

September 25, 2018 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3087 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Identity, Multi-tasking, Success.



On putting in the work

You started as a freelancer, covering a number of things, and ended up becoming a sex writer. How did you find your focus?

I don't want to downplay myself, because I work hard, but it does feel like, "How did I get here?" I'm 30 and it's only been the past three years where I've been making enough as a freelance writer to do it full-time.

I moved to New York because I'd gotten into law school here. I was going to be an entertainment lawyer, but I didn't want to be an entertainment lawyer. I'd graduated with a journalism degree. I took the LSATs and did fine. The summer before, I'd lived at Pace University through an exchange program with my school and had done a casting internship with an A&E show and became friends with Maegan Stallings, who worked at VH1. I had a music blog. This was in the era where not everyone had a blog yet and it was still a thing. At the time, I was mainly a music writer.

I moved to New York and I had to stay in touch with Maegan. She was starting to work on a music documentary called *Planet Rock* about hip-hop and crack. She was also the production manager on *Behind the Music*. She reached out to me and said, "I've been keeping up with your music blog. I know you're in New York. I need a production assistant. Do you want to work for me?" I immediately said, "Yes." It sounded better than taking out loans and going to law school to study entertainment law, when I knew in my heart I just wanted to do entertainment. So I deferred and worked at VH1 for a while.

I started as a production assistant and eventually became associate producer. I did *Behind the Music: Ne-Yo* and a few other rock documentaries. Then they cut the department. They were basically like, "We're only acquiring documentaries, we're not making them anymore." This was right as my writing career was starting to take off, so I just thought, "OK, I'm going to go for it."

In 2010, before Noisey existed, when VICE still had VICE Music, someone at VH1 I met knew someone who worked at Fast Company and was friends with the VICE Music editor. They knew I had a journalism degree and that I was doing TV stuff and liked it, but that writing was what made me really happy. They sent the VICE Music editor my blog and were like, "If ever you need music writers, you talk to Sophie."

At first I started doing those album reviews that VICE used to do that weren't really album reviews. They were jokey things. Eventually they gave me a column called, "Sex, Drugs and Rock 'N' Roll." There was a sex section and a drugs section and a music section. (I should mention now I'm a cannabis user but I had to stop using drugs and alcohol. I've been sober except for cannabis.) At first, when people started calling me a sex writer, I was like, "This tells me more about you than it does about me because I'm writing about all these different things," but people love the sex stuff the best.

I grew up on the island of St. Thomas basically naked in a house with no religion, and I have always just been comfortable talking about sex. I've learned the hard way that talking out loud about sexual things makes other people uncomfortable, but I was very comfortable writing about it. Also, once you start investigating something, the more fascinated you become. I was writing sex advice, but then I started writing about different kinks and would learn about these different communities, whether it's a kink community or a queer community or a sex party scene and meet these people and become fascinated with them. I got more interested in sexuality and was comfortable writing about things that I think other people wouldn't be, so I started getting more assignments about sex.

When that column came out, I was like, "Should this sex content come up with my IMDb credits?" The people at VICE asked me what name I wanted to go by. As I said, I grew up in St. Thomas, but moved to Virginia when I was in high school, where there was another Sophie, so some people called me Sophie Saint Thomas. It sounds good. It sounds a little bit like a porn star. It sounds kind of goth. It was enough separation that I could have my VH1 stuff and my Sophie Saint Thomas writing that still felt like myself, but I thought, "Maybe my big bosses at Viacom won't see this right away."

For a while I kind of led a double life, where I was doing the budgets for TV shows during the day, and on nights and weekends I was writing about sex and music. Now, I get all these guys being like, "How do you get to the point where you're asked to write for GQ or to write a book?" I'm like, "A decade of writing my ass off." I don't know what it is about writing, but people think that you can just do it. I just had my eight-year anniversary in New York and it took eight years to get to this point, using that VICE byline

and pitching other places and building a network of editors.

VH1 fizzled out. Sophie Saint Thomas the sex writer kept growing, and I just leaned into it. It's a bit of working with the universe, but you also have to put in the hard work. Now I make enough to support myself with the blessing of a rent-controlled apartment in New York.

As someone who's very visible online, do you have advice for how to be healthy in that space, and when to draw a line? What gets documented versus what doesn't?

I'm still learning. I had to think a lot about that this summer. This summer kicked my ass. Someone close to me got very sick. I went through a difficult breakup. My grandmother died—we'd talked on the phone every day and were very close. The Virgin Islands were hit last fall by two Category 5 hurricanes. I went back there and it's still a mess and it's hard to see. While I was there, there was a shooting; I was on the ground as clips were being emptied over my head. It got me back into therapy this summer, which is a good thing.

