

IN OTHER WORDS



ARTISTS TALK ABOUT LIFE AND WORK

BY ANTHONY DeCURTIS

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Life and Work

Anthony
DeCurtis

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This one goes out to the ladies:

Gracie the St. Bernard, my daily sweet companion;

Sue Erikson Bloland, for her essential
insight and encouragement;

And, as always, in all things, my wife and soul mate, Alex.

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My thanks and gratitude to all.

Introduction: The Art of Talk

“Great questions!”

That’s the sort of compliment you tend to get when someone’s read an interview you’ve done and liked it. It’s well intentioned, of course, and it’s churlish to overthink anyone’s kind words. But I still find myself cringing whenever anyone says that to me. It somehow suggests that, as with many television interviews, anyone armed with a list of “great questions,” even if they didn’t write them, could have done the interview just as well. If you’ve never done one, you’d have no way of knowing that good questions are barely the first step to a successful interview.

I learned that myself nearly 30 years ago the first time I attempted to do an interview. I was in graduate school at Indiana University, and Patti Smith was coming to Bloomington to perform. Her first album, *Horses*, had just come out, and I’d been enraptured by it. I’d read just about everything that had been written about her, and I managed to convince an editor at the IU daily student newspaper, who had never heard of her, to assign me an interview. I’d never done one, but I’d read a million of them. It was just talking, right? And knowing enough to ask “great questions.” How hard could it be?

I learned how hard when Smith showed up barely able to stand and incapable of keeping her eyes focused. My dutifully prepared questions went out the window as she drifted off on whatever cloud of thought floated through her head. Finally, her manager led her out of the room, and Lenny Kaye, her guitar player, stepped in and we had a friendly chat for 15 minutes or so. Unfortunately, I was so flustered by that time that I didn’t really manage to get enough information to craft into a readable story. I was disappointed, but that was only the first lesson in my still ongoing discovery that even the most careful preparation might not equip you for what you discover when you first encounter your subject.

Being able to read the person in front of you is one of the intangible skills of the interview. True, it’s the rare interviewee who shows up

too incoherent to speak. The problems you more typically find are the stuff of everyday annoyance: surliness, shyness, anger, defensiveness, glibness, brusqueness, exhaustion, or someone who simply isn't in the mood to talk. (For the best dramatization in this book of the more irritating of those problems, I refer you to my Van Morrison interview.) While you soon learn that if someone genuinely doesn't want to speak to you – or to answer a particular question – there's no way you can make them, every interviewer develops an arsenal of techniques to encourage cooperation.

One of my favorite strategies came by way of U2's the Edge. I first met him in Dublin in 1987 when I was working on a U2 cover story for *Rolling Stone* to coincide with the release of *The Joshua Tree*. The evening I arrived, I went out for a getting-to-know-you dinner with the Edge and Adam Clayton. We weren't really working, just getting a sense of each other and what the next few days might bring. The Edge mentioned a journalist we both know, and told a funny story about him. "He'll ask you a question, and you'll answer it," he said. "Then he won't say anything. I'll think, 'Maybe I didn't give a good enough answer,' so I'll just start talking again. It's really unnerving."

That was a trick that had never occurred to me: say nothing. Before that I suffered from the A-student syndrome. I'd typically look for opportunities to demonstrate to subjects how much thought I'd given their work, and that usually involved a lot of talking. My yakking could sometimes trigger smart discussions, but they also occasionally led to stupefied, one-word replies, or befuddled responses like, "What was the question again?" In a piece I once wrote called "The Naked Transcript," I described burying Peter Gabriel in such an inarticulate avalanche of words that he could barely muster a response. I'd always subscribed to Fran Liebowitz's axiom that the opposite of speaking isn't listening, the opposite of speaking is waiting.

But being quiet forces the subject to deal with his own emotions. It's easy when interviewing famous people to assume that they have no insecurities, but I've found that what the Edge said is often true. If someone answers a question but doesn't really deliver the goods, sitting in silence when they finish is a deft way of sending the message that you'd like them to continue and actually say something this time. It works about

half the time. It's also the kind of thing that doesn't get represented when you read an interview in black-and-white on the page.

My overall approach to doing interviews primarily derives from reading the long interviews that Jann Wenner did in the early days of *Rolling Stone* with the likes of Pete Townshend, John Lennon, and Phil Spector. Jann's questions were always direct and clear; they boiled issues down to an unavoidable essence. Sometimes they weren't even questions – “You were angry with Paul,” he would say to Lennon, characterizing something the former Beatle had said and leaving him little choice but to deny, refine, or expand on the statement. He would also lead his subject, the way an attorney might in a cross-examination. His tone is sympathetic, but no nonsense. He's tenacious, much moreso than I am. Jann would rephrase the same question over and over again in his determination to get an answer that satisfied him. He would not be denied. I'll typically go back to something and try again, but if a line of questioning isn't working I'll head somewhere more promising.

