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As told to J. Bennett, 3029 words.

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# On not being afraid to try something new

Author and radio host Jason Lamb discusses learning as you go along, asking for what you want, and living in the present.

**You were a standup comedian for years. What led you down that path?**

In the late '70s, when I was eight or nine years old, I got really obsessed with Steve Martin and Monty Python. That expanded into my teens as I got into more and more comedy. I didn't actually start doing standup until I was 27 because there was a period of time in my 20s where I just got distracted by partying and stuff. But it was always in my blood. I was always the class clown. I always enjoyed great humor, especially absurdist humor. When I started talking to NoMeansNo for this book, I discovered that they're also big Steve Martin and Monty Python fans, specifically, which is really bizarre.

**What did you learn from the experience of doing standup?**

It was a great outlet for angst and rage and stuff like that. And just the satisfaction of making people laugh, which is hard to explain unless you've done it. Obviously, people make each other laugh all the time in social situations but being in front of an audience and getting that first big laugh from a crowd of 50 or 100 or however many people is such an adrenaline rush. I loved that.

**Why did you stop?**

My biggest issue is that I never really got over the stage fright. I always got pretty nervous before shows. That led me to step back from it. But to tell your own jokes, that you wrote, that are original, and that you know came from your brain, and then have strangers respond to it in a positive way, is an incredible experience. And then there's also the social aspect: I've never met more interesting, funny, amazing people than the fellow comedians that I've worked with over the years.

**What kind of coping strategies did you have for stage fright?**

Well, alcohol was one, to be totally honest. And I used to have a little mantra that I would say to myself before I went onstage. But some shows were more nerve wracking than others, so it depended on the situation. I wasn't always nervous for shows, but sometimes it was a little overwhelming. Whenever there was pressure, like someone in the audience was there from Just for Laughs Festival or some important thing, that's when I would inevitably bomb because I would just psych myself out.

**At some point, you decided to go to school for broadcast journalism. What drew you to that field?**

That was basically just a practical thing because I was living in Vancouver. I'm from Victoria, BC, originally, and I moved to Vancouver. I was waiting tables, and I was doing standup on the side. There were a couple points where I thought, "Oh, wow, the standup is really great," but it was never really apparent that standup was going to be my bread and butter. It just wasn't going to be a full-time gig, as much as I wanted it to be. That was the dream, but I was still waiting tables. It got to the point where I was 30 years old and waiting tables, and I just had this realization in my life: "If standup doesn't pan out, do I want to be 50 years old waiting tables? I really don't."

So, I was thought, "What do I like? I like media and radio." I decided to go back to school, and I went to

BCIT over in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver. I went there for two years and got my broadcast journalism degree. I was a reporter at a couple of news stations for a while, but now I'm on a morning show on a station called the Zone at 91.3 with my good buddy Dylan. I still read the news every morning, but now I'm the goofy co-host. It's more of a comedy gig than anything, and strangely perfect for me. I did a punk show for about 12 or 13 years, too, but I had to put it aside because I got so busy with the book.

**How did you get into punk?**

I think the first punk record I ever heard was the Dead Kennedys' *In God We Trust, Inc.* when I was maybe 12 or 13 years old. I probably had heard The Clash and Sex Pistols before that but didn't really pay close attention. In high school, it started to become a thing. I was meeting people that were into that kind of music, and there was a band called the Dayglo Abortions from here in Victoria, and I remember listening to their album called *Feed Us a Fetus*, and thinking, "Oh my god, this is insane. I can't believe that people actually write this kind of music." There's something about it that just appealed to me—the aggression, the anti-authoritarianism. It became a part of my life.

The first gig I ever went to was a Dayglo Abortions show when I was 15, an all-ages show here in Victoria. And then NoMeansNo came along pretty quickly after that. The first NoMeansNo song I ever heard was called "Dad" from an album called *Sex Mad*, that they put out in '86, so I would've been 15 then. I think I saw them maybe a year later when I was 16 or so. And I just started going to shows. I never had a Mohawk or the leather jacket with buttons on it, so I didn't really look the part. But I went to a lot of shows.

**Do you think you've carried a punk attitude with you through your life and career?**

100 percent, absolutely. It's almost hard to put your finger on it, but again, I think humor is a big part of it, too. My favorite punk music is the stuff that's a bit tongue in cheek, a bit sarcastic, maybe, a bit of satire. The Dead Kennedys were always good at that stuff. It's aggression, it's got a message, it's fun to listen to. It's upbeat, it gets you moving. A lot of it also has this underlying, "Don't take life too seriously," kind of message. That's the stuff that appeals to me.

