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As told to Sammy Maine, 2662 words.

Tags: Writing, Music, Creative anxiety, Beginnings, Process, Identity.

On removing ego from your work

Writer Lior Phillips discusses finding your voice, leaning into your truth, and staying tender in a ruthless industry.

How did you come to develop your voice as a writer?

Whilst writing is all about the words, I absolutely think there's style and substance in having your own voice. Even on the page, you can still feel, energetically, what that person is like.

I came into writing completely self-taught. I was great at school in the things that I loved. We navigate towards the things that we love, and our brain bubbles at the things that are creative, if you're a creative person. So for me, I was really good at language, art, computers, things that were new and exciting. I wasn't very good with writing, or English, or Math. I didn't go to journalism school, I went to an advertising school. I didn't study under a seasoned mentor or writer. It was all about finding a way to get my voice to fit into the format that I was reading.

Growing up I wasn't really reading that many music magazines, because we didn't really get any of those in South Africa. You weren't privy to the things that I think younger writers are now; they've got a plethora of blogs and newspaper clippings at their fingertips. I leaned into what I was good at and what felt comfortable. The saying "Fake it until you make it" is completely true; I hustled so much and I still had some truth in me, so I leaned into that.

I was able to develop my voice when I started writing for *GQ* as a sex and relationships humor columnist and I feel like sex and music really go hand in hand when you're writing about it, because these two things are so inexpressible. It forces you to jump right outside of yourself, and you have to learn the ways around your mind. Starting out that way allowed me to just be free, crude, silly, and funny. I leaned into a more humorous tone and my style was all over the show. Now my process has been more about picking out my spots for that style of writing, knowing where it's going to be more effective.

Working with talented editors developed my voice a lot. I just love seeing myself from somebody else's point of view. It's so traumatic, in the best way possible, that it just rips you out of your head. It's like a beautiful friendship or a beautiful love story.

It also rids you of your ego because if you have too much ego when you're writing, then I don't think you're going to be a good writer. I don't know if you agree with this, but within all art making, it's open to everyone once you put it out there. Obviously writing is very personal but if you have too much of an ego and too much rigidity with what you're making, and it has to be about you in this way, then there'll be too many boundaries in place to really have your curiosity go beyond what you think you know.

Absolutely. I try to make sure that ego has never been part of anything that I've ever done, to a fault. I do think, especially with the current structure of capitalism, the thought is that you have to have this ego in order to push yourself—but I don't agree. I think what you need is a resonance within yourself, and I think you need to have endurance. The best way to continue doing it, without an ego, is obviously curiosity and passion, of course, but you also need to endure through the changes of yourself.

This career as a writer is so strange to me. It came from my loves, but I've never really written first-person. I'm not an opinion writer or a prose writer. When I started writing, I didn't think people were asking the type of questions that I was asking. That isn't ego driven, it is purely because I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I was just a fan. I felt this terrible sense of imposter syndrome: like, "Am I qualified enough to develop a voice within an industry that I have no voice in?" And I think that the

answer to that, for everyone, is always yes.

As someone who moved to the U.S. from South Africa, how do you ensure that you hold onto your cultural identity?

It's such a beautiful thing to realize that it is in our blood, whether we like it or not. I think expats have this beautiful familial bond. No matter how you swing it, no matter where you're from. I met a Brazilian the other day, and I've never felt closer to home. And you crave it. I'm not going to mixers with expats to make sure that I'm holding onto South Africanisms. I just end up meeting South Africans every single place I go to. It's helped me keep that warmth-ness. I can always be grounded in myself even if I'm moving, and that's something that I only learned from moving. I immigrated twice in the span of three years.

You have to make a concerted effort to hold onto your accent, your beliefs. We're so lucky we have the Internet and can have long conversations with family, and long conversations with friends, and immerse ourselves into our own culture that we rediscover as we move. I felt more patriotic leaving than I did living there. Stepping outside of yourself does that to you. I'm not talking about appreciation, I'm not talking about wanting to ingratiate yourself into the culture, I'm saying that when you feel lost and unmoored in life, you really get a sense of who you are. You don't learn anything when you're inside the painting.

I am South African first and foremost. Especially with my parents, who I grew up with, they were so aligned with the anti-apartheid movement, so involved in the Jewish community. My appreciation for the life that I lived, in a really beautiful, nostalgic way, has built me to become this person that I am now. The homesickness is crippling sometimes. It's so debilitating and so visceral that sometimes I don't know what to do with it. I cry all the time. But there's so much happiness in my tears, for the life that I lived and the life that's there waiting for me. My only dream has ever been to just push. Push myself in every bad, good, uncomfy, awkward position.

Then it's a portal to learning more about yourself, isn't it? If you're too comfortable throughout your life, then you're never going to change or grow.

It doesn't mean I'm not happy to be here. You know? You can live these dualities in your life. We contain multitudes, we can be homesick and also over the moon watching these crazy fireworks, or eating a hot dog. As connected as we all are, it almost feels like you're further away because you're seeing so much of other people's lives all the time. It's like prodding at that sore wound and you have to somehow patch it up quickly. It's this deep longing for familiarity and ease and comfort. And this even relates to my work. When you're so naive and you don't know what you don't have, and you don't know what you're missing, it's comfortable. But when you're uncomfortable, you're pushing yourself into a zone that can potentially ruin you. You can't think about the ruin. You have to be in the gunk and the goo and the desperation. Those thoughts of self-doubt, those thoughts of, why am I here? What am I doing? Even if it's depleting you, you still get to release it by just living.

When you took on the project of South African Popular Music, how did that impact your routine?

