

# On correctly identifying the problem in order to solve it



Writer David Turner on asking the right questions, the importance of supporting your community, and why we shouldn't accept the status quo.

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As told to René Kladzyk, 2300 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Music](#), [Culture](#), [Independence](#), [Politics](#), [Money](#), [Business](#).

## **How are you? How have you been responding to 2020 America?**

Physically I've been doing okay. And then mentally, I feel like my brain has mostly been sort of like a fried egg. Some days are better than others, but the motivation to do a lot of things has been much, much, much lower than I typically would find it. Occasionally I get really motivated for something, or I'll be working on a newsletter, or I'll get really into making food or something. But I've found my mental state much more exhausted this entire time-frame.

## **What brings you joy?**

What brings me joy is extremely boring. I like going outside. I like nice weather. I like reading. And I like hanging with my friends. I have learned in this quarantine that a lot of the stuff that I like is fairly simple. I like bars, but I like bars because they're a place to go see friends and to people-watch. And you can do that on a stoop or at a park. There's no real difference there. The atmosphere is different and the people that are there are different, but the basic activity is the same.

I've always liked reading. I studied Art History in college, so I like just opening up a book and then trying to research a topic with a one keyword search and be like, "Okay, I know I have this one phrase. What else can I find about this in JSTOR?" One of my favorite days this year, and this might've been right before or after the quarantine, was I spent an entire day researching CBS Records in the '80s. Just going through *Los Angeles Times* archive, *New York Times* archive, trying to find PDFs of old *Billboard*. And reading through that and trying to piece together a story of what had happened with that record label and how it pertained to future things that happened. That's my favorite stuff to do. That's so much fun. And that's a feeling, that particular feeling of discovering something new while researching doesn't always happen. It happens infrequently, but when it does happen, it's super, super fun. So I love that.

## **Can you tell me how and why you decided to start Penny Fractions?**

I started Penny Fractions in the fall of 2017. I was freelancing and started wanting to cover more music biz and online trends. I remember there was an [article on Wired](#) that was talking about how playlists on Spotify are breaking songs. And I read it and I was like, this seems like bullshit. So I ended up going through [the article] using Chartmetric, where you could follow the life of a song on a playlist. I ended up seeing there was a discrepancy between what this article reported and what was actually happening. Knowing how music and [music] press work, I was like this is probably from a press release or fed by a PR person. Once I started researching that, I was like, "If this story that I read about Spotify playlists is press release bullshit, then what else am

I reading here that is also press release bullshit?"

A couple months later Post Malone came out with the song "Rockstar," and put it on YouTube, but it was a 30-second clip to try to boost the plays. When that happened I was like, "This seems so weird, all these weird trends happening and all the edges of biz and viral trends." And then Liz Pelly, who I had been reading since I was in early college, she wrote a story about playlists. She started writing for *The Baffler* a few months later. Her big *Baffler* piece, "The Problem with Muzak," came out I think in December 2017, a couple months after my newsletter had just started. To me it was sort of like, "Oh cool." There were at least a couple people all thinking in this kind of space. And then a little while later I met Cherie Hu, who does her newsletter and we realized we're all doing slightly different things but looking at very similar topics. That helped keep me motivated to write about this stuff. Because otherwise, there is very little critical music biz writing.

**To me, as someone who regularly reads Penny Fractions, I have found it not only to be an informational tool, but also often a rallying cry. A tool for galvanizing people to work towards change and improving the music industry. I'm curious if you can talk about what your big picture goals are, and also about the nature of writing for advocacy within an industry. Because that's very different than just reporting on a phenomenon.**

The newsletter started off as me identifying trends and just writing about things I was seeing. I think it became more of a tool for advocacy over the last 18 months, I guess maybe two years. That falls in my own political maturation. It was the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez that really changed a lot of my own worldview, where I was like, there's this person that's speaking to a lot of different issues that I had thought about, but had never really connected any dots. And I tried to better understand those through music. Similarly, the experience of my last job at TrackRecord, which was this site under Gizmodo Media Group where we were unionized and I realized the power of collective bargaining and collective struggle. "Why aren't we doing more of this in music?" became a big question of mine.

As to advocacy in music, part of my hope is if I advocate for these things and if I talk about things like unionization, or workers standing up for their rights, or artists trying to identify the big problems in the industry and how to address them is, is this reaching anyone? Is this having any impact? Is it going to shift the needle or anything? When [I'm] talking about the history of something, hopefully that illuminates something in someone's head to be like, wait a minute. I feel like a lot of what I end up doing is trying to identify the different problems. If we can correctly identify the enemy, [we can] know how to actively address the problem.