But the primary message I got from Jann's interviews was, “Don't get too fancy.” Often when you ask an elaborate question, you're providing the answer yourself and not leaving room for your subject to say whatever it is he wants to say. The point is to get your subject thinking and remembering, exploring himself, and you can best do that by asking questions that are suggestive and provocative, but not essays in themselves.

I've found that it's also good to start slow. In news interviews, you can get right to the point, but in the types of interviews I tend to do, I try to allow for some degree of build up. I normally start with as simple a question as I can think of. If someone is about to release an album, for example, I might ask something as basic as, “What were you setting out to do this time around?” Such open-ended questions enable me to get a sense of what sort of mood the subject is in and what the conversation is going to be like.

If the person honestly and openly responds, it can take a while to answer a question like that, which allows me to get my bearings, take some notes about what the person looks like and is wearing so that I don't have to remember to do it later, and judge the quality of what he has to say. If he answers honestly and energetically you can tell that he

wants the interview to go well, and you can start thinking about ways to push the boundaries of what he might be willing to discuss. On the other hand, if a question like that elicits a testy response, you know you've got a hard slog ahead.

These types of comparisons are dodgy, needless to say, but interviews really are like seductions – or at least like dates. They go best when you take the time to build some trust and when you're true to who you are and respectful of and attentive to the person you're with. If you aren't funny, don't try to be a jokester. If you tend to be shy, don't over-compensate by being too assertive. And, most important of all, listen.

Which brings us back to the "great questions." I approach interviews with only a few prepared questions – another problem with the "great questions" compliment. Instead, I have a list of ideas I want to talk about. I view the most significant of those as landmarks that we eventually need to get to, however indirectly. But the vast majority of the interview takes place in the spaces between those markers. You can – and should – prepare as thoroughly as possible for an interview, but ultimately you're meeting a person, not a media creation and not the imagined product of your research.

That's sometimes hard to keep in mind when you're speaking to a subject who has been so much and so long in the public eye that you feel as if you know him already. But if you don't allow for the possibility that the people you're meeting are different from what you've been led to believe, you'll never really find out anything about them and the quality of your interview will suffer. You need to prepare as extensively as you can and then walk into the room and be willing to set all your preparation aside if more interesting possibilities present themselves.

The goal in one sense is to make your subject forget that he is being interviewed. That's less a matter of hiding your tape recorder – and I always tape – than of getting to a place where the conversation takes on a life of its own. That's obviously difficult to sustain over a long period of time – typically, you move in and out of self-consciousness, with particular topics taking on emotional momentum until the spell breaks and reality intrudes again.

With certain wary subjects it may be impossible to ever escape awareness of the interview situation. I've interviewed Mick Jagger a number of times and he's one of my favorite subjects. He's smart,

charming, entertaining, and complex – a fascinating person to write about. But he’s not a great interview. His sense of self-possession is so complete that the idea of revealing himself to a journalist seems absurd to him. “I’ll just look like a cunt,” is how he memorably described the risk of going on the record about a project he was working on that might not work out. He needs to be interpreted – that is to say, observed, profiled, written about, quoted in context – and the question-and-answer format necessitates that the subject be willing to open himself up

So what are the advantages of the Q&A format? Its most obvious virtue is that if you’re interested in an artist, hearing him speak at length in his own voice is a riveting experience – and one that is becoming harder and harder to find. Stories of all kinds are getting shorter just about everywhere, and fewer magazines run long interviews. The interviews in *Rolling Stone* that I read while growing up made an enormous impact on me, and it’s one of the most satisfying aspects of my professional life that I’ve gotten to do so many of them. As I was working on the Keith Richards interview included here, for example, I could scarcely get over my delight that it was exactly the sort of interview that I would have loved to read. Afterwards, I went out for a celebratory champagne dinner – though already drunk from knocking back cognac for three hours while Keith sipped his bourbon and ginger ale concoction – and then for the first and only time in my life I went home and immediately listened to the entire interview straight through just to make sure it was as strong as I thought it was.

Some rock writers regard doing interviews or even writing profiles as somehow less pure than criticism or reviews, as if associating with artists were somehow inherently sullyng. Given the contents of this book – and the 25 years of experience it documents – it should surprise no one to learn that I strongly disagree with that view. Unless you talk with artists in depth, it’s difficult to gain a three-dimensional understanding of the work they do. There is no substitute for spending time in a recording studio or traveling with a band if you want to comprehend what it’s like to make a record or to be out on the road. Those experiences are not only valuable in themselves – they sharpen your critical acumen.

That personal understanding is especially important for the kinds of exploratory interviews I like to do. I’ve never been interested in doing

“gotcha” interviews. Some charged issues come up in this book – the Rufus Wainwright interview comes immediately to mind – but in every case, I determined beforehand that the subject would be willing to talk about them. While I don’t accept unreasonable preconditions for interviews, I also don’t enjoy pressuring people to speak about things they’d rather not discuss. If it’s going to be a fight, I’d rather pass. If a subject isn’t willing to open up, it’s not worth the effort as far as I’m concerned.