**As a punk fan, I'm sure you like plenty of bands. Why did you specifically want to write a book about NoMeansNo?**

Because basically from the first time I ever saw them, they quickly became my favorite band. I couldn't believe that they were a local band, from my hometown, that sounded like that. It was so different. It was so—again—clever, funny, and you can just tell by watching them and listening to them that they're world-class musicians. After the first time seeing them, I went and saw them every chance I got. Fast forward to 2010 or 2011, when I was doing *The Punk Show*, and I managed to get an interview with the drummer, John Wright, and Tom [Holliston], their second guitar player.

A few years later, I was in my late 40s and thinking about bucket list stuff. I've always wanted to write a book. I've always thought that would be a really cool thing to leave behind in my life. I'm not a great writer, so I never really had ideas for a novel or some kind of fictitious book kind of thing. So, I started brainstorming, like, "What could I write a book about?" And I realized that nothing had ever been properly written about the NoMeansNo story.

There was one book that came out called *Going Nowhere* by a guy named Mark Black. He's in Nova Scotia, great guy, but it's a very small book. It's basically a little fan story with no pictures. It's great, but it's not really the whole story, because nobody who loves NoMeansNo really knows the whole story. They were purposefully always mysterious and coy. But I had a connection to their publicist because of the radio interviews I had done, so I sent her my book proposal. She said to not expect anything, so I was prepared to be completely ignored.

**They went for it, obviously.**

There's a guy named Scott Henderson who's an important player here. He was a sound guy at a punk venue here in town, and he's known the band since the late '70s. I mentioned my book idea to him as well. He called John Wright and Andy [Kerr], their first guitar player, and said, "If you're ever going to allow something like this to happen, Jason is the guy to do it for you." I couldn't believe he did that, but I still didn't think it would happen. A couple of weeks went by and then two or three days before the pandemic shut everything down, I got an email from John saying, "We got your proposal. I talked to my brother. We're cool with it. You can interview me anytime you want. Rob said he'll do an interview with you, too." It was like a dream come true. It led me to become a big believer in, "You don't get if you don't ask." If you ask and don't get, that's fine, but you won't ever get if you don't ask.

**You had never written a book or even an article before.**

No. I used to write little rants for the radio, and obviously I wrote standup comedy jokes, but I've never published or written a book of any kind before this.

**The book is pretty big—nearly 400 pages with tons of interviews, old photos, and images of memorabilia. What did you learn from the process of putting it together?**

Well, I knew pretty early that it had to be an oral history. I realized quickly there were a lot of people in their world that I needed to talk to, and it would be easier [to do in the oral history format]. But it also just made more sense to have it be an oral history, where the people in the story told the story. I

really wasn't much of a writer, to be honest with you. I was a compiler, you know?

**Sure. But you did write introductions to each chapter, and putting together a coherent oral history is a definite skill. Not to mention conducting and then sifting through that many interviews.**

I interviewed about 500 people over three years. I was already pretty good at interviews, to toot my own horn, through *The Punk Show* and through the radio. And strangely enough, as horrible as COVID was, the timing was good because everybody was home. Everybody was bored, and everybody was willing to talk to me. So, I took advantage of that and just talked to everybody I could that was part of the story.

**The book is largely chronological, so I imagine that helped to establish the narrative.**

Oh, yeah. It pretty quickly became clear that it's all about the narrative. Even though this is an oral history, it has to make sense like any other book. The chronology is important, but it also has to flow. There has to be a flow that makes sense when you're reading it. I'm really proud of the fact that even though you're reading a couple of hundred different people's quotes, maybe without even reading their names, you could read it as a story.

Again, I had no experience doing this before, but I've read lots of music biographies. I've always loved the oral history format if it's done right. If it's not, it can be very clunky, and throw you off the story. And I think I did a pretty good job of keeping a good flow.

**The big punk oral history book is Legs McNeil's Please Kill Me. Did you look to that as a template?**

Absolutely. *Please Kill Me* is a great book. John Robb in the UK did a book called *Punk Rock: An Oral History*, which is quite good as well. Definitely those were templates for the kind of thing I was trying to do. But at the same time, *Please Kill Me* and *Punk Rock: An Oral History* are not visual books. They're just text. I wanted to amalgamate that with a coffee table type thing.