I got a small advance and it took me two years to write the book. And as mothers, or people who are looking after others, we need work, we need to bring in money, there are these penalties that we pay that are often just so invisible. As a new mom, I had to choose between that scarce free time and work. That was the penalty that I had to pay and it was unbelievably challenging. I gave birth to my twins the same day that I heard from Bloomsbury that they wanted to take on the book. I was sitting there with the nurses, and I was crying and telling them "I'm going to write a book!" And she was like, "I don't care about your bloody book, you need an emergency c-section. The boys are coming." And isn't that wonderful? Every single big moment in my life is always upended by a bigger thing. I had the boys and then my father passed away. And when my father passed away, the boys were in the hospital. So to say that balancing time for writing a book of this nature was difficult would be an understatement.

As creatives we're on this constant hustle bus, trying to keep our voice out there and our presence known. I knew I was writing this book, but no one else did and I couldn't talk about the process. So everything that I wanted to talk about and reflect on couldn't be reflected on because it was happening at such a fast pace. I was giving birth, becoming a mom, becoming a parent at the same time that I lost one, and then becoming an author.. And it was one of the first of its kind for Bloomsbury. There was nobody who had written a book like this. My favorite thing that anyone ever said to me was: pick your battles. Perfectionism is not a thing in my world and the minute I dropped that, I became a better mom, a better daughter, a better wife, a better friend. Why are you expecting things from yourself that you would never expect from anybody else?

How do you balance grief with life as a freelancer?

There's absolutely no process. Grief should be the most communal thing that we experience, and yet anyone who has ever been through it knows how gruesome, shocking, raw, and ferociously lonely it is. You are, ironically, severely underprepared. In the midst of the most painful reality of experiencing and witnessing death, it quickly severed that direct correlation between putting in an effort and killing yourself in a culture that fetishizes work ethic. I had to resist that underbelly of any magical, capitalistic thought. Death was so clinging. It pushes you into a position that you felt completely unprepared for. You forget that you have this unspoken language with the person that you've lost. My coach was my dad, so I lost that private language. There's a special loneliness in realizing that you'll never

ever speak that language again. So any sort of balance is unattainable but I pushed myself into a space that didn't mind if I had to cry during an interview. I really drew myself to people who had that sensitivity, even if it was unspoken. As a freelancer, you need that tenderness. We have no HR. There was no time off for me. But the work I was doing at the time that my dad died was deeply transformative. Whilst this book wasn't about me, and his death wasn't about me, I needed to make sure that the career that I loved and sacrificed so much for kept going. I had to keep going.

Did this book feel like a milestone in your career?

I never in my wildest dreams thought I would ever be able to write a book, ever, let alone a book about where I come from and the historical importance of a country that is not this singular monolith. It's this beautiful thing that is so rich in culture that it continues to teach us things. Obviously I haven't mounted this successful National Geographic expedition to Antarctica or found clean water for a village but I certainly spent my life interviewing artists about their music and their humanity through creativity. It shifted my world in trying to tap into what it really feels like as a fan.

Cultural writers, music writers, critics, they have to kill their darlings, that term that I only learned later in life. And boy, do I have darlings that need to be murdered constantly, and it hurts every time. By doing so, I had to cut out this kind of flowery, bubbly, over verbose, dramatic, extended version of myself and learn how to be a critic and a fan at the same time. It's the greatest achievement to know that you can have many voices in one lifetime. I'm constantly changing and constantly shifting, and I have to give myself grace. Sometimes what a book needs or what a piece needs is a different version of you. And I knew that the stories that I had to tell needed to be factual. They needed to be very clear, historical—not academic, but in a way that was digestible. I hate being spoken to in a way that is patronizing. And that's all I wanted. I just wanted people to find out about this world. And I think that was a good way of me gaming the system, because that felt less stressful and less judgmental for me. The task is so daunting when there is an audience tapping their invisible watch waiting for you to finish. The minute I released any idea of a "goal" or "milestone" was the moment when I could write freely.

What's most important to you about the work that you do?

I think respecting and honoring voices that deserve more attention. The first thing that I think about in terms of the word importance next to the term work, is to put people onto incredible art that might not otherwise have ever crossed their path. That's what I love about being a fan, and I love about being a writer: celebrating the moments in life that make the world much easier to live in. Living like an anthropologist, speaking to people was how I developed myself as a person. The conversations were my first foray into writing. I feel like when conversations are free and you're not feeling burnt out, when you can just give yourself to finding out about another human being, it's allowing yourself to let it be bad, even let your writing be bad. That's always important for me, is just to get it down and let it be bad, as bad as possible, and go anyway, go and push anyway.

Lior Phillips Recommends:

I recommend five things that inspire me:

A visit to Cape Town, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and to support the Nonceba Family Counselling Centre in Khayelitsha.

Challenge yourself with all things ferociously new. From spending time with a death doula, to engaging with genres and art you're unfamiliar with. Don't worry if you feel uncomfortable listening to new music, it will be fuel for the busy brain to wander through those big cavernous spaces, just push through it.

Sobriety. Little hug to all the cosmic sisters, brothers, non-binary siblings living sober, sobriety has been one of my greatest levers. Sensitivity is power.

My husband's laugh inspires me. My twins laughing inspires me. My dog's cuddles inspire me. These are the **things that fill me with a particular light**, and remind me of my beating heart.

Failing. Sometimes I think I am a Victorian ghost who can make anything from scratch. Whether it's hand-churned butter or my own tile, the process of some new attempt at a hobby is worth more than whatever the clumpy, failed end result could ever have been.

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Vocation

music and culture journalist

Fact

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