Similarly, if I felt I was so much smarter or otherwise superior to my subject – not to mention my audience – that I couldn’t do a straight interview, I wouldn’t bother doing the interview at all. I don’t ask trick questions, and I hate “cute” interviews. I remember reading an interview in which a reporter asked Madonna what Sean Penn smelled like. Cute, but not my beat. A friend once remarked, while bemoaning the demise of the long Q&A, that “Every interview you read these days is 800 words and exclusively about sex.” I like reading about sex, too, but I also like reading 5,000-word interviews with artists who don’t mind speaking in depth about their work and motivations. That, finally, is what this book is about.

I first thought about assembling a book like this about 10 years ago when I started pulling together *Rocking My Life Away: Writing About Music and Other Matters* (Duke University Press, 1998), a collection of my essays, reviews, and profiles. I thought of that book and this one as companion pieces: the first a collection of prose, the second of interviews. It didn’t quite work out that cleanly, of course. I couldn’t resist cajoling Peter Buck of R.E.M. to do a lengthy Q&A with me about rock criticism in *Rocking My Life Away*, and that turned out to be one of that book’s most popular pieces. And while this book does consist entirely of interviews, it also includes a good deal of discursive prose to provide background and some sense of perspective and personal history.

A couple of pieces in here also served as specific inspirations for doing the book in the first place. The short version of my interview with Bryan Ferry, which originally ran in *Rolling Stone*, failed to convey what had been a surprising and powerfully moving experience for me. In 800 words, you have to keep the exchanges so short that quips work far better than anything more substantive. The longer version here is much more satisfying. Similarly an assignment to interview Nile

Rodgers of Chic for *Entertainment Weekly* in order to get a quote about the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" – which is driven by a sample from Chic's "Good Times" – turned into a fascinating half-hour conversation about disco. *EW* got its quote, but I was left with a great story and nowhere to go with it – until now.

The Q&A format also provides readers with more direct access to the artist they're interested in reading about – another not terribly flattering reason that some critics resent it. When they're done well, you can hear a clear representation of the artist's voice and get a real feel for how his thought processes run. In order to provide that access to the reader, the interviewer has to create an environment of emotional openness and then get out of the way. That's the hardest lesson for interviewers to learn – assuming that they want to learn it. Whatever else it's about, writing is about ego, while successful interviewing often entails setting your ego aside. The subject is the story, and once you've gotten them to open up, you've done the most important part of your job.

The interview, then, is a curious (in all senses of the word) kind of writing, one in which all the words are not those of the author – a circumstance that I allude to in the title of this book. The authorial work consists first in eliciting quality responses, and then shaping them in a way that is at once true to the experience and gripping to read. Interviewers should guide the conversation, push it deeper and then let their subject emerge.

That's why I don't mind letting answers run long if they're compelling enough – another departure from the current fashion of keeping quotes short. I take my cues in this regard from the documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker, who made the classic Bob Dylan movie, *Don't Look Back*, and the equally wonderful *Monterey Pop*. He was on a panel and someone asked about MTV-style editing in which no shot is held very long. Pennebaker explained that he followed no fixed rule about how long to hold a shot. He went strictly on the basis of common sense. He kept the camera focused on a specific shot until something more interesting came along. Similarly, I like to let someone speak as long as what they're saying holds my attention – whether that's for five or five hundred words.

That said, after years of having to cut interviews to fit acceptable magazine lengths, I decided with this book that, if I was in doubt about

whether to cut a passage or not, I'd err on the side of not cutting. I've included more than three dozen interviews here, and I'm under little illusion that anyone, other than reviewers, will read every word of every one of them. And I assume that few people will start reading this book at page one and then read every interview in order. Most people, I'm sure, will read it the way I would: in descending order of interest, with a good deal of skipping around to see what catches their eye or imagination.

Keeping that in mind, I felt that people who were reading about their favorite artists would want more rather than less. Many of these interviews have been significantly expanded, and others, most notably the ones with Paul Simon, Johnny Cash, and Bruce Springsteen, have been transformed from profiles into Q&As. Some of them now lack the tight, rigorous structure that I like to achieve in magazine interviews. What they have instead is a more genuinely conversational feel. There's more air in them, they feel more relaxed, and they're easier to read. I've left in more of my own participation, and more of the digressions that inevitably come up and frequently get eliminated. My criterion as an editor was not my usual one: "Does this absolutely need to be here?" It was: "Would fans of this artist enjoy reading this?" So if one of these chats is running too long for you, feel free to jump ahead to a part that's more to your taste.

I say that because enjoyment was my primary goal for *In Other Words*. That's not because I believe that these interviews lack substance. They don't. And it's not because I don't regard some of them as definitive. I do. But reading someone's speaking voice, however demanding or challenging what he has to say might be, is much easier than reading written prose. When an interview works well, reading it is an extremely intimate experience that evokes the childlike feeling of being told a story. Personally, I can often enjoy an interview even if the subject doesn't particularly interest me, as long as he has something to say and says it well. It's like having a fun conversation at a party with someone you might never run into again. I'd like to think this book is filled with the possibility of such random pleasures.

Anthony DeCurtis
New York City
March 2005

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Cash Family Values