Early on, I didn't really know what was out there. I figured I'd include album cover art, maybe some photos, things like that. I ended up with 23,000 unique images to choose from for this book. And that's posters, flyers, photos, set lists, ticket stubs, what have you. Everybody was throwing stuff at me. A few months in, I went to John Wright's house and went through box after box of stuff—posters, original artwork, flyers. He kept everything. It was a NoMeansNo fan's wet dream. So, I had to whittle that down. I think there's about 600 images in the book. But there's a balance there. I wanted it to be a good read, but I wanted it to be visual as well.

**NoMeansNo started in 1979, so you were dealing with events that happened over the course of the last four decades. And not everyone remembers everything the same way. Some folks might not remember certain events at all. How did memory play into this?**

That's a very good question, and you're totally right. There's a couple of instances that ended up in the final book where somebody will say something and then somebody else will contradict it, because they have different memories. When that came up, I would either just try to double check or confirm with somebody what really happened, or just leave it out. That happened a bunch of times, too. But I was surprised by how much of a clear memory most people had.

**Did you learn anything about the band that you wrestled with including? I'm not looking for gossip here—I'm just interested in the decision process for that situation.**

Absolutely. Without revealing something from the book that I think will be interesting to readers, especially fans, there was something I learned about an early relationship that Rob had. And I found that out quite early on, before I had really even established a relationship with Rob. It took several interviews with him, and then finally going over to visit him and getting to know him a little bit, before I even had the balls to say, "Hey, I know about this. I'm not going to put it in the book." And he said, "Why not? Go ahead." I actually triple or quadruple checked with him to make sure it was okay, because I was so nervous that he wasn't understanding what he was saying yes to. But he was like, "Yeah, it's fine. It's part of my history."

In the book, I framed it so it's not too gossipy or salacious, but fans who know the kind of lyrics he wrote will probably go, "Holy shit. That probably affected his writing for the rest of his career."

**What advice would you give to someone who wants to put together a book like yours? Something comprehensive that involves doing hundreds of interviews, and is essentially a historical document?**

It's amazing for you to say that. That actually makes me emotional because it is a historical document. I hadn't really thought of it that way before. But first of all, I'd say make sure you know as much as you can about your subject before you even go into it. And back to what I said earlier: You won't get it if you don't ask. Reach out to as many people around the person or people you're writing about as you can. And be prepared for tons of transcribing work. Each of my interviews were at least 45 minutes to an hour long. Jello Biafra was four and a half hours. For that, I'd say lean into your friends or people who can help you. I went to my friends and the NoMeansNo fan community and said, "Does anybody want to help transcribe interviews?" Dozens of people agreed to.

There's one more thing I would add: It's easy, when you're in the throes of the project, to find yourself

immersed in the past. While this is valuable, of course, to fully commit, don't forget to step outside and live in the present. This is actually important, because there were times when I felt like I was so focused on the story that I forgot to live my life. It can affect you deeply if you're not careful.

#### Jason Lamb Recommends:

**Viagra Boys:** "They're a band from Sweden, but the singer is American, and he's insane. I've been a fan for a few years now, but I finally saw them back in March. They're pushing punk and alternative in a new direction. They've even got a saxophone. They're just an incredibly unique, amazing band."

**NoMeansNo Thing:** "This is a weekly podcast. I've been on it as a guest, but I'm not a part of it. It's Michelle, Matthew, and Jordan, and they're going through the entire NoMeansNo discography two songs at a time. They use a random generator and pit two songs against each other to decide which one's better. It's really entertaining."

**Monty Python:** "You're talking to me on October 5th, which is the 54th anniversary of the birth of Monty Python. If you don't know Monty Python, get some in your life. Movies like Monty Python and the Holy Grail and Life of Brian still stand the test of time."

**Toasted sourdough with peanut butter and crispy bacon on top:** "It'll change your life. I'm not kidding you. It's just so, so good. If you're vegetarian, use veggie bacon."

**Be kind:** "Do your best to be kind to the people around you, because it will come back to you, and it will infiltrate your surroundings. I think if everybody did that in the world, and everybody respected and loved one another, it would fix everything. Of course, that's John Lennon-type hippie shit, but it's true."

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Fact


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