On questioning what you consum

Perfumer Trey Taylor discusses leaving the media industry to teach himself about fragrance, getting feedback from strangers, and entering a space that feels impenetrable.

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As told to Sara Black McCulloch, 2488 words.

Tags: Scent, Education, First attempts, Creative anxiety, Independence, Business.

What were your early experiences in media and how did you break into working in the sphere?

I was very isolated in Western Canada and wanted to be part of the "conversation." I had my own blog where I started interviewing photographers because that world was very fascinating to me. I kind of gave them, for lack of a better term, a platform, in 2008, where they could talk about their approach to photography, art, and fashion. A lot of them didn't really come from the fashion world but just ended up there.

And then people online started reaching out. A friend had a magazine called *Husk* in Germany and asked if I would co-edit with him. He did the graphic design and printing and I did all the writing. We quickly built it up into this legitimate biannual. We got distribution—we were in 13 different countries on newsstands—and got really cool photographers to shoot. Once people recognize you are doing something, in whatever capacity, they reach out. From there, I started to work with a magazine called Fashion, Art, Type, FAT Magazine, a Copenhagen-based side project of this agency called Dyhr.Hagen. I am proud of how I weaseled my way into the industry because I learned it doesn't really matter where you are geographically, as long as you have that drive.

The media landscape in Canada is limited in many ways. Is that why you left for London? What made you go there instead of New York?

At the time, I was allergic to America. Growing up an hour north of the border, I really did not find that many interesting things going on. In America, everything was so commercial to me. I felt like it was *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, compared to the extreme countercultural sensibilities of magazines like *Dazed*, *i-D*, *10 and* 10 Men, or *Wonderland*. I wanted to make my mark in that space. For the most part, I absorbed, learned, and digested all of the cultural output of the UK. I'm so glad I did because it opened up my mind to more subcultural things that I wasn't exposed to, like Jonathan Glazer, for example. He's a legend in the UK, and made all these Guinness commercials before he started directing films. I would never have known that, had I gone to New York. I ended up doing this whole editorial package at *Dazed* about his film *Under the Skin*. I interviewed him and talked to everyone involved. That accessibility in the UK is [not like] that in America. As big as London is, it's also very small. You can get far ahead without too much red tape. If I had gone to *Vogue* or any sort of Condé Nast publication, there's no way I would've had the freedom as a 22-year-old to do an entire editorial package like that.

You left publishing for advertising, and eventually to produce fragrance. What made you realize you wanted to pursue something different?

It was after I was laid off for the third time in my career. I had to leave *Fantastic Man* because of visa issues. I had to leave *Interview* because they declared bankruptcy. I had to leave *The Face* because they shut down their

US office. I was in talks to go to the new *Gawker*, and we all know what happened there. I think that just collectively—my friends and I who worked in media—were starting to have these conversations. What is the future of this job if all of the publications we so idolize aren't having that same cultural import that they used to? It was bittersweet because I grew up only wanting one thing, and that was to have some stamp on the culture at large… I thought that my one chance at doing that would be through magazines, but I didn't factor in how the industry would change.

In terms of perfume, you're unique in that you don't have a formal education. How did you teach yourself?

I heavily relied on anything and everything. I watched all of these YouTube videos, but it was really hard separating the wheat from the chaff. There's a lot of misinformation about how to make perfume online that can lead to devastating consequences. I relied on a lot of online forums, Facebook groups, Basenotes, and read a lot of books. I looked into the Jean Carles method. Eventually I was blending on my own, and realized it was way too hard to figure out, so I reached out to Marissa Zappas, who is an independent perfumer here in New York. I basically begged her to teach me. She was offering classes at the time, but I think she had stopped to focus on her own work, but eventually, we worked out a deal where I would go to her house and we would hang out for hours and do all of these blind smell tests. That's how I learned the materials. I think two years of the four-year Grasse Institute of Perfumery course is spent learning them. In that sense, I was heavily shortcutting, but I did that with her. She was trained at Givaudan, so she's partially classical trained and partially self-taught. It was really incredible to have someone walk me through resources: this is good, this is bad, don't listen to this person, and listen to that person.

I thought magazines were hard to break into, but perfume is impenetrable, and I still don't feel like I'm part of the club. It's interesting because—and I'm not going to name names—I came across these people who turned their nose up at the self-taught perfumers and I was kind of shocked. Who are you to tell me I can't do this? These fake social rules around perfumery are equally as silly as the social rules around culture that I'm trying to flip on their head with my brand.

How are you doing that?

I've been very open and transparent in that I'm not out here looking to create something that would freak anyone out. I appreciate Big Perfume. I grew up wearing a lot of those scents, and I still think there are really good releases from the big houses. The market, however, always dictates what those scents can be. Perfumers don't have the freedom to create whatever they want; they're given a brief based on what is selling or what they think will sell in the market. It's much less free.

I want to take combinations of notes that I feel would be kind of a juxtaposition: something that is familiar or comforting paired with something a bit more challenging or extreme. Take rose and oud, which is very common, and pairing that with diesel exhaust. Or pairing raspberry and musk—a kind of fruity floral—with galbanum, which is an extremely sharp and green cut stem resin. I want to insert something slightly discomforting into an otherwise comfortable scent. I am waiting for my time, but I feel like I am part of this niche fragrance community of really cool perfumers who are pushing those boundaries and introducing unique notes like mushroom or gym socks, and making them palatable.

