

On standing up for your work & your community



Music journalist Jeff Weiss on the perils and pleasures of freelancing, the value of camaraderie over competition, and why you should never sell out.

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As told to Julian Brimmers, 2807 words.

Tags: [Journalism](#), [Adversity](#), [Independence](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#).

Is it accurate to say that you've had quite a stressful, if not rocky, 2018?

Q-Tip said that Joni Mitchell never lies, and Joni Mitchell said that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone. Therefore, a sense of loss would inevitably follow the local alt-weekly getting destroyed by the Heritage Foundation-sponsored reboot of *Arrested Development* [laughs]. If you can't learn from losses, you can't appreciate victories. I know that's trite, but if you're not losing occasionally, you aren't fighting hard enough for what you believe in.

Have you been freelancing all your professional life?

Yes, apart from my first job, right out of college. For 15 months, I was a staffer at a business newspaper, which was an invaluable experience. They taught me how to actually report, how to transcribe phone interviews in real-time, and how to never want to wear a suit again outside of a wedding. I've been freelancing full-time since 2007.

Going freelance, the initial feeling of relief can switch quickly into a cycle of anxiety.

Yeah, because the checks come in and you're like, "Yeah, ok, that was a lot of work for THAT amount?" The last half of the 20th Century was probably a historical aberration and we're now going back to what artists always have been: insanely broke. You can't do it to try to make money because you probably won't. You have to do it because you have to do it.

When you first get your foot in the door, and you're somewhat competitive by nature, one tends to be gunning for other music writers. That pretty quickly changes when you realize, "Oh well, we're all equally screwed, no one's making any money," doesn't it?

At first, there's an element of careerist brinkmanship where you try to position yourself to get the best, most prestigious job. And then the years go by and you're like, "Oh, no one is going to get to be [Gay Talese](#) in 1968. Everyone is struggling." And if you don't have empathy at that point, then you're just like... a fascist?

In whatever creative existence you're living, the most important thing, other than a steadfast belief in yourself, are those people who are closest to you. In every endeavor, I've been very lucky to be aided by deeply gifted, ride-or-die people. That goes for *PoW*, for the label, PoW Records, and for our new publication, *The LAnd*. Even if writing is a solitary pursuit, I'm very lucky to be immersed in this architecture of people who allow me to write. That includes readers, friends, editors, and family, of course.

So what do you think is more prevalent in writing circles, competition or camaraderie?

Camaraderie, but you also have to know who the enemy is. When I was younger, my initial impulse was competition. I played college baseball and high school basketball. That gladiatorial element served me really well. But pretty early on, when the internet hit, I realized that there's a psychic sea change with people. In the print media days, you were only going to subscribe to one newspaper. You were competing for survival, existentially, with other newspapers. However, with the advent of the internet, I wondered, "how are people gonna discover your website, if not for hyperlinks?" You needed to build a community, or you would be screaming on a Blogspot for eternity. Which is probably the punishment that everyone deserves [*laughs*].

Who taught you that?

I know it's become corny to say, because we're at a point on the dystopian timeline where there are 43 year-olds in camo shorts at Trader Joe's with *W* tattoos on their ankle. But when I was a kid, Wu-Tang offered the most inspiring notion of what art could be. RZA had the best advice: get your most talented friends and become like Voltron. You'll be much better suited to face a world that is by default callous, cruel, and hyper-capitalistic.

Passion of the Weiss is one of the last music blogs standing. Spiritually, it's almost a relict of a bygone era.

I came into the journalism world in 2005, the blog heyday. To me, blogging was really liberating and cool, even if by nature it's not really cool. It felt like you were writing your way to a job, and it helped me find this community of like-minded people. They were all in their early twenties, recently out of school, and we were discovering what would've otherwise been esoteric music. It was communal. Then I built *PoW*, which today has more of a magazine approach, with a deep roster of writers, all of whom I consider my friends. It's important to build coalitions. Not that many people are truly evil.

How do you balance the things you're working on at the same time?

I tell young writers that they need to be ready to sacrifice. My life is great, I love it and I have zero complaints. But it's not a "normal" existence like most of my friends from high school. I can't buy a house in LA. I'm not married with two kids. My dad is a lawyer and my mom ran a small children's clothing store. It wasn't a rich household, but I was lucky enough to have what I needed.

