

**Big Whiz Bang**

with Phil Johnson

**Big Whiz Bang!***I Don't Know What The F#ck I'm Doing...*

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[← Filming and Releasing A Comedy and Music DVD](#)**How To Write An Effective Artist Bio That Won't Be Ignored**

April 11, 2014 Phil Johnson



Your artist bio, whether you're a musician, comedian, or any other type of artist, is the most important document in your promotional arsenal. It's most people's first introduction to you. So it really needs to succinctly communicate what you're all about as an artist.

Your artist bio gets put on your website, on flyers, in articles, and quoted in interviews. That's a lot of first impressions for one little document. And in all those they'll use your bio verbatim. Yep, even in magazine articles and such. I've seen my bio used with no changes lots of times.

So instead of a bio that's just fluff on the flyer, let's learn how to write an effective artist bio that will actually bring your potential fans into your world.

I won't lie to you. Writing a good artist bio is no picnic. For being such great communicators, most artists have a really tough time communicating what their art is about. Me included. We spin out songs and bits without necessarily thinking of the underlying themes of everything. And those themes are where you're going to make connections with your audience.

It usually takes me about a week to write a bio. Not spending 8 hours a day on it of course.

You'll be putting it away between some of these steps so your brain can absorb it and you can come back with fresh eyeballs.

Don't be overwhelmed with this process. There are a lot of steps here, but that's only because I'm breaking it down into bite-sized chunks that you should be able to accomplish without feeling too exhausted by the whole thing. Just make sure you actually finish and don't give up halfway through. This is important to your career.

Let's start with some bio "don'ts". Then we'll get into the steps for writing a good one. Check out the examples and see which would make you more interested in experiencing that act.

**Big Bio No-No's****1. Making the bio about your life.**

There are no Ken Burns sepia-toned, slow-panned images of your childhood here. Your bio isn't your life story. Think of it as a biography of your work instead. And even more so as a biography of your current work. It's a picture of what you're doing right now as an artist. And since that will change over time, so will your bio.

*Bad:* Steve started the band in 2004 with his friend Keith from high school. They broke up and then Hector joined the band in 2005 because he had his own van. Yadda yadda yadda...

*Good:* Steve's new album is a dark and achingly funny examination of his emergence from the mental trauma of child abuse.

**2. Proclaiming that you're "like nothing ever seen before!"**

Every artist is a product of their influences and experiences. And you may be combining those influences in new and unique ways. But nobody is doing anything that is completely original. Using the very common, "They sound like no one else in the world!" is a cop out and totally ineffective because that doesn't give your reader anything to latch on to. I'll show you how to go deeper.

*Bad:* Steve's music is completely original and like nothing you've ever heard!

*Good:* Steve's new album features the downhome flavor of classic Zydeco music mixed with the gravitas of an Abraham Lincoln speech and a pristine singing voice that would make Celine Dion crawl into a hole and die.

**3. Writing in the first person.**

Remember how I said press people will often use your bio verbatim? If it's written in the first person, ("I" did this, rather than "He/She" did this) than it's way less likely to be used because they'd actually have to put some work in to rewrite it. We want to make it as easy as possible for it to be used anywhere and everywhere. So write in the 3rd person.

Also, people are far more likely to engage with an artist's work if they hear about it from someone besides the artist. Writing in the 3rd

person turns on that psychological trigger even if the reader logically knows it was written by you.

*Bad:* I'm really funny and will make any audience laugh uproariously.

*Good:* Steve is really funny and will make any audience laugh uproariously.

#### **4. Making it a showcase for your comedy writing skills.**

Comics, obviously, are more guilty of this one. And it makes sense since we're in that mode whenever we sit down to write anything. But the job of your bio isn't to get a laugh. It's to make people interested enough in you and your work to book you, see your show, or buy your stuff. Throwing too many jokes in there smacks on insincerity and undermines your story in this format. Strange, but true. A funny line here and there is fine. But don't turn it into a sitcom script.

*Bad:* Steve's show is awesome when he's not drunk on stage.

*Good:* Steve's show takes you on a journey people with the characters that filled his childhood and taught him how to drink like a man.

#### **5. Tooting your own horn.**

You'd think a promo vehicle like a bio should toot your own horn like someone just cut you off on the freeway. But its real purpose is to turn people onto your work with concrete details instead of hyperbole. Anyone can write they're "the greatest comedian to ever tread the boards!" But no one will believe it and readers are numb to hype like that because of the advertising industry. Ever notice how every show in Las Vegas is "the #1 show in Las Vegas!?"

