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On running your own fanzine

Publishers and DJs Barbie Bertisch and Paul Raffaele discuss the origins of their long-running fanzine, *Love Injection*, the value of making physical objects, and why it never hurts to ask for what you want.

When you first started making your fanzine *Love Injection*, was there any particular kind of model or inspiration for how you wanted it to look and feel? How did you determine what its vibe and voice of should be?

Paul Raffaele: I guess it was just supposed to speak to me. Like, what would I like to pick up and read? I think as far as the aesthetic it was really me experimenting with design. It was whatever I could figure out how to do. The content was just whoever would be willing to sit down with us. I had no idea who would actually answer the phone or answer the emails. The very first issue was Mike Servito, there was a photo essay by a friend of ours who we knew took nice photos. The first 10 issues were really just, "Let's see who responds and see how this plays out."

Barbie Bertisch: One of the things that's great about a project that is so DIY is that we tend to seek out subjects almost selfishly. It's just us reaching out to people who we admire and hoping that they're down to talk and give us their time and will understand what we do. We are aware that there are press cycles and hot new albums by X artist or whatever the case may be, but we are mostly just driven by our own curiosity. 100%.

Paul: We will never answer a press email that says, "Oh, Jamie XX has a new album." I mean, I'd love to meet Jamie, but if there isn't an authentic New York tie to the artist, then we're not really interested.

Barbie: Yeah. It's really all about New York. It really is an opportunity to support our friends on our pages, and to reach out to our heroes and idols and get them to talk to us.

I know zine culture is something that never totally went away, but it feels like because people have their heads inside the internet so much these days, that they are extra hungry right now for a physical object or something tactile.

Paul: That seems true. It's been a pretty steady upward curve, I have to say. As the zine grows and as our audience grows, we're getting more and more attention, which I feel is natural. The old model of publishing is broken and I think there are new models out there that actually work. For instance, look at the *NYCTA Graphics Standards Manual* and Kickstarter. If most people walked into a publisher's office and said we want to print this huge coffee table book of a graphics standards manual, they'd likely have been laughed out of the room. But they crowdfunded their idea and it totally went beyond their expectations. I think publishing as a whole is going through its next phase. And while these bigger magazines are shutting down, if you have an audience in mind and you actually know how to reach them, anything is possible.

Barbie: It's like every time we throw a party, we wonder if people are gonna show up. Each time we publish something, we wonder if people are gonna get it. The whole purpose of being in print was to get off the computer, to get off the phone, to make something tangible. And maybe it is that we romanticize these tangible things, but we are record collectors. I take 35mm photographs. It's just maybe about trying to find something that's a little bit more tangible than the fleetingness of the internet. The internet can be fantastic and there's so many amazing things there, but it can feel empty.

I've been wanting to do this mail-art project where I'll draw something or make something and I'll put it in an envelope and send it to a friend and that friend will send something back in return. It feels similar to what was going on a lot in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. Just having this exchange of physical things is really interesting. It feels like something that lasts forever, beyond the internet.

Paul: I was walking into my building the other day for work and an older woman was trying to work the electronic building directory. She couldn't figure out how it worked and I was trying to help. I actually couldn't figure out how to work it either, because the interface was so terrible, and she was getting so angry. She said, "We have to rely on this digital board that no one understands? What if there was a fire? What if I need to find something or someone? Things need to be printed out sometimes! We can't rely so heavily on technology."

I think that's something we don't think about often. Like, when you think about giving Google \$5 more every year for your cloud storage to save all of your correspondence from the beginning of your adult

life. What happens if they decide to charge you \$500 instead of \$5? What are you gonna do? Would you pay it, or would you sacrifice all your information? Our whole lives are so digitally interwoven. It's just another reason to get off the screen and make something tangible that you can save and pass on.



When you first started *Love Injection*, how did you distribute it? How did people find it?

Paul: We did it ourselves. As a DJ you generally have decent relationships with record stores in New York, so we distributed it that way. It was totally free for everyone at that point. We just walked them into our favorite record stores and left them.

Barbie: Which we still do. We're not really active on social media with *Love Injection*. We just put the issues up and forget about it until the next month when another issue is up. We're still very much hands-on, doing this ourselves in our apartment. We don't have a fancy office, we don't have a co-working space. One-third of our apartment is dedicated to these projects. We do have help. We have two interns that come in every now and then to help us with our orders and things like that, but we pretty much do this ourselves at home. We work at home every night on this.

