



On finding your audience

Writer Dan Ozzi on discovering your writing and audience niches, striking out on your own, and learning what your readers like while still writing for yourself.

You got started at Vice, and I'm curious: After building a name for yourself there and leaving to go freelance, how exactly did you forge your own path?

Well, I was lucky that working there for a few years, and just working relentlessly, helped me build up enough of a following [that] I could go somewhere else. And when I put something out, I would have people listening. That's helped me map my post-employment years [and] experimenting with what people will pay me to write, whether that's newsletters, zines, one-off books, or things like that. I'm still figuring it out, as is everyone, but I've had a few successes that really keep me going.

A lot of people, when they go from staff positions to freelance, wind up doing a lot of "traditional journalism," like artist profiles, album reviews, things like that. But that hasn't entirely been your path. So how did you set out on your own path without taking that one?

This is a strange thing to say as a writer, but there's no byline that's very enticing to me. I've written for places that are defunct, and you go to find your own work, and it's just an HTML graveyard. The bigger priority was to build my own platform, because I simply can't rely on the stability of others. The landscape keeps changing so fast, but I have to do this forever because I don't have any other marketable skills. So this is just my path forward.

Somebody asked me what I thought of the future of journalism. And I said something to the effect of, "I don't have any solutions. I only know survival." So that's where I'm at right now.

How did you get into that mindset?

I do a really niche and specific thing in that I cover very esoteric music. It's very hard to pitch that. And even if you do get a pitch through, sometimes, [the publication turns] it into something that completely contorts the purpose. When you're covering any [music] that prides itself on authenticity, you can look very inauthentic with just the slightest tweaks. Sometimes, you'll send in a story that you're very proud of, and the editor, a well-meaning person, will give it a headline that makes you cringe, and then your credibility goes out the window. That's why I don't chase bylines.

The advice I hear most commonly when talking to anybody in music journalism is, "Find a niche." I feel like that's always the big advice.

Yes. But on the same token, I've backed myself into a corner, which is unfortunate because I genuinely love to write profiles of people. And I'm pretty confident that I could [profile] anybody. However, I feel like the only time I'm going to be thought of is if it's some punk singer, [but] you could probably drop me in with some soccer player or politician or whatever, and I could tell you what they're like. I feel like that skill, trying to unearth what a person is like, [is] the same across the board.

How surprising did it feel to semi-accidentally back yourself into a corner?

It's hard to say that I even did it accidentally. I relentlessly covered rock bands for six years at [Vice]. So it wasn't much of an accident or a surprise, but it is surprising how hard that is to translate to other mediums. I admittedly don't try very hard [to do that]. I'm not in the comedy world, and I'm not in politics or anything. So it's not like I'm actively pitching stories on political figures or comedians. They say to write what you know, and this is unfortunately the one thing which I am acutely knowledgeable of, allegedly.

Right. It definitely circles back around to finding that niche. But to chase down the surprise thread a bit more, I'm curious, what was the most surprising thing you learned as you carved your own path?

The most surprising thing is that there are people who are still willing to support writers they like, financially or otherwise. Everything on the internet has been so devalued [that] the written word sometimes feels like this irrelevant relic of a bygone era. Even the most moderate celebrity has more followers than I do, but there are people who will support you.

My goal has been to find just enough people to support you that you can keep doing it. I've accepted that I'm not going to be a world-renowned writer. I just want to have enough of a group who gets me and gets what I'm doing that I can keep doing it for a long time.

I do think you have that group. You really have a very devoted fan base. And it's especially apparent on social media, Twitter in particular. So I'm curious what you've learned about using social media to figure out how people are responding, what you might want to do next, things of that nature.

I think social media is so helpful because it can tell you what [work] of yours resonates among people and is popular. But that's [also] dangerous, because I don't necessarily want to do things for popularity or pats on the back. I want to do things because I like doing them.

As much as I'm very appreciative of the people who support me, I want my work to be a one-way street. I don't want people dictating what I do. ... [Social media] almost makes you feel like you're at the mercy of people, and I just don't want to feel that way. I create things because I want to see them in the world, and hopefully, they catch on, but [popularity] is irrelevant to me.

I spend a lot of time with these thoughts running around in my head, because I also don't have a lot of people to talk to about it, which is one of the hardest things about carving your own very specific niche. You're not in a race. You're just on a track by yourself, going around and around.

I'm curious what, for you, the process of writing a book while pursuing other writing-related things looks like. As you were working on *Sellout*, what was it like to balance all of the research, writing, and communicating with your editor while doing things like, say, writing a Laura Stevenson profile for *Spin*, balancing those two plates?

Man, I really wish I could exist like an old-world writer where I just disappear for two years and come back with my heartbreaking work of staggering genius, and I have this long beard down to my chest, and I just hand in my book and then go back to being a recluse. But with the internet, with social media moving so quickly, I feel like every day that you're not in the conversation, you become irrelevant, and it's really stressful.

