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As told to Yasi Salek, 3035 words.

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# On the value of good music journalism

Writer and critic Jessica Hopper on the weird state of music criticism, what can be learned from revisiting your own body of work, and how our personal metrics for success evolve over time.

**Your new book *Night Moves* is a kind of hybrid memoir, and a lot of the book was culled from your blog writings back when you were 27 and 28 years old. How much of the end result was straight from that, and how did you add to it?**

If anything, I'm stripping things away. I mean, the only things that I added were maybe a few words of additional context, or sometimes where—I don't want to say maybe I had misdescribed something—but I had a little bit more context or knowledge about it at my disposal, and I could add something, maybe sometimes a word.

Sometimes I was adding things, but sometimes, especially with some of those internet writings, I was winnowing it away. I learned something pretty sizable about editing from editing *The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic*, my book that came out in 2015, which is that the parts of that book that I sometimes wince at aren't things that I got wrong or even the typos or judgments I don't agree with now or opinions I have that have changed. Nothing like that. The things that I wince at in my old writing is stuff where there's any self-preservation or where I'm trying to impress, I'm trying to be funny, I'm trying to be clever, which is something writing in *The Chicago Reader* at 27, I was certainly more prone to. In your hometown paper most especially, you want to be clever and funny and scathing and insightful and just be the most *most*.

What editing that book and reading through 15 years of my writing—I mean, I read through more, I've read through basically everything I've ever written because I'm a glutton for evisceration—showed me was that those were the things in that book that had to go, the things that felt like false notes, the things that felt like the wrong kind of decoration. I don't really know how else to put it. So that is the stuff that I look for, and that I was looking for as I was winnowing down *Night Moves*. I don't want false notes in there. Does this feel like a specific time and place? That's what I was going for. That was the big lesson I got from editing all that old stuff—can I just get closer to the truth of this, can I get closer to the emotional truth, can I get closer to the critical truth? Even though it's a memoir, can I make it less about me? That was something that I carried into this book.

**You've recently written a few things arguing in favor of criticism and the importance of keeping criticism alive. How does writing criticism differ for you from other kinds of writing?**

Writing criticism, I want to qualify it a little bit. To me, a negative and a positive review are fundamentally born out of the same place of truly giving a shit. It's just different branches, depending on whether you're writing about Post Malone or Van Morrison or whatever, anything that falls between those two very wide poles.

I feel like with critical opinion... we're just at a time where generally there's so much risk and baggage, and there can be such a toll for having an opinion, even in a semi-public way. We see all these varying, impossible-to-comprehend life spans...it being a sort of new phenomenon for the life span of potential fall-out or backlash or anything from having an opinion at all that you express publicly. Just in general, I think it's a weird time for that, made weirder by the internet, made weirder by social media, made weirder by it being very easy to look out in the world.

I've known people who've been doxed because of something that they criticized or because they said so and so's record wasn't as good as the last one. I see this happen with so much greater frequency to women and women of color and young women and queer folks and trans folks and people of color, and the toll of writing criticism can be really high.

I just think generally it's a weird time for criticism. Not even getting into the fact of the matter that as a career, as a practice, there's almost no outlet for it that pays almost anything at all. If I hadn't had a book in the last two years that was pretty successful and that put my byline somewhere in people's minds, I don't even know how I would have work right now. I would literally be back doing the stuff that I was doing 15 years ago. I'd be writing previews in the paper. Might still go back to that, actually. Way

less of a hassle.

**Publications are disappearing left and right, or they're trimming down their staffs to nothing. Zines were instrumental for you in launching your writing career, in sustaining it, and in helping you find and establish your voice. Do you think that these are circumstances that might lead to zines rising up again and just becoming where all the good writing lives? Or most of the good writing?**

Where does the good writing go? Well, right now, there are some really great cultural critics, and some of them are definitely working and ensconced at publications. Doreen St. Félix and Jia Tolentino certainly come to mind, as well as a few other folks that I think are still employed.