But, it was like, "How much about this do I talk about?" My grandma died of colon cancer and I have GI issues. Do I tweet about this? I have to get a colonoscopy every five years. I just had one. There was a moment where I stopped myself from taking the hospital bed selfie. I was like, "No, keep this off."

It's therapeutic for me to write about these things, but while it seems like I share everything, there are a lot of things people don't know about me. I might write about them some point. For now, I haven't.

It's hard. This summer I thought, "I look so fucking depressing on Twitter and on my podcast." I used to wake up and look at my phone, and then look at my phone before I went to bed. Now I have a meditation routine. I meditate in the morning and before I go to bed, and keep my phone off.

I have noticed that the older I get I do hold back on some things. Also, I truly stopped reading the comments several years ago and I feel like that is a monumental moment for all writers. Not reading the comments, whether it's on Facebook or underneath an article, was a big step.

When I was younger, in like 2013, I wrote about a breakup when I had the VICE column and I ended up hurting a lot of people. That was a big lesson, like, "Maybe you should consider the other people in your life before writing all of this." I just went through another breakup that was probably the only one comparable to the one in 2013 in terms of how much I loved this person. I did write something that mentioned it, because I had an assignment from a travel magazine about a trip we took together. When it was due, it was just like, "There's no way to write the assignment without mentioning it." I contacted them and let them know that I was going to include it. I've learned when it comes to other people, how to be better about it. That's going to be a lot of work for the memoir I'm working on.

You mentioned meditation. Do you have a regular regimen for avoiding burnout?

I'm still learning. I feel like my desk just yells at me because it's always sitting there. There's always something I could be doing. If I don't have any deadlines, I could be pitching. As a freelance writer you always could be working. But, meditation and friends. I've made such good friends in New York. I'm into beauty, self-care. I used to just work from 8 a.m to midnight if I needed to, and until I would physically get sick and then have to take a week off because I realized I wasn't eating right or sleeping right. I was just working, working, working. I've kind of broken that cycle.

Do you ever work from a co-working space, or is it best for you to work from home?

I want to do a call to find a worse insomniac than me. I've gone five days with no sleep. I take Ambien, but I still have a lot of trouble sleeping, so working from home has been helpful for that. Even the hour of getting ready and then doing a commute as opposed to getting up at 9:30 and being up at the desk by 10, has been helpful for my health. Just getting more sleep.

I have considered going somewhere like The Wing or WeWork. I haven't yet. Part of it is money. I don't want to pay for that when I have space. I found a unicorn rent-controlled apartment that has a room that is just my desk and a library. Until I make a lot more money than I do now, I have a hard time rationalizing the expense.

Do you ever have to file something where you think, "This wasn't my best work?" Are you ever stuck with that, or do you keep working until you're happy with it?

Sometimes shit happens. Right after the hurricanes, I was in Saint Thomas writing about how there was no access to any sort of reproductive or maternal healthcare. A good friend of mine down there runs the family research center, and right after the hurricanes I'd gotten ONE Condoms to donate all these condoms. This article was so important to me. It was my normal bit on sexual health, but also I just love the Virgin Islands so much and in general no one's talking about the territories enough.

So while I was down there, I was in a shooting, and then my grandma died, and then I went through a breakup. And then I had to write this thing that's so important. I sent it in and I was like, "Fuck. I wonder if I wasn't still processing all this, if I could have done a better job." It's like, what do you do? You just have to do the best you can, and I think it came out well. My editor seemed happy.

Sometimes life is just shitty, but you have to do the best you can do, and maybe it's not as good as it

would have been if your life was this picture-perfect portrait of support systems with no guns involved and no death.

I was a freelancer for years, too. You don't have time for inspiration. There are different kinds of writing, and you want it to always be good, but sometimes you just feel like, "This thing is due in four days."

You do and it's hard. I hate asking for extensions, and it's tricky as a freelancer because you don't have paid time off and you don't see your editors every day. For instance, when I got my colonoscopy, they gave me the best drugs, but I couldn't get out of bed. I'm affected more by anesthesia and having things cut out of my rectum at 30 than I was at 25. I felt bad because I told my *Allure* editor that I'd have something for them by the end of the day, basing this off of how I reacted to getting a colonoscopy five years ago. But I was a mess. I just couldn't. I had to sleep. I have a solid relationship with my *Allure* editor and I think I've given them enough trust that I'm reliable, but it never feels good to be like, "Hey I'm sorry but I need more time on this." You just have to hope they'll be understanding.

Do you attribute any of your success to your journalism degree?

I don't honestly. But I wonder all the time, "Should I go back to school?" If I went back I think I would study psychology or human sexuality. I'm not academic. I did okay in school, but I had a hard time because the education I got growing up in the Virgin Islands wasn't the same that my peers had gotten in mainland America. I was never at the top of my class. I did do well in my journalism classes, maybe because those were the ones I actually cared about.

