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Writing 420

April 6 2015

My Evolution as a Writer: Searching for Credibility

In an age where the internet makes creating music more accessible than ever, more and more artists are coming out of the woodwork, many almost entirely on the basis of their online presence. One effect that this produces is akin to a virtual backstage pass, a behind-the-scenes look at musicians themselves, and more importantly, their creative process. As an aspiring composer and producer with profiles online, I have witnessed the rise and development of artists like never before, from self-posted links to their SoundCloud and Bandcamp, to articles of acclaim from popular music websites like Pitchfork and Complex. Countless blogs and forums burble with the names of up and coming musicians, production techniques and equipment. Music today is inseparable from the internet communities where it thrives. And with such broad public access, the activity in these communities brings to light some essential questions about artistic growth and development: How does one gain credibility as a musician and more generally, as an artist? What is required for this transformation to occur? What does becoming “credible” really mean?

A discussion about music may sound like a strange introduction to my evolution as a writer. In many ways, however, the internet music community (and my involvement with it) represents a paradigm of modern artistic development, and one which provides insight into the more opaque process of my development as a writer. Where my writing proficiency has most

often been judged by a single professor, there is democracy in the internet community, as those making art are most often those deciding its value. With this community in place, musicians today are less and less forced to create to the specifications of traditional institutions, like record labels, and compromise artistic integrity. This is not to say that writing in school has been detrimental to my development as a writer, just that this process is more difficult to chart. When I was a high school senior taking AP English, my professor simply loved my style of writing, and while this motivated me to keep doing it, it also left my ego over-inflated. When I reached my first year writing requirement, English 124, and received a B- on my first essay (a character analysis of Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's novel *The Street*), I was confused. Where was the praise that had accompanied my similar analysis of *Song of Solomon* senior year of high school? Suddenly I was no longer a proficient writer, but just a B- student. Other than my professor's feedback, I was unsure how I could have done better. Eventually I realized that what garnered praise in high school was the standard in college, and on a later essay (an analysis of the motif of water in Dave Egger's novel *Zeitoun*), I earned the A. But still, in order to do this I had to think in a singularly student-oriented mindset, writing for the professor, and to no other end than a grade. This contrasts with how I have always created music, where the end goal is to create the best art possible, with *me* as the final judge of this criteria.

I think this difference has a lot to do with the fact that I've almost always created music on my own volition, while the vast majority of my writing has not. When I reflect on my own catalog of music, its trajectory is a direct reflection of my personal growth as an artist, because my pieces were created solely with my intentions in mind. For instance, when I first began to compose music as a child, I would think of a compelling melody and attempt to learn it on piano.

When I began formal musical training and learned how to read music, I would transcribe these melodies in my notebook of sheet music, often altering them as I went along. Eventually I started using composition software and then digital audio workstations, where harmonies, multiple instruments, and effects were suddenly at play. The more I experimented and the more music I listened to, the more refined my skills became, and the more exacting the message and emotion I could convey. In contrast to my music, my writing has often lacked a comparable level of autonomy because the majority of it has been created in response to school assignments and instructor specifications. However, it is within the confines of these specifications that I can personally engage with the topics about which I write, because unlike creating music, writing is a task that I *need* outside pressure to do.

It follows then, that school has actually been an ideal place for me to develop as a writer. The course English 325: Art of the Essay, for example, was a creative nonfiction training camp, especially in its compressed summer term form. Every week I wrote an essay on varying personal themes: my semester abroad in Spain, my favorite rap album, my involvement with orchestras. Yet Professor Tricia Khleif pushed us to delve into the second and third, often disconcerting layers of our personal stories: how the Spanish language barrier colored my perception of the culture, a retrospective awareness of my former prejudice against hip hop, how personal relations formed and dissolved through my orchestral communities. Writing these essays worked my linguistic and rhetorical muscles till a point of noticeable improvement that would not have been possible outside of such a rigorous environment. By the end I felt on the verge of a turning point in my artistry, an acknowledgement that what I was writing could have value outside of Prof. Khleif's classroom just as it did inside it. This transition from writing

solely as a student for an instructor to writing as expression for an audience is what I see as the most salient evolution in my writing. It is an acknowledgment of my own credibility as a writer and thinker, and it has occurred in school. At the end of English 325 and with encouragement of Prof. Khleif, I submitted a couple of my essays for the Hopwood Awards. And while my submission was not awarded, it was this newfound confidence in my work and willingness to share it that for me signifies progression.

