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As told to Sara Wintz, 2841 words.

Tags: Writing, First attempts, Process, Beginnings, Inspiration.



# On writing as an optimistic act

Journalist and critic Geeta Dayal on the path that led her to music journalism, the importance of deep research and varied reading, and why writing is always ultimately a hopeful act.

**When we first met, we lived on opposite sides of the Bay Bridge. You live in Los Angeles now. As a writer, who might be able to live anywhere and work from a laptop, how do you choose a place to live? Does it need to be a city with a thriving music scene, or a place with friends nearby?**

All of that stuff helps. There has to be some kind of local scene that I can write about.

One of my goals in California has been to write about the tremendously rich, strange, and exciting history that happened here. So much of the history of electronic music and experimental music happened on the West Coast. There are people here like Terry Riley, who was born in California and continues to live in California. Now he's well into his 80s and he's still playing live and making music. There are many famous synthesizer inventors, like the late Don Buchla, who lived in the Bay Area. In Southern California, there are great composers like Harold Budd, who I just saw a few weeks ago. He's also well into his 80s; he's another California lifer.

So many composers have roots here and continue to do work here. They make great music. I'm happy to live around them and a lot of other musicians making interesting music. It's really broadened my perspective to live on the West Coast.

**How did you choose Los Angeles?**

I never thought in a million years that I would live in LA. I think a lot of people have a conception of what LA is and what it's about. The more I started coming here, the more I realized that LA can be anything you want it to be. People will say, "It's so plastic. It's so Hollywood," and that's one facet of LA, but there are a thousand other facets of LA. I actually rather enjoy the artifice, the showbiz side of LA, because all that stuff is just out in the open here.

A lot of the movie industry is about the architecture of illusion, in a way. You're creating these elaborate fantasies for the movie-going public. It's totally normal in LA to walk down the street and walk by a film crew or watch a photo shoot happening on a sidewalk. You just see all that stuff out in the open. I don't mind it, and there's also a very good experimental music scene here, and there's a lot of weird and interesting visual art happening here, so there's a little bit of everything. You can kind of find anything you want in LA. I find that very liberating.

**When did you realize that you wanted to be a music journalist?**

Well, there were two main inspirations. One was the "I Love Music" message board, around 2001. It was started by Tom Ewing in the UK and it was a fabulous resource made up of a community of people who really cared about music. They had passionate arguments about the music that they loved and the music that they didn't like, but even more than that, it made me question all my assumptions. It was such an education.

Another inspiration was the burgeoning "blogosphere" with my friends Simon Reynolds, the late Mark Fisher, Matthew Woebot, and many other writers in the early 2000s. I was a part of that blogosphere. Debating and discussing music through blogging is something I really miss now.

For the last 15 years, I've been writing for major publications. Writing criticism is really what I love to do. I do lots of reporting as well, but I also make sure to write criticism. A central part of being a critic is not just saying "I like this" or "I don't like this;" it's articulately explaining why you think something is worthwhile or why you don't like something. It's presenting an articulate, smart argument. And that's a real art. It's an art that I hope doesn't get lost, because I really feel that the state of arts criticism in America is under threat. A lot of major publications like the *Village Voice*, where I got my start, don't exist anymore. These publications were vital forums where critics presented intelligent, interesting, persuasive arguments for why they liked things or what people should read.

I wish people could see how much thought goes into every piece I write. The book I wrote on Brian Eno: there is so much research and so much thinking behind every sentence in that book. I read thousands of pages about Eno. I dug up every single interview I could find. I read obscure books about everything from architecture to design to visual art, cybernetics, experimental music, and then I tried to synthesize that

all together into what I felt was a coherent story. But people don't see the grinding gears in the background. You don't want them to see that part, right? You want to make it easy for them.

**And maybe convince them to care about what you care about?**

Well, you can never convince somebody to care. Either they care or they don't care. It's more like, you can nudge them in the direction of caring for something. You can create the right environment for them to hopefully have an epiphany or experience something in a new way.

