

On staying curious



Writer and editor Marcus J. Moore on his book about Kendrick Lamar, the state of music journalism, and how being an editor and a curious human being has made him a better writer.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3271 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#).

You're a longtime freelancer, and have been at [Bandcamp](#) for a couple of years now. A few months ago it was announced that you'd be writing the first cultural biography on Kendrick Lamar. Now you're doing speaking engagements and getting hit up left and right. Things are taking off. What's that been like for you?

I see myself as a scrappy upstart. I still see myself as a guy everybody's sleeping on. Like, "I wrote this thing and nobody's paying attention to it. I'll show them with the next piece." It's probably not healthy, but that's how I've always governed myself, as the guy who's looking to get better with each piece, whether it's a 200-word thing, whether it's a 50-word thing, or now, with a book, 80,000 words.

In terms of having a moment, I don't know if I fully embrace it. I don't know if I can. I get asked the question "tell me how you made it" all the time, and every time I'm asked it, I feel weird because I don't feel like I've made it. My response is always, "I walked down the street today and nobody noticed me, nobody knew who I was. I'm not Jay-Z or anything like that."

As far as having a moment, I feel like it's a result of me putting everything into the work. I've never been one of these music journalists that felt like my work was law, or when I write a review that it's the only take on the record. If people read my work, hopefully they see the integrity, and see that I'm coming from my own personal vantage point. If you have a totally different vantage point, that's fine as well.

That's part of the reason I've never slammed a record—I just don't believe in that. In terms of having a moment, I think it comes from all these years of working at this radio station, and at a newspaper, and then writing for Fitchfork, etc. I've always been the guy who wanted to cover things on the come up. Everybody else can cover Drake and Kanye and the like. They don't need my voice on that. I want to write about Quelle Chris. I want to write about The Breathing Effect.

Really, I still feel like I'm trying to get better. A part of it is me not being entirely comfortable being the guy on the new Beyoncé record, or whatever, because why would anybody listen to me talking about that? But there's this other record that no one's talking about that I can write a thousand words on. I decided to stay there, and I think that's how I got the Bandcamp gig, because I've always been the guy that lives on that road less traveled. It's worked out so far. I think I'm just going to stay there.

Maybe this moment stems from the fact that people know they can come to me and that I'm always going to shout out people who need the shout out and not necessarily the people who've already been shouted out several times. I've never understood writers who wanted to make their name by covering whatever everybody else is doing.

You forged your own path and have your own taste. How did you come to end up writing a book about arguably the most popular rapper in the world?

It's funny. Long before I do anything, I think about it for several months. One day, I'm in the office. It's a hot summer day in 2016. I'd just gotten the Bandcamp gig. I'd been there maybe two months. I ran the idea past a good friend of mine, [Jason Reynolds](#), who has now become arguably the hottest author in the world. He's on every show. I ran the idea past him to write about Kendrick, because he's been a friend forever, and he told me straight up, "Write that. I'm going to put you in contact with my friend. Run the idea past him, he's honest, he'll let you know." I ran it past his friend, who was a book editor at Atria, and he tells me "Oh, I think there's something there. Let's refine it."

I'm a sucker for fly-on-the-wall stories. At first I wanted to write about how *To Pimp a Butterfly* came together, Thundercat came in the room and then Glasper came in the room. I wanted to write that. But then in speaking with people, it made me realize I needed to present Kendrick in the broader context of Black America and of culture, and so I wrote a book proposal.

I was finishing the proposal the night of the most recent Grammy's when he opened up with Chappelle, I was like, "I need to hurry up. I need to hurry up before somebody swoops in." I finished the proposal and then the rest, as they say, is history. I had a bunch of meetings. I had seven meetings in two days. And we got a deal in place.

Even though I've never been the mainstream music guy, I've always loved what Kendrick stood for because I love how if this is the popular sound—if it's trap or if it's whatever—he has no problem going the opposite way, which is the way I've governed myself. And with *To Pimp a Butterfly*, it was such a left-of-center record. It almost reminded me of the old [Roots](#) albums and it made my job a lot easier because I've always been the guy jumping up and down like, "Robert Glasper is great!" Or "Thundercat is great, and Kamasi!" And he had all of those guys on one record.

In listening to that album, I was like, "There's a book in here." I had already thought about writing books anyways, so I just decided to give it a shot. And the idea was scaring me to death. That's how I knew I had to do it.

I imagine it was exciting getting that book deal, but was it also stressful? Because, now you have to write the book, and there will be a lot of eyes on it.