*Bad:* Steve is a comic genius destined to go down as one of the greats. (Really? Why is he playing this sports bar then?)

*Good:* Steve's material connects with audiences on a gut level, finding a common ground in the types of experiences he's had, but reacting to them in a way that no sane person should.

#### **6. Too long!**

Your bio shouldn't be more than one page printed out. Nobody needs more than that. You'll often find comedy bios that are much shorter, one paragraph maybe. We'll actually be writing 3 different versions for your bio. 50 words, 100 words, and a full page. Each will be useful for different things.

***Ok, with all the no-no's out of the way, let's look at how to write a really great bio that will make people curious enough to look further into your art.***

Marketers use the term "lead generation". A hook to bring new people into your world where you will then impress the crap out of them and they become lifelong fans of your work. Not everyone will. Lead generation is also about filtering out the people who won't like what you do early enough that you don't have to waste time with them and can concentrate on building a tribe that likes what you do.

Not everyone will like what you do. Especially as the entertainment industries fragment into smaller and smaller genres, channels and audiences. Some will have larger potential audiences than others. You might be Brian Regan or you might be Doug Stanhope. You might be Maroon 5 or you might be the Butthole Surfers.

So the job of your bio is to call out to those people who will connect with what you do immediately, and make a few others curious enough to at least check it out.

One of the great fears of every artist going into this process is that defining what their work is about will suddenly trap them into that vein forever and ever. I feel the same way every time I do it. But it's not true. You're going to grow and change as an artist. And this bio will change with you. Chances are there will still be some through line to your work, but it will definitely change over time. Your bio reflects only where you are right now as an artist. Not in the past and not in the future.

In the following steps, when I say, "write down", I mean that. Don't just think about this stuff and then try to whip out a bio in one shot. You need to actually write down all this preliminary material so you can use it as a reference.

**Step 1: For each of your current songs or bits, write a short paragraph (we're talking 3-4 sentences here) of what it's about. Insights into your work.**

Don't cop out with "It is what it is, man. The people will read their own meaning into it." No listener has the time to do that now. There's too much art out there to experience. It's not like when you bought a new album and then listened to it 50 times and really dug into it. People are lightly surfing new stuff and you need to hook them in with something intriguing first. They'll still derive their own meaning from it if they need to.

And you may start to feel pretentious when digging underneath the material to find the deeper meanings. That bit about farting for the first time around your girlfriend isn't about farting. It's about the stages of commitment and how comfortable you are around someone.

(Seriously though, I've heard that premise a billion times...)

My friend Tanyalee Davis has an amazing bit about shitting her pants just before she had to go on stage for a gig. Not a subject I'd normally sit down to hear about. But the bit is absolutely hilarious and she connects you deep to her feelings of insecurity and "now what the hell do I do?" You can't help but be engaged. You cringe and picture yourself in the same situation and are amazed at the way she pulls out of it. It's not a story about shitting her pants. It's a story about overcoming shitting your pants and then having to stand in front of a room full of people to talk about it.

As you start writing about your bits and songs, you may find that your insights are getting really long. That's fine. As my mentor, [Tim Sweeney](#), says.. You might be an author. Write a book.

**Step 2: Write down your top 8 influences. The artists you love.**

They don't necessarily have to be in the same art field as you either. Maybe you're a comic that is inspired by Bill Burr. Or maybe a Kandinsky painting makes you want to write comedy. Maybe you're a music artist that loves the Dead Kennedys. Or maybe watching

Peyton Manning makes you want to write songs.

### **Step 3: Write down what about each of those artists influences your work.**

This step is extremely important. Just throwing out the names of your influences could be a turnoff to anyone that isn't a fan of those people. But in specifying what you like about them, you'll grab people on that same wavelength.

It could be Bill Burr's uncompromising look at the battle of the sexes. Kandinsky's bright colors. The morbid humor and sociopolitical leanings of the Dead Kennedys. Whatever Peyton Manning does... Sorry, I'm not much of a football guy.

Again, saying you're influenced by the Dead Kennedys would be a turnoff to anyone who doesn't like punk rock or just doesn't know them and is turned off by the name. However when you say you're influenced by their political leanings you'll capture the interest of someone who's into that angle.

Concentrate on finding what each of those artists have contributed to your work. For me, it would be something like this:

Eddie Izzard: The unexpected, anthropomorphic act outs.