The very act of writing about the arts sends the message that the arts is important and worthy of value. Writing about something well takes a lot of effort. It takes time; it takes a lot of thought. To devote that time to something is, to me, one of the highest forms of respect you can pay to art or to music. What critics do is really vital. I really hope it doesn't get totally supplanted by social media and streaming platforms and all that stuff.

**How did you know that you wanted to focus on writing about electronic music?**

Well, it's one of the things I've focused on. When I talk about electronic music, some people think that electronic music means some kind of tacky Vegas EDM stuff, you know what I mean? They don't realize electronic music is something with a very long history. It's the history of technology, culture, the 20th century, and beyond. There's so much to write about and there's so much to investigate. It's such a unique lens by which to study the world. The history of electrical engineering, computer science, gender studies, sociology, anthropology—it's all there. Music is a very interesting way of writing about everything.

**You're so good at illuminating the practitioners of, what most people assume to be, these arcane or inaccessible styles of music. They step right off the page. Your 4 Columns piece about Alvin Lucier is a great example of that. What are some of the most valuable resources when you're preparing to write about a person?**

It's hard to be creative and present a unique perspective if you're just looking at Wikipedia. You need to dig deeper than just sitting on your computer and looking at Google.

Whenever possible, I try to actually meet the people that I'm writing about if they're alive. If they're not alive, I try to meet their family or talk to friends of theirs who knew them so I can get their unique perspective. It's more authentic and it's much more useful for the reader to have some firsthand knowledge, rather than just digging up everything from websites you read, which may or may not be right in the first place. There have been several times where I've looked something up on Wikipedia about an obscure musician, and then the information wasn't correct. If you are using the internet for all of your research, you have to be really good at fact-checking everything you read. That's one thing I would say.

The next thing I would say is that I have a pretty extensive collection of books. I've gone out of my way to collect a lot of rare books about music. I use them for reference and stuff. I've devoured hundreds of books about music—some really quite nerdy books about music.

I think it's good to have a wide-ranging collection of books, so you're not just reading books about music, but you're also reading novels. You're reading fiction; you're reading poetry. It expands your vocabulary to read poetry, to read literature, to read books about cinema or books about architecture. That all inspires me in some way when I write about music. My knowledge base and my perspectives aren't just coming from looking up stuff online or reading books about music. It's coming from reading widely across a wide array of subjects.

I think you can learn so much from reading fiction, and from watching films. You learn techniques to transport the reader into a world. In really great fiction, you get totally lost in the story and you can't put the book down, you know what I mean? Even though I'm writing nonfiction, I want it to be as engaging as reading fiction. I don't want it to read like a dry historical text. I want it to read like a narrative, with pacing and drama and character development. A lot of that knowledge comes from reading novels. I don't read as much poetry as I used to, but I find the economy of words in poetry to be very profound.

I'm interested in all the ways in which you can evoke powerful emotions or memories, or paint an intricate picture, with just a few words. There's this kind of magic about poetry. When I write criticism, I really aim for my sentences to not be too wordy or filled with incomprehensible jargon. I try to make it so that each word means something. I always aim to have an economy of language because I think it's more readable that way.

**Thinking about resources and effort... What did your writing process look like with *Another Green World*?**

Yeah, a tremendous amount of work went into that book. I worked on it for two straight years, and I really enjoyed doing the research. I like hearing people's stories. I like feeling like I'm a detective.

When I was a kid, I was a huge fan of *Encyclopedia Brown*. When you're researching a complicated story that hasn't been widely written about, you're kind of a detective. You're digging into this mystery, and to me, one of the great mysteries of the world is sound and how it works.

I try to psych myself up and say, "This is a fun detective story that I'm trying to do." I'm trying to dig into this strange past. I'm trying to fill in the gaps in the storyline, or I'm trying to dig into

something where I feel like there's so much more than what's out in the popular press. That's what it feels like to me. I'm not a journalist and critic to help publicists push product, you know what I mean? I'm a journalist because I feel like I have something creative and possibly unique to add to the arts. Because of my odd background—I went to MIT and studied cognitive science before I got into this—I figured I could possibly contribute something useful to the body of knowledge that we have about experimental music and other fields.