I feel like there's such a bottle-necking of talent, and everyone I know is like, "I miss being able to write about music in such and such way, I miss this kind of work, I miss this kind of camaraderie, being in dialogue with other people about music in such and such way." Some of it goes to podcasts and some of it goes to other stuff, and a lot of people I know are making their living working in content or doing stuff that's un-bylined, and that's where they write about music because that's their primary skill. As we all return to having normal jobs, or, I don't know, mowing lawns, babysitting, before we all go back to being snobby baristas and record store counter jockeys, my great hope for other people and myself is that we don't hit a place of such burnout that we give up on writing, that we drop the dialogue that tethers so much of what we call the music community, just drop those dialogues like, "Oh, I'll just tweet or something."

You know what I mean? I don't think I'm being old-fashioned in really kind of feeling a desperation or really trying to keep that alive and trying to keep talking about music and the culture of music and fandom and what it means to love things. That remains interesting to me, and it's been interesting to me my whole life, and it is a thing that really feeds me, and it is also one of the primary ways that I have community with other people.

I just hope that by the time we're all back working at Sbarro's at the mall, that we're not so beat down from all being laid off from websites, or we aren't all so traumatized by the current political American landscape or the privatization of fucking everything... I could go on with an infinite list of the things that can fucking bum you out and keep you from writing. That's really my fear, that everybody's just like, "Fuck this," or that we're so far from a culture of doing it ourselves that—I feel like this strange Karate Kid or something, you know, fearing the old ways will be lost.

We have to teach people the ways of making it yourself, because when you think about it, there are so few people that I can look around and point to who are really making something the survival of which exists totally outside the conventions of how you market things on social media and how you let people know about things. I'm gonna joke, but whatever. Pivot to zines, 2019.

That's one of the things I think the most about, and one of the things I miss most. Sometimes it's just for my own—I almost said greedy—but it's just that desire, maybe part of it is nostalgic, too, for a thing that feels like it's drifting away, that we're losing it, that I can't read certain people on certain records with any kind of frequency. These are seriously high-class problems, but that's the sort of thing that makes the world so much less lonely for me. So it's just important to me for those reasons. If someone wants to blow their trust fund on making a really good magazine for a few years, please get in touch. I'm ready. I'm there.

I don't want to keep talking about back in the day and having all of these conversations and just feel like we're making jokes about journalism's funeral as we all just pray that some article we've written gets optioned into a fucking film, limited series, and we can exist for a year while we try to wait something out, you know? That sounds like pretty much shit. How do I figure out how to be like the fucking Nick Hornby of geriatric Riot Girls. What's my plan? Who knows.

**Do you still write today in the way that you wrote when you were documenting the life experiences that became *Night Moves*? Do you spend time doing that?**

I'm one of those writers without a good system. I might be a little bit more organized. But I have a multitude of little notebooks and little bits of paper and stuff that's floating from one jacket to another, and notes on my phone. I find this and I'm like, "What is this about?" That's kind of the form of my daily writing now, is all these little piecemeal notes.

I'm not by nature a diary keeper. Periodically I'll be a very diligent family journaler and write about things that are happening in my children's young lives, or things that just sort of inform the rhythm of our day and what it was like. I inherited some writing like that from my mom, that my mom kept in a diary where she wrote to me, on and off, from when I was about six. She gave it to me when I had kids. It was really interesting, not only because my mom was quite young when she had me, and to have a sense of who and how she was when she had me was really interesting, but also the ways in which sometimes my memory would match up—sometimes her writing would jog a memory so that I would have a better understanding of something that I maybe only vaguely remembered. So that's something I do, I kind of keep a family journal. But unless I'm truly furious about something, I don't really keep much of a diary. Sometimes when I'm really just livid, that's still my inclination.

**On what occasion do you return to those notes and scraps and expand them?**

So far, the only time I've done this is if it's for a particular assignment. I have entire notebooks that

are like, "Here's all my notes and thoughts on a book I haven't written. It's all in the wrong order. Notes from whatever."

My favorite place to listen to music and really be able to think about it is alone in the car. Particularly if I have a long, very familiar commute, and then I'll listen to a record or certain songs over and over and take bad notes that are almost not readable, crumple them up and jam them in my purse. Then I have to read them and try to figure out what the hell they say later.