Being a student has undoubtedly enabled my growth as a writer, but accomplishing this has meant finding my own voice. Here I see another analogy to my development as a musician. I began playing the double bass when I was nine years old. I took lessons for ten years, and in that sense I was literally a student for the entirety of that period. Yet there was a gradual transition that occurred in my playing which is hard to pinpoint chronologically, but where I emerged from studenthood while still remaining a student. It was the realization that I was a bassist *as well as* a double bass student. There was a tangible result in my playing, too: I began to create music, rather than just play notes off the page. In this sense, I think to create art requires one to first self-identify as an artist. In the Capstone course for the Minor in Writing, there were two blog posts I wrote that really captured my discovery of a unique voice. The first analyzed my normal writing voice, using my *Zeitoun* essay as an example. It concluded that I rarely deviated from a formal tone, often employing long, complex sentences, and this was even clear in the tone of the blog post:

I think this stylistic habit goes hand-in-hand with the dependent clause at the beginning of sentences and contributes to a building suspense. Also adding to the momentum of the essay was my use of the active voice, a stylistic move that I have tried to incorporate more in the past couple years. Overall, I found the tone of my writing to be very formal. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as I think it comes across as clear and concise, but experimenting with different

tones, maybe similar to how I speak, is something I want to try in future writing.

Three months and eleven blog posts later, I wrote another post called, “Finding My Blogging Voice...And Making It Look Good.” Reading this now, over a year later, the change in tone is remarkable. Here’s the first paragraph:

Over the course of this semester I've really worked on finding my blogging voice. I started off writing in a more formal tone, using descriptive vocabulary and long, complex sentences. Then I experimented with a super informal, conversational voice. Neither seemed that natural. And, now in writing this at the end of the semester, I think that sounding natural and genuine is the essence of a good blog post; I've started to embrace the idea that it's all about being "in the moment," and I think that this medium of writing is best suited to capturing what the writer is thinking now. It's well adapted for spilling your thoughts. That's not say that a good blog post has to be a stream-of-consciousness jumble of text or ramble. It can be organized and thoughtful. But it's a reflection of your thoughts in your voice - you don't have to mold it to someone else's standards.

I was unaware at the time, but by establishing this voice, even if it was only specific to this medium, I was not just a student doing a blogging assignment, but also had become a blogger.

Arriving at the end of my college career has meant learning to become the best possible student, but also seeing the realm beyond this role. All successful artists, be it writers, musicians, painters, etc. are lifelong students of their craft. But they are also authority figures. Gaining credibility is a recursive process: those who do it become the ones who set the standard for posterity. I have developed as a musician as I have developed as a writer, and each has influenced the other. Watching the current community of internet musicians has made visible the steps towards gaining credibility as an artist, yet through writing in a school setting I have evolved in ways that would not have been possible on my own. In the end, my evolution as a writer is a story about adaptation. Recognizing this process has been preparation for one of the

most significant adaptations I will soon have to make: writing outside the safe haven of studenthood. Therefore it is only fitting that I begin to recognize what value I personally can contribute, if at some point I am to be called, or honestly call myself, a writer.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Ostrow, J. (2011). *Directed Self-Placement Essay: What It Means to be Human* (pp. 1-3).

I had not read this essay, titled “What It Means to be Human,” until recently when I considered it for this bibliography. It is the first official essay that I wrote as a U of M student, and it captures well the mind of a high school student anticipating what college writing sounds like. What’s striking is that upon first read, the prose sounds similar to my prose today: the sentence structure, the cadence, the tone, are all similar. But reading it over again, the content is what reveals the writer’s pre-college status. I blend in quotes from the articles we had to synthesize about artificial intelligence into a response that basically states that our human uniqueness is located in our culture, social conditioning, and selfhood. I use strong evidence to make these claims, such as primate tool making and Radovan Richta’s theory of technological evolution. But I do not prod deeper, and finish the essay in two and a half pages. The argument I make is broad. And I believe the essay prompt was structured to produce exactly the type of writing that I did, though nothing more. This essay is typical of the brief, well-flowing essays that I churned out in high school, but it is safe, and is a good reference point to which I can compare other college writing.

2. Ostrow, J. (2011). *Waves of Strength: The Significance of Water in Zeitoun* (pp. 1-5).

This essay was written for my English 125 class, and was an analysis of the Dave Egger’s novel *Zeitoun*, which tells the true story of a Syrian man (Abdulrahman Zeitoun) and his family in New Orleans during the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. In it I discuss the dual symbolism of water in the novel: Zeitoun had been a champion swimmer, but also lost a brother to the seas; he had immigrated to America by boat, but the flooding aftermath of Hurricane Katrina had destroyed his house. This dichotomy was not difficult to explore in the context of the novel, but in my analysis there is a clear focus on depth of thought and content as opposed to my previous literary analyses. In this way, it was similar to high school work I had done but translated to a college environment, where the expectations were higher and the criticism more intense. Reflecting on the assignment, it is clear that the LSA curriculum was careful to ease students into college writing; first keeping the requirements the same but increasing expectations. For me, this essay stands out because it was one of the last literary analyses I wrote in college (in English), but still shows my prowess within that genre.

