

Kelly McCartney Interview

[Todd L. Burns](#)

13 hr

I'm Todd L. Burns, and welcome to Music Journalism Insider, a newsletter about music journalism. If you're not familiar with the newsletter already, [click here](#) to find out more.

[Kelly McCartney](#) has been in and around music journalism for a long time, but her career is hardly a straightforward one. For Kelly, writing was a side hustle for many years. In the short time that she's been doing music journalism full-time, however, she's become a major voice in the roots music community, most notably with her [Hangin' & Sangin'](#) podcast, which combines interviews and live performances.

How did you get to where you are today, professionally?

Music was a huge part of my childhood, as was writing, so as a teen, I decided that I'd be a music journalist and write for *Rolling Stone* which was the holy grail of the form back in the '80s. I moved to L.A. for college and got my degree, but an internship at *Entertainment Tonight*, in a round-about way, led me to a job as personal assistant to Susanna Hoffs right after the Bangles split up in 1989-90. From there, I started booking clubs, repping artists, and working all over the music industry.

It wasn't until 1999, I think it was, that I got my first gig as a music journo with AllMusic.com. That was the early stages of building the whole database, so we basically got to pick and choose what we wanted to write. It was a blast and it jump-started that side of my career. For the next, gosh, 13 or so years, I kept writing as a side hustle while I worked with artists and pursued some activism. Then, in late 2013, I finally committed to making "music journalist" my primary job and found a really nice fit for myself within

the roots music community.

Did you have any mentors along the way? What did they teach you?

As a writer... not really. But, working with Susanna, I got to see the inside of the music business at a very high level. She also taught me so much about being organized, efficient, and authentic, no matter what you're doing. She may well be the most humble rock star you could ever meet. That and jobs in numerous other areas of the industry gave me such a wide and deep perspective on what it means to be a maker of music in this world that I'm able to relate to artists in a much more holistic way than many journalists.

Walk me through a typical day-to-day for you right now.

Every day is different, which is both fun and frustrating. I work from home and recently bought my dream cabin in upstate New York, so my physical environment is aces. I'm juggling a number of different projects right now. The top four are a podcast/radio show, a theatre project, some freelance writing, and a non-profit that supports marginalized artists in roots music. Some days are dedicated to one thing, like editing that week's show, and some days all I can do is hold on for dear life as I make my way through my to-do list. That's when Susanna's organization and efficiency lessons really pay off.

How has your approach to your work changed over the past few years?

I was the editorial director over at the *Bluegrass Situation* for a few years, until we parted ways in mid-2018. I definitely miss having the structure and stability of an anchor gig like that, but being back in the hustle has made me get creative. It's also put my focus more on *Hangin' & Sangin'* and less on freelance writing. With *H&S*, last year, I expanded it to an hour and added an audience for the live recordings. When I moved from Nashville to New York last summer, I made it a ticketed, pre-doors thing paired with a full performance. Audiences really dig it so, when the show moves into the

Bearsville Theater in April, we're putting the interview in what would be the opening act slot ahead of a full set by the artist. I think it's going to be a really wonderful experience for all involved.

What would you like to see more of in music journalism right now?

I wish outlets had the resources to pay writers more so that they could take the time to do a really good job. When I'm prepping for an interview, I dig around and read older ones with the artist and, man, they are bleak. I outright apologized, on behalf of this entire profession, to Larkin Poe once. But I also get it. When you're only making \$40 or \$50 for an album review, you simply can't spend several hours doing a really deep dive.

What would you like to see less of in music journalism right now?

Click bait. It's so transparent and just... gross.

What's one tip that you'd give a music journalist starting out right now?

Always be a fan first... at least internally. Externally, you definitely have to play it cool, but never lose your love of the music. Ever.

What artist or trend are you most interested in right now?

I've long been a singer/songwriter devotee, so seeing Americana get a much brighter spotlight over the past few years is very exciting to me. That community is just brimming with talent, though I'd say that Brandi Carlile, Jason Isbell, and Rhiannon Giddens are our current ambassadors which is about as great as it gets.

What's your favorite part of the job?

Few things beat actually sitting down with an artist for a conversation, especially when it's someone that I can go really deep with on spiritual, political, or creative matters. That's just living my best life, right there. Also,

having an artist's parents track me down to tell me I got a piece more right than anyone ever has is pretty dang great, too. And that has happened a handful of times.

Bonny Light Horseman, "Bright Morning Stars (feat. Justin Vernon)"



What was the best track / video or film / book you've consumed in the past year?

Musically, at the moment, I am desperately in love with the Bonny Light Horseman album, although the new releases from the [Secret Sisters](#), [Brandy Clark](#), and [Indigo Girls](#) are all really fantastic, too. And just to prove that I *do* have a life outside of music, I'll throw in three TV series that I think are exceptional: [When They See Us](#) and [Unbelievable](#) on Netflix, and [Please Like Me](#) on Hulu. That one is older, but I just got hip to it last year.

If you had to point folks to one piece of yours, what would it be and why?

Hmmm... you know, I think it would have to be [a super deep dive](#) I did on Brandi Carlile and the Hanseroth twins for *No Depression* back in 2015. It was the first time anyone had done that with them and they were so grateful to finally have their whole story told.

Anything you want to plug?

My marketing team will be really mad at me if I don't do one more push on [Hangin' & Sangin'](#). As far as I've found, it's the only podcast in the roots music space that combines interviews and performances, so that makes it special, off the bat. And I'm not precious about who I have on, as long as I dig them. They could have a thousand fans or a million. If the songs are good, I'm in.

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