

# On the practice of not practicing



Musician and writer Thurston Moore discusses remaining a student for life, the impact of punk, and not being afraid to do a lot of different things.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2869 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Writing](#), [Poetry](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Inspiration](#).

**You play music, you've edited fan zines, you teach, and now you've written a memoir. Do you have an overall creative philosophy that you bring to all these disciplines?**

I always subscribe to the idea that there's equal value in these disciplines that relate to each other, in whatever field it is. For me, the people who write about music in any journalistic way, especially when I was coming of age in the mid-'70s—writers like Lester Bangs and Patti Smith and Richard Meltzer—who I talk about in the book as having a really informative and intriguing energy, as much as the people they're writing about. If Lester Bangs is writing on Lou Reed or Iggy Pop, I'm as interested in who Lester Bangs is as I am in Iggy Pop or Lou Reed. So, that was really important to me growing up, realizing that there was this kind of equal value in these disciplines of people who were involved with the world of underground music, doing fan zines, people who were making films and videos eventually, people who were involved with running an independent record label, or even somebody on college radio promoting the music.

Everybody did different things, and it wasn't always just about the musician per se, who was the driver. It was like everybody was in the same boat. I liked that, and I always had an interest in working in all respects to that. So, of course I wanted to be in a band. Of course, I wanted to be a songwriter. I liked performing, but I also wanted to write, and I really loved writing. And I eventually got really involved with the world of poetry and its history—particularly post-war poetry and the more experimental nature of it—and publishing it and writing it and studying it and becoming intimate with a lot of the people who devoted their lives to it. So, anybody could call themselves anything. I'm a poet, a writer, a musician. I liked the fact that you could have all these descriptors for what you were doing.

**There's that famous saying, "Jack of all trades, master of none." Was that something you were wary of?**

There certainly was a line of thought to not stretch yourself too thin, to focus on one aspect or focus on one discipline. I never agreed with that. I thought the creative impulse could lend itself to any medium, to any discipline, and you could work in any which way. Of course, you might be more interesting to others as a guitar player or as a singer or as just a composer than you are as a writer. You have to be aware of where your strengths are.

**Punk obviously had a lifelong effect on you. Other than helping propel you into music and becoming a touring musician and running a record label, how do you think it affected your overall approach to life?**

Well, it certainly was an identity that I felt attuned to in my late teens as that whole world was coming together. There was some realization that there was this series of micro communities around the world happening at

the same time that dealt with kicking against the idea of having to attain a traditional technique to express yourself, and to break that down and to agree on this idea that working from the ground up and creating your own personal voice, with some regard to the traditions of the art form. It was necessary because in some ways it was really restricted by 1975 or '76. I mean, the idea that you had to play keyboards on the level of somebody like Rick Wakeman or Keith Emerson or play guitar with the agility of Jimmy Page or Eric Clapton—all of whom you could adore and honor and be amazed at and try to even have the ambition towards or learn from.

In some ways it was really important to create a new forum in which to share expression and to push against the complacency that late '60s hippie culture had sort of established. There was this idea of rebelling against the standards of society by growing your hair out and moving out to a farm or a commune. But in some ways, that escapism, I think, was not completely rewarding to an entire generation coming of age in the '70s. Instead, it was this wanting to come to terms with the energy of the urban, of the city. So, when you started seeing pictures of Patti Smith, who looked androgynous standing on a subway platform in New York, or Iggy Pop in Detroit, that inner city energy was not what *Rolling Stone* newspaper wanted to promote. They wanted to promote the hippie, James Taylor, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young on the back porch with the dogs and the fringe jackets. But there was something that rang a bit false about that because you knew they were successful musicians, and they probably had pretty judicious bank accounts.