I'm totally naive when it comes to writing, because I'm one of these guys where it's just me and a laptop. I'm just pecking away. I don't pay much attention because I'm always focused on the next thing. Like, "Let's finish this thing so I can get to the next thing." Even when I put the tweet out, "Hey, some exciting news to share," I just figured it would be 10 likes, 20 likes, and that no one would care. But then I turn my phone over and it was just a steady stream of, "Oh my god, you're the right person for this." And that was what stopped me, because I'm like, "No, I'm not. Come on. Get out of here."

I didn't think people were paying attention. Writing is such an isolating art form that you never know who's paying attention. That's when it hit me: "Oh, I'm writing a book about Kendrick Lamar." A friend of mine woke me up with an email and said, "Hey, did I just hear on the [Breakfast Club](#) that you're writing about Kendrick Lamar?" And I'm like, "Uh, I guess you did hear that." Another friend of mine, a publicist, emails me randomly, "Hey dude, I just read on Fitchfork that you're doing the Kendrick thing." That's when I was like, "Alright, this is going to be a thing."

It was scary at first. It's not scary now that I'm actually conducting interviews, and I'm talking to people and I'm writing. And now that the heat of the announcement has cooled a bit, the people I need to interview are more receptive because they see the place that I'm coming from. They've seen the other things I've done. I hope that they know I'm coming at it from a good place. That's the main thing I wanted to explain to people: that this isn't some tell-all, "You won't believe what..." clickbait-type things. It's about how he influenced Black America, and it also goes into the rise of spiritual jazz in LA, the rise in gangsta rap in LA, and how those things helped shape his perspective.

A couple weeks ago I was in LA and it's like, "Well, let me go over to south LA and actually talk to the old-school jazz guys." And the other thing, as you know as a reporter, where you talk to this set of people, and they say, "Well, you need to go over there and talk to that set of people." And then you talk to them. That's how it's been. When I come back and I dive into the notes that I have, I realize I actually am getting a lot. I've been writing it now and it doesn't seem as daunting. At one point, I was scared. I was like, "Oh, I hope people say yes." But everybody has said yes so far and it's been great.

Do you have a system for trying to write a certain amount every day? Do you have a deadline for the book?

My deadline is actually a year from Saturday. They want it then. But it's funny, when you assign something it's like, "Okay, well this record is coming out Friday. We need the review to go up by Monday at the latest." I'm still operating from that mindset where I want to get everything in. And my editor, who has been great, he's been the one calming me down. He's like, "Dude, you have a year. And 80,000 words really isn't a whole lot. It sounds like a lot. But trust me, you'll do it. It's going to get done." He's also kind of been a therapist where it's like, "Look, we don't just give book deals to anybody."

So, I have a system where I try to write at least 500 words a day. Sometimes that's tough because of the full-time job. I'm there from 9–well, in total, like 8 to 6, because I start from home. And then when I get home, I'll try to bang out about 500 words or so.

But I'm also one of those crazy people where I have Google Docs on my phone. I'm always in thinking-emoji pose (☹), and I'll just write. If I'm on the G Train, I'll just write whatever comes to mind. And then cultivate it when I go home.

When I break it down and treat it like a big feature, it's cool because for a while, the word "book" freaked me out. It's like, "Oh, I'm writing a book." But now it's okay. I'm not as concerned about it because I can slowly unpack my thoughts.

Has your background as an editor and a freelancer been helpful to writing a book?

It really is. Even before the book, these things informed each other. I still freelance from time to time, and I know now as an editor what drives me crazy. I never, ever, ever want to turn in bad or late copy, or anything else that makes an editor walk around the block huffing and puffing. When it's time for me to write a review or turn in a Q&A I'm like, "Okay, I know what I like. I know that I shouldn't have run-on sentences," etc. Not that I did any of that stuff anyways, but now I'm extra mindful. It's like, "Alright, when I turn it in, I know there are going to be certain edits." But I don't want it to be where I have to totally rewrite this thing.

Being an editor has really helped with my writing overall, and it's totally helped with the book because I find that a lot of writers—and I used to be guilty of this, too—just use all of these words. Like even if you can say it simply, you don't say it simply, and instead you use all these fifty dollar words to make it seem poetic. You don't need to do that. That's just one example where when I'm writing the book, I try to slowly build the narrative, put the reader in the scene, etc. And my wife reads a ton of books. She's always at the bookstore. She's been helping me as well.

I'll ask her, "What style of writing do you like?" She's like, "I love simple, punchy writing, maybe it will have a complex word here and there but I don't always want to be looking at the dictionary on my phone when I'm trying to get through this thing." That approach has been truly helpful in enabling me to communicate who Kendrick is and what he means, because I realize that the music journalist community is really small and I'm writing for people who may not even know who Kendrick is, or who Thundercat is, or who any of these guys are. I'm writing for those people. Even in the moments where I feel like I can just say, "Oh, experimental jazz musician blah, blah," I have to go back in and explain, "He came from this scene and that scene."