Butch Walker: The wry humor and timelessness of his melodies.

Walt Disney: A respect and nostalgia for the past while still pushing towards the future.

It doesn't have to be anything long. Just pinpoint what you're drawing from each of those influences. Do all eight even though you won't use all of them in the bio.

### **Step 4: Jot down your big achievements/awards/credits.**

Make a quick note of your biggest career achievements. This is honestly the least important stuff in your bio. Comics get really hooked on this stuff for some reason. It's very useful for gaining credibility in the eyes of the reader, but not really for bringing them into your world.

If you don't have any credits or awards that are noteworthy, don't sweat it. Just skip this part. You can update it later with that stuff when it comes. Keep them relevant to your work.

Beside each item, mark down whether you think anyone else gives a crap about it. It's all important to you. But mentioning a lame credit makes it even more apparent that you don't have a big credit than just saying nothing at all.

You may also want to include a very short stats section of your bio that includes online play stats, follower numbers, product endorsements, number of albums sold, etc. So make notes on those things so you have them available. Honestly, that stuff makes very little difference to your potential fans. But industry people like to see numbers.

*Good:* Appeared on David Letterman

*Bad:* Appeared on Stucky's Comedy Hoedown on the community access channel

*Good:* Grammy winner

*Bad:* Winner of the Pizza Depot Battle of the Bands

*Good:* Has millions of YouTube views

*Bad:* Has thousands of YouTube views

*Side note:* If your current work is going to be marketed to a really specific niche then you can use credits that apply to that niche. Winning the W. Van Alan Clark Jr National Sportsmanship Trophy for sailing won't mean much to your average audience. But if your whole album is songs about sailing, it will mean a lot. In cases like this, you may end up writing a general bio and a specialized bio for those niche target markets.

### **Step 5: Put it all away and get some sleep.**

Give your brain a little away time so it can ponder all the dark and light you just dug up on your own work. Come back to it the next day with new eyes. You'll start to see some of the common themes that pop up in your work.

### **Step 6: Jot down a couple of notes, nothing in depth, about the common themes of your work.**

Do relationships keep coming up? Political stuff? Stories of your traumatic childhood? race issues? What about the feel of your work? Happy or sad? High energy or low?

Something that works for me, and I have no idea if it will work for you... Think of your art in terms of colors. Is it muted earth tones? Gritty blacks and grays? Brightly colored and cartoonish? In case your wondering, my act is the latter.

*Side note:* Thinking of your work as a color scheme can also help with your branding in other areas. Everything from what you wear on stage to the colors you use on your website.

### **Step 7: Using quotes.**

A couple good quotes will lend some energy to your bio. If you've got a couple good press quotes, keep those handy for insertion where they make sense. If they don't make sense within the bio, you might just pop one on the top and another at the bottom.

Don't have any press quotes? Quote yourself then. You can take one of the descriptive statements about your work, change it to first person and throw some quotes around it. The purpose is to lend some verbal, conversational energy to the bio.

### **Step 8: Time for the dreaded first draft.**

Now we get into actually writing something. Don't worry about getting it perfect on the first try. Just like working out the details of a song or bit, your bio doesn't come in one single wave of genius.

- You need to write in article format. Important general info in the first part, deeper info in the second part, and a summation in the third part. We're looking at 3-4 paragraphs here. It's a format that the press has perfected for hundreds of years to get a maximum of information into your eyeballs quickly. Plus, of course, that makes it easier for them to just print exactly what you gave them.

- Don't forget to write in 3rd person.
- Paragraph 1 – A broad overview of the general theme of your work plus a quick mention of your achievements/credits if any.
- Paragraph 2 (optional) – Write about your influences and what they contribute to your work. You investigated 8 of them in your preliminary writing. For this just pick out the 2 or 3 that most strongly resonate with your current work. This paragraph is optional. While picking through your influences will help you find your themes, you still may not want to put them into your bio. Totally up to you.
- Paragraph 3 – Write about the bits or songs on your current album or in your current show. This is where you dig into those insights and give them 3 or 4 bite-sized insights that reinforce the themes you presented at the beginning. This can be split into two paragraphs if it gets too long. Or you may be talking about two sides of an issue that can be split into separate paragraphs.

*Side note:* Does all your material have to work with the theme? No, it doesn't. If you look at someone like Louis CK, he has some main themes that glue the show together, but he'll do a few off-theme things as well. The flip side is someone like Christopher Titus who writes a themed show from top to bottom.