College is a privilege, but I have this expensive degree and no one has asked about it. The job I got was from a WordPress blog. Perhaps I learned about leads and sentence structures and that helped the blog be better, but I have not gotten a single job because of my degree. It's all been through meeting people, trying to grow my social media, reaching out to editors and pitching, and just being in New York. I hate the word networking, but it's true.

I have a GRE Kaplan exercise book sitting at home, but I don't have the money, nor does my family, to pay for a Master's degree. The financial aspect of it is so intimidating to me. Some people are comfortable taking on debt. Of course, it's not your fault if you're born into a wealthy family. Use that to good reason and to better yourself and your career, but there's a degree of wealth and class that we don't always want to acknowledge when it comes to education.

When people ask me, "How do I get to where you are?," I never think about schooling. The answer is usually "work hard."

That's the thing. For me, it would be like, "Do a student-exchange program in London and do a ton of cocaine at music shows. When you're on the cocaine and can't sleep, start a music blog, and then turn back time to when it's 2008 and blogs are still interesting, and make friends with someone at Fast Company who knows someone at VICE and send your blog to them. Then work really hard, and then have a mental breakdown that teaches you a lot about yourself."

And, once you do "make it," keep working hard.

Totally. Last night me and my best friend, Annabel Gat, came up with a new project. She's VICE's astrologer. We have a sex and spirituality podcast together called The Serpent Cast. We're next-door neighbors, which is amazing. She just decided to start her own podcast about astrology, and I really want to do on-camera work. I was like, "You know what? I'm just going to make my own YouTube show and I'm going to post it on Twitter." So we're both taking on these new projects, and we're already doing this podcast out of our own pocket. It's like, "Why? I'm already working this much," but I do think you have to have that drive to be successful. There's just a desire to create. So yeah, I'm just going to film this show on my iPhone 6. I bought a tripod and I'm going to wear golden goat horns and talk about, for the first episode, the god of ritual madness and sex parties. I'll do something each Sunday, and maybe it will turn into something.

Or, maybe I'll make absolutely nothing for it and just have more hours filming and editing and less of a social life. I think a lot of creatives can relate to feeling like these strange weirdo introverts who don't get out much, but feel very comfortable when it comes to writing or making creative projects.

As far as the freelance-writer career goes, I got to a period over the last year where I've written for most of the places I always dreamed of writing for—like *Playboy*, *GQ*, *Allure*, and *Glamour*. I've hit all the bylines I wanted to get, and I have good relationships with the editors, and I just found myself being like, "Okay, what now?"

That's what led to pushing the book proposal and creating a podcast, and now to Sunday Worship with Sophie Saint Thomas, because I wanted to create more things that weren't just the freelance writing. I still love it—I'm going to keep writing and I'll develop in terms of my writing abilities and what I'm covering, but I didn't know where else to go. So you just keep going.

5 Things That Are Useful in Staying Sane as a Sex Writer:

1. The music of David Bowie

2. A trusted best friend such as Annabel Gat, *Broadly's* astrologer (read her work)
3. Remembering to lean into your weirdness, and that the shadow sides of you that you were once ashamed of are what will ultimately lead you to success
4. A self-care practice, which for me includes trauma therapy, witchcraft, working out, meditation, marijuana, massage, masturbation, and lip fillers and Botox
5. Everyone who came before me, including Dan Savage, Annie Sprinkle, and Dr. Ruth

Name

Sophie Saint Thomas

Vocation

Writer, Podcaster

Fact

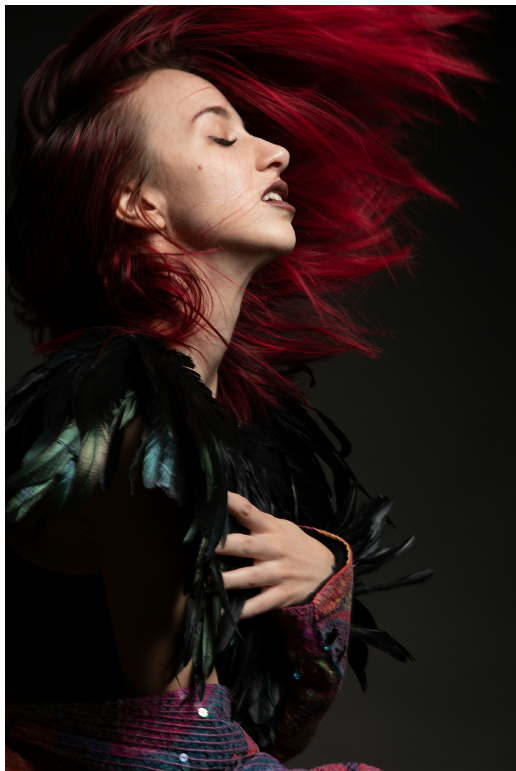


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