**Punk essentially called bullshit on that.**

Yeah. There was something about embracing poverty with the ripped jeans and torn leather jackets that the Ramones were wearing over T-shirts. Or even Johnny Lydon and the Sex Pistols, just kind of extolling what they saw as the virtue of their reality as working-class lads. That was really important. There wasn't anything like that happening in the rock world. And the songwriting was consistently magnificent, which doesn't get written about a lot. I really wanted to write about that a lot in my book—about how punk actually proved itself by producing work that was startling. I mean, "Anarchy in the UK," "God Save the Queen," they're incredible rock and roll songs. That whole album, *Never Mind the Bollocks*, by the Sex Pistols, is impeccable. It's a rock masterpiece on par with anything in the 20th century. The first Ramones album, as monotonous as it is, is astounding in what it's presenting as a really singular statement of minimalism and everything. So, the goods were delivered. Patti Smith delivered the goods on *Horses*. I think if that wasn't the case, we probably wouldn't be talking about the hows and whys of punk rock having the everlasting effect that it has had culturally.

**Jonathan Lethem wrote a blurb for your book saying that Sonic Youth made music from the standpoint of the "permanent novice." What's your take on that? It seems to tie in with the punk aesthetic and certainly what you just mentioned about not having the dexterity of a Rick Wakeman or Jimmy Page.**

I think it was the acceptance of always thinking of yourself as being an apprentice to the culture, even if it's a subculture, which I always feel anyway. I feel more as if I'm still a student of my interests than I do some kind of professor or purveyor of it.

When Jonathan sent that in, I thought it was an interesting perspective. It was all about this idea of constantly being enthralled by the work that informs you, so, I like that. I'm not quite sure if he actually looks at himself that way. I think a lot of fiction writers like Jonathan or even Colson [Whitehead] or Jonathan Franzen or Mary Gaitskill—talking to writers like that, I think the idea is that they're trying to better what they have already done. And I always felt like with Sonic Youth and whatever work I do as a solo artist, it's always about doing work that is genuine to you at that time. And in that time, you hopefully feel that you're doing work that has progressed from what you did before. Not necessarily more sophisticated, but just something that you feel generally that's changing as you change as a person. And that could be for better or worse.

**The jazz pianist Bill Evans once said that you have to practice your craft and be diligent in that, but when you sit down to write, you have to have an almost childlike approach. What do you think about that idea?**

Yeah—make it new, make it fresh. Allow yourself to be open to that. You have this great history of what you have learned already in practice. My whole thing with practice is two ideas. I mean, the idea of practicing every day, whatever you do as a discipline, is a very instructive thing. You hear that from painters: "Paint every day." Keep

your craft growing and paint every day, and that's how you become a better painter.

I've had other musicians saying it's good to rehearse every day. But I remember not rehearsing every day and then coming to band practice. In the book, I talk a lot about the first band I was in, called The Coachmen. The older guitar player in the band would just be amazed. He'd say, "You seem to still get better even though you don't practice." I felt like in some ways I decoded what was necessary as far as what I needed to know about playing guitar. But I guess if I really studied more music theory and traditional guitar technique, I could be that much better a guitarist per se, but I didn't really think of myself or want myself to be this kind of guitar player who can shred in a certain kind of way.

I totally appreciate it when I hear other people play that way who are contemporaries of mine—somebody like J Mascis, who picks up the guitar and just shreds nonchalantly. But I never really wanted to be that kind of musician. And I did realize that if I stepped away from playing the guitar or thinking about the music that I want to make in any which way for two weeks or a month or two months when you're not on tour and you have this downtime to not go near the instrument, I find that really rewarding. Because when I do reintroduce myself to the world of composition and sitting down with a guitar, it's that much more flowing and explosive, and all these ideas that have just been germinating in your meditations come out. I don't know if that would be the same if you're playing every day. If you play every day, you start coming up with these tropes and ideas that go from day to day, and you keep returning to them. Like, "Oh, what about that thing I played yesterday?" And there's this continuance that can be really great and interesting, but I find also that not playing can be really, really important.

**You've published poetry and essays and other short pieces, but *Sonic Life* is by far the longest thing you've written. What did you learn about yourself as a writer as you were working on it?**

One thing I learned is that I completely loved it. I learned that if I could just stay still, get out of the van and stop touring at 65 years old, stop beating myself up physically, and just stay home and write, I would be more than happy. I learned that I loved waking up at the crack of dawn and opening up the laptop and getting back into the paragraphs and moving forward. And then knowing that I was going to have to edit with an editor, and just getting involved with that for almost a year and really loving that process of cutting it down and refining it. And then producing the book itself, down to what it aesthetically feels like in your hands. Everything about it was great. I learned that it's something that I'm kind of raring to jump back into.

