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On turning your curiosity into a career

A&R Rep and music writer Tyler Andere on what it's like to have a hard-to-define job, the slow pace of diversifying the music industry, and why turning your passions into a job can be complicated.

How do you break down your work life as an A&R (Artists and Repertoire) person? What is your day-to-day like?

It changes every day. I'd say there's always a decent amount of computer and email work, responding to artists who need things or who have questions. I do A&R so I'm the point person for all the different creative aspects that come together to make an album happen—the press photos, the biography, music video stuff, merchandise... any number of those things. I'm usually the person who the artist is coming to when they've got questions or concerns.

So, a good amount of it is keeping up with those tasks via email, phone, text, or whatever during the day. And then another chunk of it is just listening to a lot of music and doing a lot of research on the things that I'm listening to and trying to find interesting stories and learn more about these new artists that I'm coming across. That can be anything from actually setting up a phone call or a meeting so we can talk and get to know each other, to looking through their Bandcamp or SoundCloud history, seeing who they follow and what kind of stuff they're into, and looking at their social media stuff.

There's also quite a bit of going to shows. I go to shows at least four times a week, sometimes eight to 10 times a week if it's a busy week. I'm going to everything from DIY stuff happening at warehouses or coffee shops, to shows by more established artists who are coming through. I'm also going to shows for artists who I already work with, who are maybe coming through town. I'm making sure that I'm always checking out new things on every level.

That was a long way of answering what my actual day-to-day is like, but it's a combination of all those things, and it's always shifting and changing depending on what artist we're working with at the moment, or what time of the year it is.

Do you do A&R stuff exclusively for Father/Daughter, or for other places as well?

I do some A&R consulting for this other label and art collective called Elestial Sound. They are based in Gainesville, Florida. They are both like a label and like an art production house. They do a ton of installation work for music festivals and different art events. So, I work with them on a consultant basis. And then I also do Father/Daughter. Those two things together make up my main gig.

When you were a kid, did you always have some kind of affinity towards music? Did you always want to be a part of this world in some way?

I never thought I would work in the music world. Honestly, when I was growing up I didn't even know that there was a music industry. It was something I couldn't quite imagine or fathom. I was very much into

music and was checking out all sorts of stuff, but I didn't have an understanding of how it was coming to me.

I was just finding stuff online, or through friends, or through my sister, and I didn't really have an idea of what was actually behind it or how these things were actually coming together. I grew up doing theater and choir, so that was kind of my main thing for a very long time. I ended up studying theater in college as well.

It's interesting when I look back on my theater days, especially in high school, I realized that I was very interested in the social and community aspect of the theater department. I remember being so fascinated and obsessed with the trajectory of someone entering into high school theater as a freshman or a sophomore, and then seeing who would end up taking on the lead role by their junior or senior year. By the time I was a junior and senior, I was very active and had lots of lead roles, but I was way more interested in trying to find out who might be the next freshman or sophomore to be the star person in our high school theater department.

I wasn't aware of that being like A&R or anything back then, but looking back on it, I was always really interested in trying to spot talent early on, before it became a more realized thing. During my junior year of college I decided to leave school, and was becoming less interested in theater. I was way more interested in what was happening in music at the time.

I've always been a music fan. I was always the person in my group of friends in high school who was bringing lots of new weird stuff to the table. At that time, I was reading a lot of different music blogs and publications, so I started a Tumblr page because I was bored and I wanted a place to share some of the things I'd been finding and getting into.

I started this blog called Flashlight Tag in 2010, and I started posting stuff that I found. And then, slowly but surely, it grew a small audience. That is how I came to work with Portals, which was started in 2012 by a whole group of bloggers. We got this idea to start a larger publication where we would all contribute and do features and different coverage on a wider and more ambitious scale. I was doing that for a really long time, and Portals went through many different phases. It's still going now, but at a much slower pace. It's just a few of us. Through that world I also met Jessi Frick who runs Father/Daughter Records. Long before I came on to work for the label, we had been friends, and Portals covered a lot of the artists that were on Father/Daughter.

I've never thought of myself as a writer, and I wasn't particularly interested in journalism growing up. I very much fell into it and it just kind of stuck. That's how I ended up where I'm at now.

A&R is a weirdly amorphous job that involves so many different kinds of skills. How do you describe it when someone asks what your job is?

