" in tech, which fed into his idea of a sound system without distortion. Basically, each player had their own PA. There was no "intermodulation distortion"—the technical term. No two sounds were running through the same speaker. So if you listen to the Wall of Sound recordings, the clarity is unmatched.

Some of the early shows would be delayed by up to five hours because he would freak out over a single amplifier. He claimed to be able to communicate with inanimate objects, such as sound system gear in this case. People would happen upon him hugging a speaker and crying and talking to it, trying to coax signals out of it. He was way out there but also a very brilliant creative person without whom none of this could probably have happened.

What an interesting man.

He was obsessed with audio, but also a ballet dancer. He produced millions of hits of LSD and basically turned on that entire generation. So much of the acid flowing through the Haight-Ashbury in the Summer of Love, and then throughout the rest of the country, was manufactured by Bear and his assistants. He also got obsessed with metallurgy. He would go in deep and bring in everyone.

There's a great quote from the late Steve Silverman, a *New York Times* bestselling science writer and an OG *Wired* writer who wrote the book that changed the conversation around autism and the spectrum, called *Neuro Tribes*. He noted, "I spent some time with Bear at a Grateful Dead studies conference back in the day, and came away convinced that he was on the spectrum in the best possible way." Silverman said that the Wall of Sound is, he would consider, the most outstanding achievement of the neurodivergent community. That neurodivergent folks and neurotypicals came together and forged this groundbreaking piece of technology.

It's interesting how much emotion this system of inanimate objects contained, and how much work went into building it. Obviously there's a great metaphor in there for completing a book.

Talking about the process and the journey, putting this thing together in terms of the sheer timeline and the community—it takes everyone from your editor to your agents, friends, and acquaintances who often would listen to me, being a little harebrained, working through it. It takes all those people to realize something like this. I didn't always think this would be something that would happen one day, but like everything else, it's just a progression and then one day you realize "oh shit." If you are committed and put in the time, patience, and work, you really can make these things happen.

Brian Anderson recommends:

Sticky Fingers: The Life and Times of Jann Wenner and Rolling Stone Magazine by Joe Hagan

SUNN O)), *Pyroclasts*

The Substance (2024)

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Vocation

journalist

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