**Did you hit any patches of writer's block?**

No. I mean, there's always the anxiety that you might have writer's block, but I feel like as soon as I sat down and started writing, it went away. And I learned a long time ago, even with writing songs, that all I had to do was pick up the guitar. If I didn't pick up the guitar, I wouldn't write a song. So, I realized that if I didn't touch the keys of the keyboard, nothing's going to get written. I can just sit down and start writing a sentence or something or reread a previous chapter or a few paragraphs and refine them a little bit and then move forward. There's all kinds of strategies, but I found that I never felt like there was a dead end. I guess maybe someday I could, but I don't know.

**You teach writing at Naropa University. What do you like about it?**

I got asked about seven or eight years ago by Anne Waldman, who was a director of the summer writing workshop at Naropa, to come and teach a class. I was really nervous about doing it, even though my father was a teacher and he taught art appreciation and philosophy. And there were other teachers in my family, so I felt like, well, it is a familial thing. But my whole thing with school was like, "I never want to go back to school." The idea of waking up in the early morning and going to class gave me the heebie-jeebies.

That said, it immediately became apparent that classrooms are generally filled with people who are very open to any information you impart. I teach writing that's conducive to my experience, though. I could talk about the relationship between Allen Ginsburg and the music world, or William Burroughs in the music world, or I can talk about the writing of certain poets that have some kind of engagement with underground music, like The Fugs and Ed

Sanders and or D.A. Levy, or just talk about somebody like Lou Reed or Nico or John Cale and their songwriting, their lyric writing, how distinct it is from each other—let alone the entire pantheon of lyric writing. I figured if I go into a class and want to use the Velvet Underground as a syllabus, well, everybody knows the Velvet Underground. This is going to be redundant to a lot of these people in the classroom. But I realized the classroom doesn't really know what you know. They haven't been investigating the way you have. To find this out is really rewarding. I enjoy it. But I don't really see myself as someone with a future in academics.

**Thurston Moore recommends:**

Saint Omer: This is a wonderful French film about a female journalist investigating a court case where a woman was being accused of matricide. It has this very interesting dialogue between these two women because one of them is very university educated and the other is not. I was really struck by the intelligence of this film.

Boooooook: This book deals with the life and work of a British publisher named Bob Cobbing. Through the '60s and '70s, he published a judicious amount of poetry, small editions of little stapled pieces of ephemera that, in some ways, captured the ideal of the underground community of just sharing ideas through the discipline of your choice. For him it was poetry, but I've talked to people in London who said that what he was doing presaged a lot of what happened with punk rock in England, especially the idea of a stapled fanzine.

Zoom R8: "This is a more technical recommendation. As somebody who's a bit of a Luddite in the studio—I barely know how to turn the lights on when I walk into a studio—I recommend the R8 recorder. It's no bigger than a laptop and it has faders. For me, working digitally, punching in numbers, my brain does not want to go there. Faders do the same thing as pressing numbers, but for some reason it's much easier for me. As an addendum to this, I was able to find a manual for the R8 that's for dummies."

Eat Your Mind: This is a biography of the writer Kathy Acker. She was somebody I've always been interested in. I met her fleetingly in the early '80s because she was involved with a lot of downtown New York people. She was a singular and wild literary figure, somebody who was so obsessed with the art of writing and the art of being a writer, that her work just took on this otherworldly quality. And you don't have to be an enthusiast of her writing to enjoy this, because I don't think I am. She was a very intense personality.

Lo Becat: It's these two women who play bagpipe drone music. They're from Belgium. They put out a few cassettes and CD-Rs through the years. They draw inspiration from ancient French and Belgian traditional music and more academic takes on the essence of what drone music delivers, which is this otherworldly, almost body-shifting sound world. It's not for everybody. Sometimes I put it on, and people are like, "Can you take this off?" But for other people, it's really beautiful rainbow noise music.

Name

Thurston Moore

Vocation

musician, author

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Vera Marmelo