

On finding what it is you love to do



Writer and journalist Anthony Fantano (The Needle Drop) discusses finding your format, staying excited, and engaging with an ever-growing audience.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2931 words.

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You've been doing YouTube reviews since 2007. How do you maintain your enthusiasm for new music, for discovering new things, and about what you're doing?

I really have no clue, honestly, I'm sorry if that's a terrible lack of an answer. I've always been interested in music in general for as long as I can remember, but there was definitely an a-ha moment ever since in the early 2000s when I first got a hold of the internet and gained the ability to illegally download songs.

I was always interested in music prior and I had my ways of getting it either through saving up money for a cassette or copying songs off the radio. I feel like once I was on the internet, downloading any number of songs off of Kazaa or LimeWire was still way more music than I would've had access to otherwise.

That became a really convenient exploration mechanism for me and showed me there's an insatiable desire here, that there really seems to be no bottom to. I'm always looking for something new, something different, something surprising, something that's going to challenge me, something that's going to make me think of sound and music in a different way.

What I need to will myself to continue doing sometimes is something new, like making content for TikTok. I need to be streaming and I need to talk about this thing and that thing or this other thing. I've found it doesn't really matter how humorously or lightly a certain opinion is in a review. It's going to piss people off and have them jumping down my throat.

I figure I'm at a point where I'm just embracing it. I'm not here to be likable. I'm not here to be everyone's friend. I'm not here to make people admire me. I'm here to just give my two cents about a song or a record.

I worked at Pitchfork for a long time. We never had a comment section on the site. One thing I think you're quite good at is creating a dialogue. People feel like they have a voice and it's less of a one-sided thing.

You mentioned TikTok. Have you had to adapt? The form you do fits so well with YouTube, for instance, and you're doing stuff on Twitter, too. There's a different way to talk on each platform. With Pitchfork, we'd make our comments and just disappear. But for you, it's this ongoing dialogue.

It's important for me to have that dialogue, because a pivotal part of what I do is trying to meet people where they're at. I don't want to engage people with a conversation that they're not trying to have. For example, I did not necessarily anticipate that people would start arguing against a point that I'm not even making. But the

thing is, your average person is not a commentator. Your average person is not a reviewer. At the end of the day, I'm doing it for me. I don't know if personally I would undergo this kind of headache or take on this kind of vitriol for somebody else's sake or another website or platforms or whatever's sake.

If I'm doing it for me and it's my content, it's my decision at the end of the day to do what I do and say what I say and post it when and where I post it. It's a lot more agreeable to me to go about it that way. As opposed to doing it for somebody else. It's that side of things that I need to be able to will myself to stay engaged with it sometimes because unfortunately, some of the reactions and commentary can be really negative, can be really hateful and can be super personal.

There are so many people doing YouTube reviews. Why do you think your format rose to the top of that? When you first started doing this, did you have an intuition, or was it a lucky accident? My kids, for instance, are really into MrBeast. I read a lot of stuff about him, about how he studied the form and figured out things like, "this is how long a shot should be," "this is the type of thumbnail people respond to," etc. Did you do any of that kind of background work?

It's, in part, a happy accident. I didn't do this thinking, "Oh, this is how I'm going to hit it big." I never foresaw getting to a point where I was considered, I guess you could say, the most relevant music critic of my generation. I didn't think things could ever get that far. Not just to that point, but to where I'm probably reaching a greater audience than some of the classic publications that did at a certain point.

Who the heck knows? It's a difficult thing to engage.

That's not to say that no effort or research or evolution went into what I do. I used to work in radio for an NPR station and did college radio and a music show. I used to write for NPR Music and ran a music blog. I was trying to get my foot in the door of the industry in a certain way. I was trying to climb up certain ladders and make connections with people and write for certain outlets. I reached a point where I was just like, "This just feels like I'm contributing to a greater saturation going on here." I wasn't really breaking through or connecting with an audience of people in a genuine way.