Is it working so far?

People have really gravitated towards my fragrances in a way that I was not really expecting. The other day, someone from Berlin emailed me because my fragrances are sold in this one place in Luxembourg, and she bought them there. She sent me this long, emotive email. It's so strange to be on the receiving end of that.

Why?

The fact that something I created has impacted someone so much that they have taken action… I'm still coming to terms with it. With journalism, I was searching for bylines and would celebrate whenever my name was in print, but that was cool mostly to me. Really, nobody emails writers. Nobody emails you going, "That was a great article.

It changed the way I thought." Whereas now that I am the "creator," people will tell you how they feel about something you've created, good or bad. I've gotten some crazy reviews on Fragrantica already, which is exciting. Someone wrote that Sour Diesel was "disgusting," and they would never put it on their skin. The fact that someone feels any type of way about a fragrance I've created is so exciting to me, because for years I was writing articles that I was begging people to read, and nothing would really resonate or I wouldn't get that feedback I was hoping for.

Do you like that people are so decisive about your perfumes? Do you feel you're helping them articulate their taste?

The majority of people don't question what it is they're consuming and why. What does it mean that I want to go to Brandy Melville? Why do I want the American Eagle jeans? Is it because of Sydney Sweeney or is it because I think they fit me well? I'm introducing people to these conversations through fragrance. I want people to question not only what scents are right for them or not right, but also why anything they consume or purchase is a signifier of their identity. In a world where everything is dictated by an algorithm, I think it's very easy to be susceptible to that, to get lost in it and develop these parasocial relationships with people whose taste you may admire but don't question.

I am under no illusions that people might come to my brand without knowing any of this stuff or thinking about any of it. They might find Byronic Hero and think, "Oh, this resonates with me. I love this fragrance." Buy it, wear it. Cool. But I want people to start shaking the cage of culture, dissecting why they like certain things or looking deeper into the things that they do like, whether it's fragrance notes, authors, or lighters. I want them to talk about that more because we've lost the monoculture and now everyone's a gatekeeper, so thereby nobody is.

Is there anything comparable between writing and developing a fragrance?

The big thing for most perfumers is, how can I make my formula more simple? Often a lot of beginners will put everything in the formula and just keep adding to try and change the scent versus removing—as in writing. If you can delete any extraneous or superfluous words, then your piece will be tighter in the end, point blank.

Once I come up with a formula that I'm pretty happy with, I show it to as many people as I possibly can, regardless of whether they have a nose for it or not… Everyone can read an article, for example, and be like, "Change this [or] that," but they might not know immediately what to do. Whereas with perfume, regardless of who you are or your background, you have an immediate visceral reaction—it's *yes* or *no*—and that's interesting to me.

Why?

In the realm of personal taste, people will be like, "Oh, this is not for me, sorry." And I'll be like, "Okay, great, but *why?*" And it's really hard to articulate why something is not resonating with you. I try to question people's reactions and decide whether or not I want to take that into tweaking my formula. It's a long process. I'm launching a new fragrance in February, and I've been working on it since last June. It's been over a year, and it's been shelved for a while, but I've taken that formula and tried to expose it to as many people as possible to gather feedback. I'm not an experimental perfumer. I want my fragrances to resonate with people. I want to challenge the status quo, but I'm not out here making a challenging perfume. I want people to like this, so I ask them if they do.

Perfume and scents are challenging to put into words, from a marketing perspective. How do you approach storytelling with fragrance?

I took the approach of storytelling around my brand and its narrative, versus perfume individually. If you look at all of the Serviette output, you'll often find that there's very little talk of perfume. I will fit the perfumes into a newsletter or social post [and] talk about the notes involved. For the most part, I'm trying to get across this narrative about being curious and developing your own personal taste and cultural capital—how you can move through society based on what you know.

I am bucking the trend of trying to manufacture the visuals or feeling you might have when you wear Serviette. I think most advertising that I see, a lot of advertisers and creatives generally don't ask themselves important questions. Would I take action because of this? Would I buy this perfume because I saw somebody whipping around in a floral field? Probably not. It might make me feel something, but I think back to this Kenzo campaign with Margaret Qualley dancing around. I feel like some cool creative directed it, and that's memorable to me, but it didn't make me want to run to the store and purchase the perfume. I don't feel like Burberry smells good because Adam Driver is sitting on a horse topless. I don't really understand the correlation. Burberry are doing amazing marketing right now by featuring real British people in Burberry clothes. That is something that I can associate with the brand. So in that sense, I don't find fragrance marketing all that appealing, and I don't think I can point to any examples of anyone doing a great job of it.

Do you find your approach is working?

I think the strategy of me appearing on social media is a better way to connect with people and show them that I am trying to start a luxury brand. I want to signal that it is handcrafted and well thought out. It's from a very human person.

What's surprised me is that because I have this editorial background, and because I think I am pretty decent at storytelling, a lot of people who have gotten in touch seem to think my brand is a lot bigger than it is. I was approached by people in Texas who were like, "Hey, would you like to open a storefront here?" And I was like, "Do you know how big this brand is? I'm in three stores. There's no storefront coming for a while." So I think it's flattering, but people are mistaking it for this massive thing when it's literally just me.

Trey Taylor recommends:

Noblesse Oblige by Nancy Mitford

Old issues of the Emporio Armani magazine, which ran from 1981-2001

Library180

Meta Glasses

Gohar World crumb catcher

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Vocation
perfumer