Ideally a lot of what I'm saying would filter to actual people in power, be it politicians, be it the American Federation of Musicians, be it other advocacy groups. I would love if what I wrote could help influence/push those groups to make bigger demands and have better analysis. But that's kind of a big hope. Otherwise, I'm writing this thing and hoping that it's useful.

**Although in some ways the music industry is its own beast, a lot of the problems with fairness that the music industry faces are also experienced in many other creative industries. In thinking about what you hope for the future and the sorts of changes that you hope to elicit, what advice would you give others who want to act similarly, maybe in different creative industries or maybe within the music industry?**

If you are a writer or critical thinker in another industry, please start your own newsletter and please send it to me. I would love to read about any critical views of something like Hollywood or other kinds of entertainment industries. Over the last couple years there's been a big push for unionization in museums. So there's been additional writing about museums and the role of the museum worker and that. I would absolutely love to read more folks doing that kind of work.

In the context of music, I would love if people started to look inward in their own day jobs, to ask the question of "How can my day-to-day work be made more fair? More democratic?" I think of this all the time with my friends that work at small record labels where I am like, I don't really know what the finances of your record label are, but they are not paying for the 12 hours a day you're working at that record label. I know that, you know that. But because it's a small record label you have to deal with it, which is really, really terrible and really, really shitty.

I would love if there was more push for unionization among essentially all parts of the music industry. I tweeted out from my account, asking "are (music industry) internships paid?", and nearly every response I got was, "No, wasn't paid. Wasn't paid. Was paid \$10 stipend. My boss maybe bought me a lunch." It's like, okay, okay. I can talk a lot about issues with streaming and issues with the industry, but on a certain level all of us need to look inward to be like, why is it that my own day job is so unfair and so unequal?

An example is Bandcamp. Bandcamp has their days of promotion where they give all the proceeds to artists. Great, love it. No hate on that. But it is worth asking, if I'm going to put all the energy into this one day, what if I put all that energy into talking to my coworkers about why we don't have a choice in how many hours we're working? Or why don't we have a choice in which records we're putting out? Or any of these questions of actual control over the places where we work. And I also think this is similarly true to ask of people that only do things as consultants or on project basis.

Unless there's actual ground support among all of us that are in the industry to make these changes, it's just wishful thinking. I can wish that streaming was better but unless people at Spotify who work there and can actually yell at someone to make it happen, it's just wishful thinking.

**It seems like the norms of the music industry are such that it's normal to structure labor in a way that's fundamentally unsustainable and dependent on burnout.**

Absolutely. I feel like people don't want to even imagine that [change] is possible. Sometimes I feel like people are like, these are the circumstances that we have and these are the only things that we can do. I don't think like that. If I thought like that then I wouldn't put much time into this stuff. And even more with these protests that have happened! If a month ago if someone in New York City said we're going to try to defund the NYPD by a billion dollars, that would be like what are you talking about? Shut the fuck up. But now, I was going to call my city councilman to support this and I found out he already supported it. The public pressure because of the protests made that possible.

It's easy to feel like nothing changes or nothing can change. But right now it's clear things can change if there is an actual base of support to make that kind of change. And that is why in music, I hope that there are enough people out there that want to do that and make that happen.

**What do you feel most optimistic or hopeful about? This can be in relation to the music industry or more broadly.**

I'll be honest, there's not a ton in the music industry right now I feel super hopeful about. But more broadly speaking, I feel more hopeful that at least it's obvious, things can change. And that if we push it, things can change for the better. Throw your energy into something rather than sitting on the sidelines, because there's no point to sit on the sidelines when things are changing and adapting every day. Don't assume a status quo when the status quo is actually changing every day.

**Can you share a story of a time that you recently felt inspired by someone or something?**

That's real easy. I felt the most inspired during the first week of protests that were happening around New York City. And the reason I felt inspired was because you would show up, and see all these people giving out masks, giving out food, giving out hand sanitizer. During the protest we were checking the police scanner because there were people following the police scanner to see what was happening there. You saw all these people on bikes coordinating, closing down the streets, doing all this stuff. None of these people coordinated this from the top down.

And as a person that very much likes the idea of things being fairly planned, it was very cool to be in this semi-spontaneous moment that had the structures of people who had thought deeply about planning and safety. My own worldview would have implied that to have something this coordinated, we should have had at least five meetings or something to make sure everyone was on board, to make sure everything was working in tiptop shape. But if we all have a singular focus and a singular purpose, we can create something a little bit more ad hoc. And that was really, really inspiring because it challenged a lot of my own thoughts about how I like things to be

structured. People have so much power. And that's something I've been trying to instill more into folks in music.

**David Turner Recommends:**

A. *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Music Streaming*

B. *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*

C. *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock 'n' Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians' Union, 1942-1968*

D. *The Death Panel*

E. Plants!

Name

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Vocation

Writer

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