On top of that, I felt like as long as I was continuing to just do podcasts and blogs, that I was going to continue to be at a disadvantage because I didn't have the budget or the presentation or the networking advantages that some people had. I didn't have the budget or the internet know-how to build the most tricked out website, or whatever.

The only thing I could think of was to make it so easy to recognize me over my competition. At that time that I started uploading to YouTube in 2009, there were no other music reviewers. There were a few other dudes that I discovered. We all mutually discovered each other maybe several months in. One of them was a metal reviewer, another guy reviewed a lot of underground loud rock and hip hop. I mostly just stuck to indie stuff because that felt like my niche at the time.

I didn't quite go into YouTube and try to understand the platform to the degree that MrBeast did. But I did look at my greater competition in the music publication world, and I was like, "What are these platforms doing? What are these sites doing? How can I present my own version of that, but through a camera?"

I thought associating my face with what I do was maybe one of the only ways to effectively create some kind of connection with anybody who might want the kind of content that I was making.

I still don't really see myself as a YouTuber as much as I see myself as a music commentator. I'm not dependent on one single music community or genre. The fact that I'm able to cover such a wide variety of things has helped me a lot over the years.

You're a largely YouTube-based version of that sort of Pitchfork eclecticism. I thought about talking to you and reached out recently because I was hanging out with my old friend Ryan Schreiber and we were talking about all

that's happened with Pitchfork recently.

It feels like as that site scales back and other written publications are shutting down, music criticism is moving into a different territory. There always will be critics, there always will be written criticism in one form or another. But when Pitchfork started, there was no social media. It was a different thing. We had no Twitter, Instagram, etc. Now it's like these platforms have taken over the more staid website that just uploads the interviews.

I think that there's still good content analysis going on out there on the internet. One of my favorite content kicks as of late has been a lot of these Zoomer girls on YouTube doing super negative reviews of completely awful books that then go viral on TikTok. Really terrible garbage romance novels with absolutely preposterous narratives where, I don't know, for example, some teenage girl has her parents die and she goes to live with her uncle and his two hot sons, who are her cousins. But of course not by blood because she's adopted. And she ends up having sex with all of them at some point. Just completely ridiculous shit.

The thing is they're really good reviews. They're funny, they're in detail. A lot of them go over an hour. Some of these videos are being watched by millions of people. The effort that some of these creators go to really communicate effectively how terrible the content of the book is—it's actually entertaining, in depth, substantive.

This is what I aspire to do—I see myself in this one. I'm tearing something apart, like Doug Walker's *The Wall*, the parody album, or something like that. "This is one of the most garbage things I've ever heard. I'm going to go over every single detail and tell you why it's the worst thing ever."

These creators have positive reviews too, where they go over books that they really like and they think are great. Hearing their analyses and the way that they go over this stuff and how they pull it apart is interesting.

I saw you tweet that you wanted to review every record ever recorded. When I first started *The Creative Independent*, my dad was like, "Yeah, are you ever going to run out of people to interview?" And I was like, "No, you'll never run out."

You'll never run out of music to write about, When we started out, you're saying you're basically fueled by your passion for it and your excitement for the music itself and obsession with the music. Will you ever reach a point where suddenly you're like, "You know what? I'm just not." How do you know when to stop? I guess you haven't reached that point yet, but how do you know when you've reached your last review?

If I ever stopped doing reviews, I think it'll probably because I just get sick of the process of actually reviewing. I can still very much see myself still wanting to hear new things. Say hypothetically, I was in a position where I just didn't need to anymore because I found another job or I retired...I could see myself still listening to new stuff and because I'm not reviewing, I would have more time to listen. If I hear something I think sucks, I won't have to listen to it 10 times to finish a review of it. I could go on on to and listen to other things that I think are more interesting.

Reviewing music is very much a young person's game. I have friends of mine who were in their mid to late 30s who used to watch my channel regularly when I was starting out and used to be into music as much as me. But now they approach me and they're like, "Man, I don't know who any of these bands are anymore that you're talking about. I don't know. What is this Black Country, New Road thing? What the fuck is a Billie Eilish?" They've just moved on and that's fine. That's how most people are.