When it became apparent that I wouldn't go to law school, but instead opted to become a writer after college, my dad was like, "That's a terrible career... good luck, get a real job!" Of course, I knew that there were writers out there who actually got paid, albeit 90 days and eight "where is my money?" emails later. I knew it was a conceivable, if not slightly delusional, goal. You just have to be willing to sacrifice. And there are many things you have to do for your mental health.

Like what, for example?

After looking at Twitter for a few hours, I feel like I have the world's most mild case of PTSD. You're just scrolling through your feed and it's atrocity after atrocity that I am powerless to fix. To stay halfway sane, I go to the gym, meditate, read, or go for walks. I nap a lot. If I don't do those things, my brain starts an open rebellion against the rest of my body. I begrudgingly go to yoga. I have been known to burn incense. I'm from California and have been forced to embrace the cliché.

I guess the qualities that propel you to success can easily become the qualities that take you down. Your obsession can become a monomania. What are the steps to preserve your sanity-and are you being realistic with what you can achieve? Those are questions that every creative person is confronted with every day. I know that I am, and I don't always answer them correctly. But at least you get a couple of them right in the process.

What a regular, functioning person would do, is: pick up a good novel or magazine, listen to a record that means

something to them, just to get away from it all. How often do you read or listen to music with no notion of, "How can I make professional use of this?"

I read at least four, five days a week for fun, whatever that is. I read a lot of late-period Henry Miller, which I vastly prefer to the Henry Miller of *Tropic of Cancer*, who is basically a crass, one-note version of "this writer... fucks." I'm reading "Conversations with Nelson Algren," who's one of my favorites. I read Eve Babitz "Slow Days" and "LA Woman" this summer and think she deserves a bronze statue outside of Musso and Frank's.

The underlying question is, "How can I funnel everything into one direction so there is no wasted movement?" I don't go out just to go out very much anymore. I might get a drink at the Dresden because Marty and Elayne playing Santana is my Woodstock. It's great that I've been able to build things like the club night, "Don't Come to LA," that I do with Vic of Rosecrans Avenue. There, and at ETA, where I sometimes DJ, I get to listen to the rap music that I want to hear. It's much better than going to a random bar and paying \$15 a drink to listen to Drake. Drake is a toxic form of American homogeneity.

You mean Canadian?

See, that's the problem with America, the biggest rap star is Canadian. We can't even do our own narcissism correctly anymore [laughs].

Besides your freelance work, you helped organize the LA Weekly boycott. It seems like you have a talent for getting people behind a worthy cause that doesn't necessarily make anyone any money.

I take that as an immense compliment. I just hope it's not meant in a Tom Sawyer way [laughs]. Tom Sawyer got people to whitewash the fence for him. I'm like, I have this fence and I need people to help me paint it in the craziest colors in the hopes of creating something that hasn't been done before. In all honesty, you won't necessarily remember what you got paid for every story, and you surely won't remember what you spent the check on. But you might remember the friend you made or the party that you went to.

Some of the best friends I made came from writing. *Stylus* magazine really was my start in this world, and when I'm in Chicago, I still stay at the house of a friend I made through *Stylus*, thirteen years ago. That's how *Passion of the Weiss* started, too. At one point, I invited other people in to write whatever they wanted. "Be as creative as possible and let me edit it in form." I always hated coaches and teachers. But there is a value in leadership and creating symbols. It wasn't much different with the record label, or the *LA Weekly* boycott. Our mindset was, "Fuck this! This act of aggression will not stand. Not in OUR city."

Do you think frustration is undervalued as a catalyst for starting things?

People get caught up in this idea of "everything should be positive." That's a very California thing. Honestly, some of the most positive things have come out of negativity. In business, they'll tell you that the best businesses are the ones that fill a need that no one had yet filled. That applies to creative endeavors, too. Write the book that you want to read. Make the record that you want to listen to. Publish the book that isn't available in your native language. It's the same guiding principle.

The art that I love, it isn't nihilistic, but it finds meaning from the darkness. Let's say someone died, how can you make their life and your life meaningful? God didn't want them to die, y'know? One of my best friends died three months ago, he drank himself to death at age 36. He was a brilliant writer, so I'd love to get his books published. Just to make sure his life mattered, because it did. I'm not gonna pretend he is in a better place now, but I do think that life is meaningless and it's up to us to find some meaning.