We've chosen to keep these real-life relationships with people because we care about them. To have a personal relationship with the person who may be on the other side reading this will actually help us understand what they want to read about, what concerns them, and what is interesting to them. We learn more ourselves that way.

One thing I was struck by when we started *The Creative Independent* was that right away everyone had some kind of advice for how we could improve the site, and usually it was about doing more stuff. "You should start a podcast! You should add video!" The immediate impulse from a lot of people was, "How do we expand it or make it bigger or make it more complicated?" But we were more interested in trying to do the opposite-making things simpler, only publishing one thing a day, etc. Have you experienced anything like that?

Barbie: All the time.

Paul: Yeah, people have their opinions. We just take them with a grain of salt. We also just kind of have a rule that we don't do anything unless we're naturally, organically pointed in that direction. If it happens, if there's a real need for it, then we'll do it. Like we didn't have a website for the longest time. Before the magazine started, I had a record label that did only vinyl stuff. I still do.

The original thought was to have the label be the publisher of the zine. Eventually the zines were piling up on this website that was under a different name and it just became confusing. We were also doing a lot of radio and other stuff, all under this same umbrella, so we finally figured out that we needed a new website that could hold all of this stuff in one place. Still, we opted for a simple website. We only do things when we absolutely feel it's necessary and we have the time to do it.

Barbie: Even though we're published monthly, by being so hands-on we still have a lot of freedom that perhaps bigger magazines or glossy magazines don't have. We inhabit this in-between world where we're not quite a pamphlet-we're a bit more than that-but we're not one of these high-end \$25 magazines with a more robust structure around them. That gives us the ability to keep things simpler. We keep things focused, which is always the intent.

How do you balance making a magazine, working day jobs, and also working in nightlife?

Paul: We're working DJs with a lot of full-time gigs, and it's really hard to go out a ton beyond that. At the same time, you have to remember that we can't end up writing about this culture if we're standing on the outside of it. We need to contribute to our community, and support it as well.

Barbie: We both come from ad-agency backgrounds. I was under the project- and account-management side. It set us up with the skills that we really needed to run *Love Injection*. We manage to balance everything, but it's not always easy. We might DJ on weekends or be up late during the week, but we're both up at eight in the morning. There's always day-to-day operations that have to be taken care of, and then there's interviewing and so on and so forth.

Paul: One important thing is that we don't really drink or do drugs anymore. When I first started going out to clubs, I was as obsessed as an 18-year-old raver in New York. But when I realized that I wanted to be a DJ, I just sort of knew that if I was going to be in this world as a career, I would never be able to separate the partying from working. So at a certain point I just chose not to do drugs. I think that helps.

Barbie: I definitely did drugs. I started going out in Miami, I was underage, and I got thrown into this world of going to post-punk and indie-rock parties. I was 16 when I started going out and I think that by the time I turned 21 I was actually just sick of being hungover. So I stayed around for the music, which was always what drew me there, and stayed away from the partying. I don't need to really "party" to enjoy myself. I know that some people vilify nightlife because they think that it's this realm where people get fucked up and never come out of it, and nobody wants to be the sad 60-year-old at the club on drugs. Actually, we know a lot of 60-year-olds who are still dancing and incredibly happy and it's not about destroying yourself or being wasted.

That's something that's very important. People tend to think that you go out in your early 20s and then you get married and you have kids and you've got a mortgage and then you kind of put that need to go out and have fun on the side. But you don't actually have to hide that part of yourself, especially in New York. You don't have to put that side of yourself away in a drawer. You can be part of the nightlife culture and help to support the idea that nightlife is not the devil, that it's not the place for nihilism and self-destruction. That's something that is very important to us, because we actually live in between the two worlds of daytime productivity and night-time hedonism.

Your work shines a light on some forgotten corners of NYC nightlife and its history. So much writing on nightlife culture fixates on and mythologizes the same few places over and over again, bemoaning a New York that no longer exists, and overlooking the fact that there is still a lot of interesting stuff happening here. There will always be.

Barbie: Totally.

Paul: Yes. And like you said, a lot of these bigger outlets focus on the same couple of clubs over and over. We pride ourselves on being able to excavate these stories that no one else wants to talk about. We've got a long list that we keep adding to. We're always being made aware of more people, more stories, and more histories that deserve to be told. We find these people who were so important but have become kind of forgotten, and usually when we reach out to them they're more than willing to meet up with us and share everything they know. It's an insane trove of information that people are missing out on if they're not talking to these people.

