

## My Lunch with Andy

*Cynthia Rose on how she learned that journalism means more than typing*

Maybe we still cling to calling it “the media”. But what people now read for news and culture can come from anywhere. Unified by nothing, only one thing drives it: the nonstop, all-inclusive competition. To those who are creating a majority of its ‘content’, today’s distracted readership is nothing but ‘eyeballs’ and clicks — and it’s a landscape in which writers are minor cogs.

This world couldn’t differ more from the ancient music press or, at least, from the *NME* where I worked. There no equivalent to the Like button existed and our staff saw its independence as sacrosanct. Far from anyone trying to please, we knew our editors often saw us as trying and difficult. But no one sought, needed (or cared about) approval.

Several factors underwrote that point of view. The *NME* was proudly a socialist music paper “for youth” but, more importantly, it was a market leader. Because we happened to enjoy a large circulation, the corporation behind the paper made good money. So whether or not anyone really agreed with our formula, in terms of what mattered to those higher up, it worked. At our level (if not that of all our editors), that result bought us editorial freedom.

It also gave all of us quite a showcase. At *NME*, if you did your work well, people who mattered noticed. The paper was monitored by its rivals, by editors at publishing houses and by the people commissioning TV and

radio. So if your work shone (or if you clearly had ideas), freelance jobs and book deals usually came your way. Some of the most interesting work I did was not at the paper — yet, in another job, it would never have found me.

Working in the music press also gave you confidence. It was highly competitive and, week after week, your plate could be as full as you wanted. All of us were on the hook for “in-depth” features, but these were juggled with non-stop writing on records, books, gigs and movies. Distilling all of that into words was life, 24/7.

Every week we thought about and sized up what we heard and saw. Not only did we come to view all of it as related; we made a case for why that was so. These days, when hierarchies everywhere are collapsing, that kind of schooling has turned out to be useful.

Jobs in the music press entailed a lot of mundane detail. There was endless waiting and schlepping; plenty of sitting in airports, stations and venues. The logging of transcripts, in my case by hand, was seemingly endless. But, thanks to the paper’s status, we had genuine access. Not for us pontificating on the basis of links and emails.

The narcissism which produced the selfie was inbuilt *chez nous* and *NME* was infamous for its “personalities”. Most of the founding fathers were gone by the time I arrived, but their *modus operandi* certainly lingered on. Many a scribe aimed to live, dress and write like some kind of star. This seemed to be a legacy of the Swinging Sixties, when musical luminaries anointed the first “personality” hairdressers, cobblers and tailors. Eventually, star artisans of every ilk followed, from writers to supermodels and even typographers.

When it came to actual celebrity, however, we saw it. Our job made us witness to all its daily perks and details — from the girls and boys and drugs to the suites and chauffeurs. We also listened, over and over, as people told us how it really felt. In the case of someone like Dolly Parton or David Bowie, that experience could often be surreal. But it was never boring.

My lunch with Andy Warhol was a good example. It took place in Dallas, Texas — the site chosen by Andy for a rendezvous with his “dermatologist”.

I had already heard a lot about Andy Warhol. According to Debbie

Harry, who I frequently interviewed, he was more orthodox than his myth might have you believe. Andy, she told me, habitually got up early, attended Catholic Mass and spent most of every day working. (“I think he’s very much in control. So much so that it sometimes startles me.”)

My memory of walking in and seeing him remains a vivid one. Sitting alone in a restaurant with all-white décor, he couldn’t have looked much more like “Andy Warhol”. From the black turtleneck to his pockmarked face and wig, every piece of that iconic image was present. But what struck me more than anything was his posture. It was impeccable; I’d never seen anyone sit that straight. This was due, as he later showed me, to a pair of custom-made corsets. One of these was pale pink, the other mint green. Two decades after being shot, Warhol’s body still couldn’t support itself.

Now Warhol lives on in countless tapes and digital files, machinery diffusing his flat, fey tones in perpetuity. You can also type his name into any search field and diverse queries spring up: “*Andy Warhol boyfriend?*”, “*Andy Warhol Edie?*”, “*Andy Warhol shooting?*”. Yet when I disinter my own plastic tapes, it isn’t answers to those queries I discover.