3. Ostrow, J. (2011). *Why I Write What I Write* (pp. 1-4).

“At my core, I care about the words and ideas I transcribe because I care about being perceived as credible.” This is a telling quote from my Gateway “Why I Write,” piece because it shows that this idea of credibility was something I was thinking about and articulating at least a year ago. In fact, many of the ideas in “Why I Write,” are seeds that present themselves in a more mature form in my Writer’s Evolution Essay. In this essay, I focus primarily on the content of my work being the major reason that I write, the ideas and “stories that I have to tell.” I was largely concerned with the “what” of my writing, the message I was getting across, hence why I somewhat annoyingly titled the essay “Why I Write What I Write.” I also mention that for me, writing is “an attractive art form to me because of its fundamental nature: no special tools are required other than mastery of the language we use everyday, which in itself is a tool far more valuable and complex than most others in any artist’s arsenal.” The importance of the manipulation of language was another concept hinted at in this essay but not fully explored (see Psychology 442 Final Perspective Paper). In many ways, this essay feels like beginning of a longer process of self-reflective writing that ran its course all the way through the current Capstone course.

4. Ostrow, J. (2011). *Psychology 442 Final Perspective Paper* (pp. 1-16).

This was the longest paper on a single topic I have ever written, which, at 16 pages, is not actually that long. Still, this in itself was a challenge, and it was not made possible without the incorporation of multiple, sizable block quotes (which also happened to be necessary content). In short, this essay was the last of three we had to write for Psychology 442: Perception, Science, and Reality, and consisted of our final perspective on many of the major themes of the course: whether we leaned towards metaphysical materialism or idealism, positive science or intuitionism. With this assignment we were given the freedom to write about our own opinions, and thus there was essentially no “wrong” response, but the paper did need to include support from the many ideas talked about in class: theories of perception, gestalt psychology, Helen Keller. One of the more interesting aspects of the paper was the argument I made about language being fundamental to the creation of human culture, and in many ways, human consciousness. Helen Keller describes this in her autobiography, “*When I learned the meaning of “I” and “me” and found that I was something, I began to think. Then consciousness first existed for me.*” Writing my Final Perspective Paper, in comparison with my Initial Perspective Paper, it was not as if my views had changed drastically, but I did have novel frameworks, such as the concept of language, through which to understand them.

5. Ostrow, J. (2011). *Hopwood Awards Submission: “Black Star” and “Behind the Orchestra”* (pp. 1-16).

At the end of summer term, my professor for English 325 mentioned that the Hopwood committee was accepting submissions for non-fiction, and suggested that we submit something. I had actually thought about doing this before, but had never had enough material to meet the requirements. After writing essays every week for six weeks, however, I decided to submit two essays I had written, “Black Star,” and “Behind the Orchestra.” The first was a meditation on my favorite hip hop album, “Black Star,” how it got me into rap music and what it meant to me. The second was a reflection on my experience growing up playing with orchestras as a bassist, and the relationships that I made through them. I submitted them together because they both creative nonfiction on a musical theme, but also because only together did they meet the page requirement. Writing both made me come to terms with what music meant to me and how diverse of an influence it was. Also significant is the fact that I merely submitted these essays. I elaborate on this in my Writer’s Evolution Essay, but this acknowledgement that these essays could have value outside of class assignments was a sign of maturity in my writing. They were not selected as a winner, but the process helped acclimate me to applying writing to contexts outside the classroom.

6. Ostrow, J. (2011). “*On The Run*” Review (pp. 1-6).

This is a book review I wrote last semester in English 225: Academic Argumentation. The subject is a newly published ethnography by sociologist Alice Goffman titled *On The Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. It is, in her words, “an on-the-ground account of the US prison boom: a close-up look at young men and women living in one poor and segregated Black community [in Philadelphia] transformed by unprecedented levels of imprisonment...policing, and supervision (xii). In my review, I found myself actually writing *as* a critic, rather than just trying to adopt the style of one. I aimed for specificity in my comments, coming off praiseworthy of certain aspects, such as her portrayal of the police’s punitive tactics, but skeptical of others, such as her inconsistency in using either a subjective or objective viewpoint. I was also referential where it strengthened my case, discussing the work of other sociologists and ethnographers. At the same time, my review is far from perfect, and struggles especially toward the end from vacillation in my argument between critique of Goffman’s over-categorization of her subjects and the necessity of this tactic. However, I think this flaw signifies unsteadiness in a newfound position grappling with credibility rather than an unawareness of this process altogether. I still am thinking like a critic, be it a novice one, but instead of simply regurgitating generalities, I attempt to carve out my own perspective.