Barbie: We've gotten this question a couple of times: "Do you guys ever run out of stuff to write about?" And the truth is we've barely scratched the surface. Because everybody talks about Studio 54 and Paradise Garage and the Limelight, but what about all the other places? Studio 54 was a celebrity club for mostly rich, cool, hyper-popular people. And you know, to be honest, that's not really what we're about.

What about the clubs uptown? What about the clubs in the suburbs? What about the minorities that historically are written out of the cultural history? I never worry about having enough stuff to write about. Our focus may be dance music, but that culture has so many ties to so many other communities. For example, we recently wrote about Alice Coltrane and having some of her music on vinyl for the first time. Alice Coltrane is certainly not a dance-music personality, but she's super important.

I've worked for a lot of glossy magazines over the years and have seen first-hand why a lot of them end up failing. It's often because the strain of advertising just becomes unsustainable. How did you first go about finding advertising for your fanzine?

Paul: Dealing with advertising is the hardest thing that we do. Especially if you had clients for a long time and you want to keep them, it's a struggle to re-convince them, and to keep it fresh and awesome and worthwhile for them. In the beginning we'd just reach out to people we knew and asked them. You just learn as you go. One thing that was interesting to learn was that not everyone pays for ads. Not every ad that you see is bought and paid for. I didn't know that. There's a magazine that I really love called *Polanski*, and it's kind of like a fashion magazine, but inside of it there are these cool music ads from labels and for parties I really like. So I thought I'd hit some of them up, because they must have money to spend for ads. And then I called a few of them and they were like, "Oh yeah, that's a free ad."

I was like, "Oh, okay that's interesting. Well I should do that." We should do that for companies and people that we like, and then hopefully that'll generate interest in other people. So that's something

that we learned. Also, clubs print flyers and posters all the time to promote their stuff. So how is the back page of this magazine, which is way more valuable than a flyer, any different? It's bigger than a 4x6 flyer—it's 8.5x11—and maybe more people see it. It has way more value than any flyers that you can give out at a club. So that was our first pitch to Output back when we first started. We've been really lucky that they've been with us from the beginning. They're super crucial to keeping the lights on, as they say.

Barbie: Also, the nice thing about advertising in niche publications is that, if you know how to identify your audience, you're literally putting your product in the hands of your most valued, ideal target demographic. So I think it's about identifying who that actually is.

Other than the internet, what have been some of the most valuable resources for you in figuring out how to run your own publication?

Barbie: Honestly, one of the most important assets we have is our community and the people around us. The other biggest resource is just your own experience. We learned a lot of lessons over the last 42 issues. Some of them we learned only recently, and some have been really difficult or economically painful or stressful. The thing that has been a constant throughout this time is just the people around us. If you surround yourself with like-minded people who understand your mission, that goes a really long way. We wouldn't be able to do what we do without The Lot Radio, without the clubs, or without the people who choose to contribute to the zine every month, our monthly columnists.

Paul: Recently we started doing a regular fundraiser, which is relatively easy since we're DJs and we have the ability to put on a party instead of just doing a fundraising drive asking people to give us money. Instead, we put on a party and have everything donated and give people an experience, and then people in turn contribute to the well-being of the zine. That's taken on its own life because we've now gathered all this amazing knowledge from all these people that have put on amazing events, and we can combine that with our own inspirations to create this ideal communal shared experience with music.

Barbie: You can't be afraid to try. That was a good thing to learn. And patience. Also, you can't be afraid to reach out to people. For example, for issue five I wanted to interview Colleen "Cosmo" Murphy, but I was a little bit overwhelmed and shy, and I thought it was a pipe dream. I reached out to a friend of ours and asked if they could put me in touch with her. Sometimes a simple email seems daunting and scary and like a weird leap of faith, but you should always shoot for the stars. In the end we got the interview with Colleen, and she became a mentor of ours—it was one of our best interviews to date. No matter how much clout a person has or how impossible it might seem, if you have something to offer that is honest and is being done with good intentions, there's no reason why they should say no. You just have to try.

Lessons we learned along the way:

Throw out your television

Find your mentors

Go to Japan

Keep a written journal

Essentials:

The Life Energy of Music - John Diamond, M.D.

Love Saves The Day - Tim Lawrence

Love Goes to Buildings on Fire - Will Hermes

L&B Spumoni Gardens

Go to 718 Sessions!

Name

Barbie Bertisch and Paul Raffaele

Vocation

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