My day with Andy sounds like the relic it is. Not because Warhol-in-the-flesh was so witty (although he certainly was) or so oddly prescient (Debbie was also right about that) or so totally working-class. It’s because there was nothing “virtual” about him. Every bit as present as he was on the day, Warhol audibly, if passively, takes charge. As I listen in — after decades — to us talking, the subjects bounce from lunch to the history of photography, from art deco to the finer points of libel law.

Warhol often hesitates, yet he is far from laconic. He has opinions on everything and most of them are erudite. As one might expect, too, he sounds very up-to-date. The artist so famed for his interest in the new sees plenty to praise in his Commodore Amiga.

Yet, as I keep on listening, something else emerges. It isn’t the taste for novelty which makes Warhol singular. What does that is his total immersion in the present tense. Despite a clear fascination for image and self-presentation, nothing about Andy’s presence is simulated or fabricated.

On my tapes he is canny and caustic, then reticent, then risqué. But,

during every second, whether we're alone or joined by his entourage, Andy gives the conversation all his attention. This is his real art, the skill of paying attention; he wouldn't be that guy preoccupied with his mobile phone. It's the last comparison I expected, but Warhol had a lot in common with Madame de Sévigné. If his façade was totally as advertised that was where the symmetry with his legend stopped.

Fourteen months after our meeting, Warhol was dead. Now, thanks to the internet, anyone can access his most secret foibles. They too can learn he went to mass, worked long hours, volunteered at homeless shelters. But, for me, our lunch remains less a revelation than the embodiment of something basic: the story is never what you expect. In comparison to that exceptional guy I met, the Warhol Google serves me up is just a paper cut-out. Virtual facts and screens of text just can't compete with the randomness and detail of life.

One thing about the real, though, is predictable: it always comes with politics. Understanding that is part of *NME*'s legacy too. The paper didn't just sell because Paul Weller graced our cover. We also backed CND, the women at Greenham Common, the miners and the Labour Party. We were a union shop and, on one occasion, a majority of us voted for a strike of our own.

My first-ever news piece came out of that consciousness; it exposed deaths on the Youth Opportunity Scheme. Back then, most British school-leavers faced unemployment so, through 'YOPS', Thatcher offered them mandatory, short-term "training". Much of this came from small, local firms, places where employers were actually looking for cheaper labour. Because almost no oversight was put in place, over three years YOPS caused seven deaths on the job. Not to mention more than 9,000 injuries.

I still remember many of the kids I wrote about. One was mopping a factory floor with solvent when someone tossed a match. Another was cleaning a mincing machine, standing inside, when it got switched on. All of this occurred long before email, so I took the details by phone from parents around the country. Those who had no telephone answered with hand-written letters. Blurry, smiling photos slid out of the envelopes.

Those four years in the *NME* office certainly changed me. I gained the ability to better pitch a story and I learned to make it work at any length

or format. I absorbed the importance of images, headlines and captions. I was able to hone a favourite skill, that of interviewing. All of this remains useful and engaging.

But what I really learned was something more important. Because, although skills and confidence are vital, neither will profit you if you lack curiosity. It's really curiosity that leads to the unexpected, to the telling detail or the heart of a story. Today, when I look around at the world of tweets and texts, that's the one thing I find absent. The *NME* turned my own curiosity into a reflex — and that made life enormously richer.

Without it, would I have worked “underground” in a Twinkie factory? Would I have listened when Chris Stein insisted I meet Jean-Michel Basquiat? Would I have ever set out to learn why James Brown screamed?

Would I have combed the Western hemisphere for Our Lady of Guadalupe? Would I have moved to Seattle on the advice of three oddballs (Kurt Cobain, a medical examiner and a skateboarder)? Would I have written a book with a gay, black, working-class artist?

Would I have met, in a tiki bar, the person I live with? Would I have landmarked a 1914 steam laundry? Would I have made a film about performance typing?

In short, could I have understood what Andy Warhol had to show me?

My time in the music press was just one link in a chain. But it was a critical one. Maybe there are no longer any jobs in “journalism”. But real journalism keeps changing my life.

*Cynthia Rose got her first press card at 20. Initially hired by Melody Maker, she joined NME in 1980 as Thrills! editor and worked for them until 1986. Now based in Paris, she works as a journalist, author and broadcaster.*