It's a tough thing to describe. There's an older music industry way of defining what an A&R person is, and then there's what an A&R person looks like post-internet. The way I define it, first and foremost, is scouting. I'm actively looking for new artists who are unsigned. That's the baseline of the job. But the second part of it is much more emotional, much more creative.

Once we've signed an artist, I'm not only the point person for all the different assets that come together for putting together an album—I'm also there as a therapist or for emotional support. Me and my artists talk a lot about feelings, ambitions, self-doubt, and insecurity. I'm there to keep them excited and motivated, and to be someone who they can rely on for ideas, and as someone who they can go to if they're feeling emotionally distraught.

I think that's the difference between someone who's doing a good job at A&R and someone who's maybe just doing the literal definition of the job, which is scouting and helping oversee the signing process. Once you've done all that, your job is to also be there for them in an emotional way. That's the way that I've carved out my role at Father/Daughter and that's the thing that I feel I'm best at offering—being someone who can get into those heavier emotional conversations and talk about things that are not just solely based on the industry or what is happening with the album release itself.

There's a huge amount of people skills involved in that. You need to be able to talk to people and make them feel comfortable and figure out what their problem is and help them be the best thing they can be.

I think being a people person is huge for this job. Knowing how to read the room, and knowing how to have a conversation with someone who maybe doesn't know what they're getting themselves into, or how the music industry actually works. Thankfully, a lot of these are skills that I picked up in the theater world and have been able to carry over into this line of work. Being good with my instincts and knowing how to feel out a person from the get-go has been really helpful.

I feel like you have to be someone who is really curious as well, both about people and about culture. I do A&R for a record label so I work with music, but I'm deeply interested in culture at all levels, high and low, everything that's in-between. You have to be someone who's deeply curious about that sort of thing, and also be somewhat of an investigator or a researcher. It's not quite like investigative reporting, but I do see myself as someone who's constantly doing a ton of research.

The music industry has undergone several seismic changes in the last decade, but at the end of the day it is still a landscape dominated primarily by straight white dudes. What has been your experience navigating the less creative part of this business?

It's been challenging. When I first started getting into music blogging, all the bloggers and writers that I admired were predominantly straight white men. Often times, I didn't know who was behind these blogs and I would find out later. The people who I would see working at the different record labels, or anybody who was in any industry position—publicists, booking agents, managers—I was mostly seeing white men or white people in general.

It's been challenging because I feel like I didn't have a mirror in that world, so I've had to just imagine it for myself and advocate for myself. I've been doing this for around eight years now, and through all that time I've met a lot of other people of color and queer folks in the industry. I've built a nice network, and I feel like we are a support system for each other. I feel a lot better about it now because if I ever experience some sort of micro-aggression or experience where I feel like I'm being discriminated against or judged in some way, I have people that I can talk to.

But yeah, when I was first starting out, I didn't have that network yet and it was difficult to be taken seriously, honestly. Often—especially when I'm in a media space at a festival or some sort of industry space or event—I will frequently be mistaken for an artist. I like eccentric and dramatic fashion, and I'm queer, and I'm kind of fluid, so I express myself in a lot of different ways. Oftentimes, it doesn't align with what people's perceptions are of someone who works on the industry side of things. Typically, people think people in these kinds of roles are still creative but a little bit more straight laced. A&R is seen as a job where you want to be really anonymous and just stand in the back taking notes.

I've chosen to do the job much differently. I have no problem not hiding how much I love an artist. I have no problem getting up front at a show. I love moving, I love dancing, I love expressing myself. It's been hard to find a position where I could be my full self and still be doing my job. Luckily, I met Jessi at Father/Daughter. They just have a way more inclusive and way more progressive point of view than a lot of the other labels in that space.

I think there's a new wave of labels who are changing the face of things, but a lot of the indie labels that started in the late '80s or the mid-'90s are still predominantly owned and run by straight white men. When I first started considering doing A&R work and looking into some of these positions, I took interviews with some of those labels and it just felt like I wasn't being taken seriously. I was looked at as someone who was maybe really cool and fun, but not serious enough to actually do the job. So yeah, it's been a challenge.

You've helped break the careers of several artists who don't exactly fit the standard mold in pop or indie-rock. It must be gratifying to be able to amplify what are typically pretty marginalized voices.