I'd have these things where I'd be month two into a chapter that's 13,000 words and losing my mind over it. And then somebody will hit me up and be like, "Do you want to do this 1,200-word thing?" The hardest part is getting out of your headspace, because I feel like, [writing] an in-depth chapter, my brain is constantly thinking about it. It's the first thought when I wake up. I think about it in the shower. Sometimes I'll see a sentence out in the world, and it'll spark some weird idea for me where I have to go home and just switch two words, and it makes all the difference to me.

For somebody to be like, "Hey, come out of that world for a week and write this profile on this one person where you have to listen to their album for a week, you have to prepare for questions, you have to talk to them, and then you have to turn it into something else," it's really disruptive. I wish I could go back to the days of the 1950s novelist who got to just fuck off for two years and come back with their great work, but I also have to pay rent.

I feel that to a terrible extent. But at this point, you have written two books while balancing these other things. So how do you know when something as big as a book is done?

An old friend of mine gave me this great quote from Lorne Michaels of *SNL*: "The show doesn't go on because it's ready. It goes on because it's 11:30." So yeah, there are times where I wish I had more time with a big work like that, but also, I think working with restrictions is helpful because I probably would just dawdle with it forever unless somebody said, "We're done." [I'm] very grateful to the editorial procedure that gives me a deadline.

I'm also somebody who will dawdle with my writing until it reaches some point of no return. Do you get the thing where you look at something you've written years later, and you're just like, "Oh man, what if I had written it that way instead?"

All the time. There was something that happened recently, a band I'd written about broke up or something like that. I was like, "Oh, I remember a profile I wrote about them a few years ago," and I looked back at it, and I was like, "This isn't even worth resharing, because I could have done better."

When you end a project, it's different than when you started. It's better, it's enhanced, so when you go back to the beginning of it, you feel like you could do better. But then, by that logic, a book would never get finished because you'd keep going back and improving and it would never actually get done. [With] *Sellout*, for example, I think the last chapter I wrote for it far exceeds the first one in quality. But then, what am I going to do? Rewrite the first chapter? And then what? Rewrite the second chapter, and then just rewrite the whole book? It's ludicrous.

What was the editing process like for *Sellout* before you filed it with your editor?

This sounds incredibly corny, but I've had the same close friends since high school. And I think that everything that I've ever written has been some sort of attempt to entertain them. So I would write chapters with them as the audience in mind. I would send it to my friend Tammy and be like, "What do you think?" And if it impressed her, I [knew] I did a good job, but if she was meh on it, I would do it over

again. That's been the guiding principle for my entire career, just trying to write for my friends. And it turns out there are a lot [of] people in the world like my friends. So they're just invaluable to me as an audience. And I dedicated the book to them for that reason.

On the note of the book, a thing that was a big takeaway for me from it, regarding your creative process in general, is that, although a book is a very long thing, your classic balance of cleverness, snark, and serious admiration for your subject matter was all there. I'm curious how much you thought about that balance over the course of a whole book.

I actually think this is the most objective thing I've ever written. I really tried to take myself out of it, and it's hard, because you still want it to have a voice, but I'm not in it at all. I was very careful not to have "I" or "me" in it. Even in the introduction, I avoided phrases like, "I wrote this book because blah blah blah." I wanted to totally take myself out of it so people would hopefully think of it as a good book and not a Dan Ozzi book, if that's not weird to say. My editor was super helpful in that regard because, sometimes, she would highlight things and leave a note that said, "This doesn't fit the voice of the book. This is too jokey."

That's interesting to me because, despite what you're saying, it still feels like a book that has that distinct Dan Ozzi flair that I've seen in places from your time at Vice to, still today, the newsletter [REPLY ALT]. But you're saying that a lot of that was edited out.

Well, I'll say this. I read a lot of music books and enjoy very few of them, and I think the reason is that they either try to fit into two voices. One: A guy—and it's always a guy, often British—just trying to flex how cool they are. They really want to come off like an author who's telling you about this cool thing while they smoke cigarettes outside the venue. And they always sound like geeks to me.

The other [type of] book that always falls short is when something is too technical and boring. It's like, "Hey, this is a book about rock music, let's try to pick it up a little bit." So I really tried to strike the balance between informative and fun. Fun-formative.

That's everything I wanted to ask you, but is there anything else you want to add?

I will say that writing is a lonely endeavor for me, and doing it during the pandemic made it even more severe, and in a weird way, I've been having a hard time letting [Sellout] go. The process of it was my only reprieve from the craziness of the world over the last year. Any day that I woke up thinking about 1994 Berkeley or 2002 New Brunswick and not whatever repulsive, disgusting lie the president said that day, I counted that as a victory. So I had this really weird freakout when we announced the book, because it was like my best friend for a year. I was sad to let it go, because it meant I had to cope with the real world.

Dan Ozzi Recommends:

Dan's five tips for making life bearable:

Don't look at your phone for the first hour that you're awake.

Buy a camera and bring it everywhere you go.

Listen to Laura Stevenson.

Read *The Sarah Book* by Scott McClanahan.

Tell your friends you love and appreciate them. It really freaks them out!


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