Sometimes it's just a word that I want to remember. Right now I'm working on a long sample chapter for a book proposal that's very research-intensive that I've been working on for months, and I'm often very frustrated. I'm like, "I thought this was in the little purple notebook?" And then realizing that I've started this notebook sometimes from the middle, sometimes from one end and then I turn it the other way and I'm like, "Oh, *this* is why I couldn't find the notes, I started at the other end." I'm kind of a little bit of a chaos person in that way, and yet have still managed to survive. Sometimes it's right before I fall asleep or upon waking, I'll grab my phone and just email something or put it in my notes. And then when I go back to whatever draft I'm working on, that's when I come back to it.

**As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success?**

The aperture on my idea of success has closed so much over my 20 years of writing. Because when I started it was like, "People think this is good and I get paid for it," and it was very external. It's just really narrowed since then. My idea of success is—*is this a piece of writing where I can't take any more lines out of it, or it will fall apart? Have I done all I can to make people be able to inhabit my understanding of a record or an idea?*

My idea of success is so weirdly small, and it's also so much less tied to any typical metric of success, like "a lot of people saw it," or "a lot of people liked it, and I got paid for it." Those things are all of great utility to having a career, but truly for my sense of success with something, it's more just, *am I happy with it?*

To feel successful with something is like, is there this sort of feeling that I get that has to do with the earnestness of communication—of having a sense that I've made an argument that I feel is fairly accurate to my feeling, to my understanding, and that I think the writing is in a place where it invites other people into the work. I feel like I could better draw a picture of my feeling than explain it.

Maybe I can put it this way. Early on, my sense of success was totally external. Now it is almost entirely internal, but there is an awareness of—it's not so much that I'm making an argument in the writing where I want or need people to agree with me or appreciate it or anything like that, but that I've made a very robust argument, the best argument I can, the best descriptions I can, the best vocation that I can. But it's still accessible to people; people can find themselves in the work. That there are still a lot of ways into the work and the understanding, that it isn't purely my understanding, that it's not myopic.

Does this make sense?

**It's almost like you're being really true to yourself, but also in way where other people are able to find that truth.**

Yes. I want people to come in, and for a long time I really wanted people to be convinced. I think that's why some of my early writing basically belabors the point, and really kind of hammers at people to agree with me.

But sometimes it was also because I wanted to be so convincing that I couldn't be dismissed, because there was so much I encountered of that and such a sense of being kind of a marginal voice because I was, when I very first started writing, a teenage girl. Basically nobody has less authority to write about music, seriously, than a teenage girl, and I think some of that stuck with me. The other part of that too was that I had internalized so much of this idea that sometimes came from editors and stuff, who are coming from really different points of view or places, that my opinions needed to be bulletproof.

That I couldn't just be like, "This is what it feels like, this is what it is to be in this world, this is what it's like writing from a feminist perspective," because it was considered so outside that there were always people, always some random editors or other journalists who would be like, "When are you gonna drop this feminism and just start writing about, I don't know, the Beatles being good or something, over and over again, forever?"

I think I internalized some of that, and it's like, it doesn't need to be bulletproof. I just have to write my truth. But I mean, it took me more than 20 years to get there. These are pretty recent things that I understand about my writing.

**If in 100 years people could only access one piece of your work, which one would you want it to be?**

I think probably "Where the Girls Aren't," but I would like to take a really good editorial pass through it again. It hasn't been refined since 2003. It is the first piece of long form I ever wrote, but to me it feels like the one that remains true. I hope that in a hundred years it's considered a weird relic that just sort of reflects how ridiculous certain spaces in time are and that it could be used as sort of this barometer of how much things have changed since then.

Jessica Hopper recommends:

Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living*—it's a memoir and meditation on motherhood, making art, being lost.

Carol Wilson's meditations and talks via the *Dharmaseed* app

Ada Limon's poetry collection *The Carrying*

David Dark's quote "To love a person is to love a process"

Jane Marie's podcast *THE DREAM* and its mapping of the influence of pyramid schemes and scammers in the architecture of the contemporary American Idea.

Name

Jessica Hopper

Vocation

Writer

Fact

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