Yes, it is. It's so amazing when you have a moment when you're at a big festival or something and you see a queer artist or a queer person of color, just anybody who's in any sort of marginalized group who's getting to make art at that level and bring it to a wider audience. It's super gratifying, and it makes

the work extremely political for me, whereas I think there are maybe some A&R folks or record label folks who aren't thinking about that stuff, who maybe don't really have the same point of view. It gets lost with them.

At Father/Daughter it's pretty much exclusively all queer POC on the roster of artists, and the people we have on staff also reflects that. Hopefully other, bigger labels with more funding and more resources will take notice and realize that they should be making some changes as well. I think there have been changes made on an artistic level with a lot of labels, but there is still a long way to go. You do see more diversity on some of the bigger independent labels as far as their rosters are concerned, but often the staff doesn't reflect that. You go into those offices and the staff will still be largely white and male.

As we were saying, the landscape of the music business—and music journalism—has changed pretty radically over even just the last couple of years. Knowing that, what kind of advice might you have for someone looking to get into this world? Or someone interested in doing A&R in the more creative sense?

That is a really tough question and I don't feel like I have a super solid and clear answer. I've talked about this with people in the past, but the role of being a music writer—particularly in the internet era—is kind of self-elected, isn't it? You get to decide, "I want to do this." There are some music business programs in different schools and things like that you can take, but even if you do that, it's still pretty much you who decides what your career is going to look like. There are ways you can get started for free, whether it's by launching a blog or just booking tiny little shows at your house. Or it can be as simple as thinking, "Ok, I'm gonna start going to a lot more shows." If you are interested in A&R, why not try going to at least two shows every week and seeing lots of different kinds of stuff. You have to immerse yourself in the community you want to eventually be a part of.

You also need to have some sort of passion project that leads you there. I didn't take the path of, say, getting an internship somewhere and then eventually applying for a job. It was all passion projects that led me from place to place, thing to thing. It was all these projects that I just kind of dreamed up with other people, and as we kept doing them people took notice. Eventually, someone was like, "Hey, we can pay you to do this."

That's also extremely lucky. You want to think about what you're passionate about, and then you want to start a project around that, and you want to do that to the best of your ability and hope that somebody takes notice. There's a certain amount of luck that falls into it as well. So I can't say that if you start a passion project, if you start a blog, and if you start blogging every day and start going to shows every week and doing everything that I did, that it is going to equal out in the same way. A big part of it is luck and a big part is also being delusional and trying to manifest this thing you want to happen. When I would talk about my ideas for music blogging and label work and that kind of stuff when I was first starting out, it didn't make a whole lot of sense to the people who I was talking to.

I think if you follow your curiosity and really see it through, cool things can happen. If you don't end up in a place where you're able to make money or to make a living doing art or working in art in some way, that's okay, too. That's a large part of the world. The kind of work that I'm doing could not necessarily be taken from me, but it could be irrelevant at any moment. It's not necessarily a really comfortable, sustainable thing. It's very abstract in a lot of ways. I'm also working for a label that has somewhat of a legacy, but it's still very new in a lot of ways, still very young. It's risky.

Some days I'm envious of folks who have a more traditional 9 to 5, but then do art for different passion projects or artistic projects in their free time. I think that's a really solid way to be living life. But if you're someone who wants to be doing it full-time, I think you need to have a delusional crazy passion within you, and once you actually do get to a point where you are maybe starting to make some money from writing, or you get a part-time gig on a label or something, you're gonna have to accept that it is work and it's not just this fun thing now where you get to just hang out and listen to music and do whatever.

For me, working in music and working in artistic spaces, the line between personal and work are super blurry. That can be tough. Sometimes I wish I could draw those lines a little bit more clearly—when am I listening to music for "work" and when am I listening to music for "pleasure," for example—but most days I just feel really grateful and lucky.

Tyler Andere recommends:

5 things helping me get through this year

The Hidden Shelf - Zone Out - A beautiful pocket-sized album. Perfect for a bike ride on an overcast day.

Still Processing - The best podcast in the world from two of my favorite cultural critics, Wesley Morris and Jenna Wortham.

Shinichi Atobe - "Heat 1" - I could live inside of this tune forever. Breezy, late afternoon techno.

Rosanne Cash - "Only Human" - This deep cut from Johnny Cash's eldest daughter was my personal song of the summer.

Bonus Family - A beautiful and patient Swedish family drama on Netflix.

Name

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Vocation


A&R Rep, Music writer, Curator


Fact



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