This book is a serious history. A lot of people in our general age group who are writing books these days are writing memoirs, or thinly veiled memoirs. You're writing a history, not piecing together your tweets.

I wanted to do this on purpose. Maybe this is just me having low self-esteem. I've had a couple of people say, "You should write a memoir, or you should write about the D.C. scene or yourself, or how you navigated the scene." And I'm like, "I don't think anybody's going to want to read that. That's not interesting."

But it's vitally important to place someone like Kendrick within this context. Going from around 2014 until now, you have this surge of alternative Black creativity that he is at the center of in many ways. He helped usher this in. You have Kendrick, and nowadays you have the HBO show *Random Acts of Flyness*. You have *Black Panther*. *Insecure* is another one. We've finally reached a point where, no matter what your art is, there are ears for it, and people are going to find it, and people are going to seek it out. That's why I felt it was important to write about Kendrick. There's already a curriculum being written about him, he won the Pulitzer. This is a guy who people are going to be talking about years down the road.

I'm always going to be a music journalist. I'm always going to find a record that I want to write about, but I also plan to be a full-time author where I'm just going down this road of writing about Kendrick and then writing about whomever else. I already have other ideas that I'm trying to sharpen. I feel like those types of things help build a legacy. It's building a legacy without having the attention being solely on me. I feel like that's probably the best way to go. A book is such a beautiful, tactile thing that you can pick up and put on your table. I look forward to having that. I look forward to coming home and being like, "Is that my book on the coffee table?" That's crazy.

You didn't necessarily have a strategy for getting this book off the ground, like, "I'm going to do this, this, and this." You just kept working. One thing led to the next thing.

That's it exactly. I've been covering stuff that I like and thankfully people have paid attention. It's never been systematic, like, "Okay, I'm going to write the first Kendrick book and then I'm going to write this and then I'm going to blow up." I always do this thing where if there is a record I like, I find a way to cover it and I write about it from the heart. The rest is going to be what it is, so whether it's a review that people get behind, or whether it's a feature story, or like now doing speaking engagements, I do things that I really like. If somebody can get with it, that's amazing and that's a blessing. I just keep doing that. I have no plan. I wish I had a plan. But I have no strategy. It's just writing about stuff that I really love. That's it.

You've already given some advice—forge your own path, write clearly. Do you have any other advice for young writers? Anything you've learned from editing so many people?

Younger writers should do more studying of previous works and how those works help inform what they're listening to now. Everything out here now is a version of what came out in the '70s and '80s. There's nothing entirely new.

What I tell writers from all backgrounds is this: Let's say you're a hip hop guy, you like hip hop. Go to a rock show. Go to a punk show. Go to every other kind of show—metal, what have you. Stand in the back and study. Don't go there as a fan. You can go there as a fan, obviously, but you can also just go and study what you're seeing. Study how fans interact. How do the notes hit you? Study that, then go home, dig through liner notes, and do a little bit of crate digging, whether it's going through YouTube, or whether it's going through Spotify, or Bandcamp, or whatever. Just broaden your palette as much as possible.

I get a lot of writers who say, "I like this specific sub-genre of hip hop," and they don't go outside of that. If I had any plan, it was, "You won't be able to box me in." I grew up as a rap head, but I also like folk, I also like electronica, dance, whatever.

If you're a freelancer and you discover you're the rap person at an outlet, go somewhere else and be a jazz person for that outlet. This way you have different outlets and you're not writing the same thing for each one. You're always tricking yourself into doing something different, or to write differently for every publication.

That's advice I always give: Broaden yourself as much as you can, because as publications dry up, there are fewer opportunities. Have genuine curiosity. You have to be naturally curious and present yourself as a journalist who wants to learn.

With publications drying up, it's important to do different things, even beyond writing. Look to curate playlists, write bios, whatever. There are different ways to get your name out there. Nine times out of 10, the old way of just thinking, "I'm going to write at this place, then I'm going to write here, and then I'm going to get a full-time gig at Pitchfork," is not going to happen. You need to be able to vary yourself in different ways.

Five Brilliant Albums That Help Me Write and Create:

[Quelle Chris, *Lullabies For The Broken Brain*](#)

[Jordan De La Sierra, *Gymnosphere: Song Of The Rose*](#)

Shabaka And The Ancestors, *Wisdom of Elders*

Moses Sumney, *Aromanticism*

The Contemporary Jazz Quintet, *Location*

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