Which brings us back to why your year has been so stressful... can you recap what happened to the LA Weekly?

For the better part of the year, *LA Weekly* had been up for sale by its previous owners. They were nefarious in their own right, but at least they knew how to run a newspaper and respected traditional walls between editorial

and advertising.

The wholesale process was shrouded in secrecy from the get go. The buyer was a new company called Semanal Media. All we knew was that there were weed ties. Then the *LA Weekly* staffers got a letter saying, "Your jobs are all terminated as of this date." Everyone thought it was just standard practice—when a company gets bought, everyone gets fired and then rehired. All of a sudden, the publisher gets an email, telling him to fire the editor and the whole editorial team, save for one staff writer. There were no exit interviews, no one had the guts to even face them. So I'm texting the EIC, asking if she's still there, because if she's not, I won't write for them anymore. And then she sent out her now infamous "Red Wedding" tweets, comparing what happened to the *Game of Thrones* scene where everyone got murdered. Which is probably the most apt analogy, honestly.

And then you followed her example and put them on blast on Twitter?

I took inspiration from Tupac's "Hit em Up" and Rich Homie Quan's decision to "Never Stop Going In" [laughs]. I wrote something out, it went pretty viral and I noticed how much people cared about this. In the modern media world of 2018, these layoffs are ubiquitous, but this one was particularly galling and sinister. I started googling who these people were, and started making fun of them on Twitter, which, to be fair, felt like the most logical recourse. Like, okay, you own the paper now, but we will expose the truth about this evil, idiotic plot. April Wolfe, the former film editor, went in as well. We just came across ethical lapse after ethical lapse, and lie after lie. It became obvious that we were essentially dealing with con men. They thought they could just use it for their own enrichment, and quickly found out that that would not be the case. I hope this can serve as an example to other rapacious businesspeople who think they can just gut local news and use it for their own sinister purposes. There will be repercussions.

You mentioned how these mass firings also spark discussions of selling out by continuing to work for such publications. This fear seems to be on a lot of writers' minds these days.

The devil's greatest trick is making people believe that there is no such thing as selling out. There IS such a fucking thing as selling out. Everyone knows what it is: it's when you do something insincere for a lot of money and you're by default conning people. That's a sellout. It's not, "Oh, I did a commercial," it's, "Oh, I did a commercial for the worst, most toxic product and I told you it was good for you." There is a difference between a sell-out and a glow-up. People need to understand that difference. On the same note, when you get into that space of "nothing is right," then that's a slippery slope to be in. It doesn't mean to be a zealot either. Be civil, but don't be bullied.

I wondered if establishing a new magazine like the *LAnd* is, in a way, an admission to the fact that the fight for the *LA Weekly* has been lost?

The *LAnd* is built to be an antithesis to that—a natural response to these new owners being so clearly craven and dishonest. We're trying to be transparent and ethical. We have the community in mind. We're trying to employ as wide and diverse of a group of freelancers as we can. Of course, it won't be perfect, but ultimately, it's rooted in the desire to be for locals and by locals. We'd love to publish four times a year, but hopefully we can at least start out doing it twice a year. But it will matter and you will be able to hold it in your hands, and there is something real in that.

Jeff Weiss recommends... The Best Songs to Listen to While Attempting to Demolish Your Feeble Republican-Owned *Alt-Weekly*:

2Pac - "Hit Em Up" - Consider that 83.2 percent of the runtime of the most vicious rap diss of all-time is consumed by third-tier rappers named after fourth-tier dictators and no one even remembers because 2Pac was so immortal. Chino XL never stood a chance.

Lil Boosie - "Goin' Through Some Thangs" - There are only two groups of people who really understand the economic pain inflicted by the shift from analog to digital: print journalists and musicians. Who among us cannot relate to Boosie being unable to ride candy coated Dodge chargers because of illegal downloading?

Pusha T - "Story of Adidon" - There are no rules in rap beef or newspaper boycotts

Drakeo The Ruler - "Cyberbullies" - Free Drakeo, Free the Stinc Team. Always keep a few shells handy

Dead Kennedys - "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" - Pro tip: you should always punch Nazis

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Vocation

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