**Do you have a favorite word that you tend to use a lot when you're writing?**

I could tell you my least favorite words in music criticism. This comes from my days of arguing about music on the "I Love Music" message board. My good friend Mark Sinker used to say, "Influence doesn't exist." Saying that an artist was influenced by another artist is kind of a lazy construction. When you say, "This artist was influenced by X and Y," what does that really mean? I try to stay away from using the word "influence" or bandying around the word "influential," because to me, it's a bit lazy. What does it really mean? And then, there are a lot of familiar tropes and clichés in every kind of writing that I try my best to stay away from.

**Like what?**

Certain words that people use, like "seminal" or "important." Maybe something really is important, but why? That's the more interesting question. I feel like you shouldn't use words as a substitute for actually thinking about stuff.

**Is there something that you wish someone told you when you got your start?**

There's no straightforward path to being an arts critic or journalist. It's something you figure out the hard way over years and years of throwing stuff against the wall, hoping something sticks. What I wish somebody had told me is just "be less worried about what other people think." Have confidence in your opinions. It took me a long time to feel like I had confidence and authority in my opinions about the arts, because in the beginning, I felt very tentative.

**How did you build your confidence?**

I think it was a combination of factors. When you gain more and more experience doing something and you keep doing it for enough years, you're much more seasoned and you slowly build confidence that way. That's one way to do it. Another thing that was helpful was, over the years, I received more and more positive feedback from people I respected. People like Brian Eno—I know he really likes my work and he reads my writing and he takes it seriously. Or fellow writers telling me that they like my work. It means a lot. It's good to get recognized by other writers who feel your work is valid.

**When I was listening to your conversation with Ben Ratliff about Alan Vega and Suicide, about their success, I was thinking about how, in punk, success is such a subjective thing that's specific to every artist and fan. How do you define success?**

Some people, or maybe a lot of people, really define success in financial terms: what their salary is. I've never been like that. As long as I'm making enough money to live on, I'll keep being a writer. Patreon has been really essential to that—I can't thank my supporters on Patreon enough. They're helping to ensure that I keep doing what I do.

I define success in these terms: Am I writing at a level that I'm happy with? Am I doing the work that I want to be doing? What makes me happy is working at a nerdy, cerebral level where I can challenge myself. I don't want it to be easy, because if it's too easy, I get bored. I want it to be challenging.

At heart, part of the reason you become a writer is because you want something to exist in the world that doesn't exist yet. You're actively creating new stuff to put into the world and you're doing that because you believe that it should exist. Being a writer is one of the most optimistic and hopeful things that you can do as a human being.

Writing means creating new possibility spaces for what could be, or what could happen. I think that's a good thing. It's a very hopeful way of looking at the world—that you have some ability to change the way things are, or that you hope that you can somehow make things better, you know?

Five tips for writers by Geeta Dayal:

Pitching is a sport. Don't get emotional if you get rejected. Just pitch again. If you don't feel confident, act like you are. Acting confident gets you 90% of the way there. Honestly, it works.

Spend time in good libraries. I feel inspired when I'm surrounded by lots of strange and interesting books.

Have a strong internal compass. What matters is what YOU think. Your parents might say, "Why don't you apply to medical school?" Your literary agent might say, "Can't you make this idea more commercial?" But being yourself is what makes you unique. Don't be afraid to have your own vision.

Learn to cook. Seriously. If you're eating well, your whole life improves. Many of my friends who are writers are also fabulous chefs. Great cooking is all about technique; it's a magical and ancient form of

alchemy. My friend Neil Gaiman is wonderful in the kitchen, and I think the meditative process of cooking subliminally feeds into his writing.

Take up a hobby that isn't writing. Writing is creative, but when it becomes your job, it can be really stressful. I play piano, and sometimes I write songs for fun. If you don't want to buy a musical instrument, learn to sing. I sang for a while in a gospel choir! Singing can be an incredibly cathartic experience.

Name

Geeta Dayal

Vocation


Journalist, Critic


Fact



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