7. Ostrow, J. (2011). *“Analyzing My Writing Style” and “Finding My Blogging Voice...And Making it Look Good” from Minor in Writing Blog* (pp. 1).

I came across these two blog posts while writing my Writer’s Evolution Essay, and, using the medium of blogging, they exemplify development of my voice. The first is an analysis of my style from the *Zeitoun* essay, which I describe as “very formal.” It is meta though, because this description is also apt for the tone of that blog post. Later in the semester however, I wrote a blog post about developing my voice, and I present this realization: “I think that sounding natural and genuine is the essence of a good blog post; I’ve started to embrace the idea that it’s all about being “in the moment,” and I think that this medium of writing is best suited to capturing what the writer is thinking now.” Once again, this statement describes the tone in which I wrote this blog post: it is suddenly freer sounding and off-the-cuff. Our required blogging during the Capstone Project was a helpful for developing a comfort with the genre. And in the same way that I talk about the internet musical community as fostering artistic development, I think the same is true for blogging, it is writing’s correlate in this regard.

8. Ostrow, J. (2011). *UROP Abstract: VaximmutorDB: A Database of Vaccine-Induced Host Immune Factors* (pp. 1).

This is my abstract for my research project for the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, which I participated in my sophomore year. For my project, I began doing research in a bioinformatics laboratory. The research in particular was focused on creating a vaccine database to track host gene responses to vaccines in order to quickly test vaccine efficacy. I was examining genes associated with influenza vaccines. Although this research did not concern my ideal subject matter, I was fortunate to be able to work alongside scientists and contribute to a project which could have real lasting implications. Critical to the presentation of my research was the writing of an abstract, which outlined my process and results. I had never written a formal abstract before, and doing so made me especially conscious of how to be concise yet clear. I began with general definitions, such as the definition of a vaccine, and then narrowed in on the focus of my project, which was to identify genes important for signaling responses to vaccines. This abstract became a helpful reference later when assembling my final poster presentation because it served as an organizational map.

9. Ostrow, J. (2011). *Hanover Research Cover Letter* (pp. 1).

Each time I write a cover letter, I always modify the wording to what I think will best fit the position to which I am applying. This cover letter, which I recently sent to the

company Hanover Research, got me an interview, which is more I can say about a lot of the cover letters I have sent off. I came to the conclusion that employers receive so many cover letters saying the exact same things that it is important to be (1) unique and (2) genuine. In this letter, I aim to accomplish both. Right off the bat I mention my connection with the recruiter who I met at the Winter Career Expo, setting me apart from the applicants who solely applied online. After listing my qualifications, I devote a paragraph to why I want a job in the field of educational research, and why I would be the company's best choice. Throughout the letter, I also strive to be a honest and transparent as possible, mentioning my experience with data analysis but noting that I have not done research in an educational setting. Because I have experience tutoring however, I suggest that these two skillsets combined would prepare me for the job. Knowing that the recruiters did not expect applicants to necessarily have done educational research before gave me the green light to make this statement, and showed a desire to think critically about the requirements listed.

10. Ostrow, J. (2011). *Trabajo Final: Los Hombres Opresivos en La Mordaza y El Tragaluz* (pp. 1-8).

I have not yet included a piece in Spanish in this bibliography, but I think it is important to do so because writing in Spanish is both significant portion of the writing I do at U of M, and distinct from writing in English. This piece in particular is my final essay from the class Spanish 430: Spain is Different, a course which dealt with portrayals of Spain in the media and literature during and after Franco's regime. This essay compares machismo present in two plays, *La Mordaza (The Gag)* by Alfonso Sastre and *El Tragaluz (The Basement Window)* by Antonio Buero Vallejo. In both, there are families oppressed by male figures, a father and son, respectively, but who ultimately overthrow their rule. This story is one that runs parallel to the surge and decline of fascist values in Spain, and I draw this conclusion later in my essay. While I still am not entirely fluent in Spanish, each time I write in the language, my familiarity with idiomatic phrasing increases, and I like to think the flow of my prose gets better. The more I write in Spanish the less I have to first translate to English in my head, and I think this improves my writing as well.