I will admit, it does feel like a bit weird in a sense, to be almost 40 really enjoying the new Yeat album and knowing that when I upload that video, most of the people watching it are going to be around half my age. It's also further weird a bit knowing that when I review something like that or the Billie Eilish record, it wasn't exactly made with me in mind.

But I guess in my own head, the way that I justify that is there've been so many albums that I've reviewed over

the years, even when I was young, that that was not the case. It's like fucking Tim Hecker's *Virgins* wasn't made with me in mind. Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* was not made with me in mind. It doesn't really matter what age I come at that album with, that record was not made for me or made to appeal to me. There are lots of albums that I enjoy that were never made or intended to be appealing to me, and yet I managed to enjoy them and find something in them worth talking about.

Relatability isn't the only way of enjoying art; it only feels that way when we think about music because there's so many things with music that come down to demographics and marketing and so forth. Once you take all of that crap, throw it to the side and talk about it for what it actually is, art, it seems less weird.

You've done tons of reviews. Have you ever thought of putting the text of these things into a book? Or do you think what you do for relies more on the reviews being spoken?

I have been approached multiple times over the course of my career to do a book and I got a more recent offer that I've been considering. I've always thought myself just a little bit too busy to accomplish this as a goal. But now I've reached this milestone where the main YouTube channel that I run, The Needle Drop, with all the main reviews on it and everything, just hit a billion views.

Oh, wow. Congrats.

Thank you. And obviously I've had this run of my YouTube channel where we've gone all the way from 2010 to 2020 and now several years deep into this decade. I think it would be cool to do a book where I'm talking about some of my favorite albums of that era.

Music coffee table books go over certain artists and over certain records, but a lot of them tend to favor and spotlight the same artists and same areas of music, many of which I love and think are great, but a lot of that stuff is not very favorable toward or shifting much focus to the 2010s. When you do see it, a lot of these publications begrudgingly shoe-horning in Kendrick, Drake, or Cardi B. There's more important stuff that happened over the past 10 years of music than that. Especially when you start considering there's loads of underground music we're not really appreciating. And how a lot of those artists who we tend to worship from those eras, the '60s, '70s, '80s, those were youth culture artists, many of whom didn't really build up the untouchable, bulletproof, classic critical reception that they have today. They didn't have that to the extent that they did then. That built up over a period of years and years.

I feel like we're not really considering what artists of the past 10 years are going to be coming up in that way. We're just throwing up onto these lists, a few new things that are very popular as a means of proving, yeah, we're with it, we're hip, we're contemporary. Here's a few things that top the charts and have maybe from what we can tell some artistic merit to it.

I guess what I'm trying to say here is rarely are these types of lists bringing up a group like clipping, for example, which is totally insane, crazy conceptual, ambitious in so many ways. In ways that frankly, I think will continue to keep their music interesting for years to come. We need to write things about those artists and those records that are still going to be worth thinking about 10 years from now. Not just what's popular now and isn't the worst and most annoying thing that we could think of.

I definitely do want to do a book where I'm covering that decade of music. I would much rather come through with the book where I'm spilling ink about Death Grips and what their music represented for the turn of the internet age and social media. I would much rather do a book where I'm talking about Lingua Ignota, Sinner Get Ready, and do a big bird's eye view of this era of music. To go over what makes it interesting, what makes it special, what makes it significant, and the things that truly, to me stood out as highlights and important moments.

Anthony Fantano Recommends:

Nikki Carreon – scathing, smart, in-depth book reviews i'm kind of obsessed with at the moment.

DJ RAMEMES – frantic brazilian funk with grooves for days.

cold brew coffee – tastes great, so easy to make. it's been my culinary kick for the past 6 months.

Andrew Huang's new book – great for anyone looking for guidance on how to succeed at being creative for a living.

Sleepy Peach Cardigans – new fashion obsession. they're so colorful, creative, quirky, fun.

Name

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Vocation

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