Again, you're not trapped in your themes here. Make the story cohesive and then let it evolve over time.

- Paragraph 4 – This is the roundup portion and your last chance at pulling that reader in. A quick summary of the themes and how they apply to your overall vision of your work.

-Section 5 – If you're going to include a list of stats [like this](#), put it in a section after your last paragraph. It's just data that industry types like to see.

Now, put it away and go do something else. Come back to it the next day for some editing and review.

### **Step 9: Editing and Review.**

Now that you've had some time away from it, you'll be able to look at your first draft with fresh eyes. Time for your first rewrite. Here are some things to ask yourself while you're editing.

- Is it coherent? As a music artist or comedian, you're certainly adept at writing within your discipline. But prose may be a new world for you.
- Could you swap out your name with someone else's and have it read the same? I hope not. If your statements are too general or full of hype, they won't connect with anyone because they could apply to anybody. "They rock hard!" should apply to any good rock band. "He bowls and audience over with killer jokes" is literally your job description as a comedian. Use the stuff that sets you apart from others.
- Are you trying to make too many points? Remember, you want to center in on one or two themes and explain how your art works within them. Feel free to work outside them as well. Just leave that stuff out of the bio until new themes arise.
- Are you including things that people who don't know you yet don't care about? The brand of guitar you play or the sitcom producer you once did some writing with will be plenty interesting to someone already in your tribe. Someone who's new to your world doesn't care yet.

### **Step 10: Get some other eyeballs on it.**

As an artist, we're always too close to our work to have a truly objective view of it. So it's time to have some other people look at your bio.

- Find a few people who are familiar with your current work and ask them to give it a read and comment on it. Both fans and your peers in the artistic community are good for this. Do they see those same aspects of your influences in your work? Do they see that theme at work in your stuff? Really, does it sound like you? If they read it and it either sounds like someone else, or sounds like everyone else, go back to the drawing board.

If they're seeing something different in your work, maybe you missed a cool theme they're picking up on. Or maybe it's a different wording of the same thing. Maybe they're not seeing that punk rock influence in your wispy singer-songwriter material. Compared yourself to Robin Williams and your fans are saying Stephen Wright instead?

There's one of two things happening here... You could really want to be about those things you wrote in your bio draft, but aren't yet. Maybe you wrote a mission statement instead and can work towards those ideas. Or you're perfectly happy doing what you're doing and just didn't explain it in a way that jives with the way your audience is viewing you. In that case go back and write the bio again, this time using the feedback of your audience.

- Find a couple people who aren't familiar with your work at all and let them read it. You'll get different information here. Does it entice them to want to see your show or listen to your music? Does it sound generic? (Root out and destroy the hype!) You may even pick up a few new fans in the step.

### **Step 11: More editing.**

Take all that feedback from the people that read it and do another rewrite. You may have gotten some feedback that you totally don't agree with. That's fine. You don't have to use all of it. But if you see a trend of the same comments from different people, that's something you may want to implement.

You might repeat steps 9 and 10 a couple of times until you've got a version you really like. I usually do at least 4 or 5 rewrites on my bios.

### **Step 12: Creating alternate bios.**

Outside of the press, most people using your bio will need a shorter one. So it's time to compress that puppy down to 50- and 100-word versions.

When I write the long bio, I try to create the first paragraph to stand on its own as a bio 50 word bio. If you've done that, part of your

work here is done. Just be sure that it makes sense on its own.

Here's a boo-boo in one of my own bios. Check this out...

*Being human is a constant struggle between defining ourselves as individuals and trying to fit in with "the group"...*

*Phil Johnson, who has appeared at the Sundance Film Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, uses comedy and music to dissect that dilemma in his own life and others.*

That's the first two little bits of the bio. The problem is a lot of bookers will just take the part that starts with my name and use that. So the reference to "dissect that dilemma" makes absolutely no sense because they didn't grab the first line.

And nobody proofreads apparently.

Instead, I changed it to this:

*Being human is a constant struggle between defining ourselves as individuals and trying to fit in with "the group"...*

*Phil Johnson, who has appeared at the Sundance Film Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, uses comedy and music to dissect the dilemma of individuality vs. acceptance in his own life and others.*

I had to restate it, but that at least makes sense on a poster. Now if I could just get people to stop using the old version...

Now you need that little halfway point of the 100 word bio. I usually take the first paragraph that I used in the 50-word bio and last paragraph of the long version as a starting point. A little quick editing and you should have a 100-word bio that makes sense.

As mentioned before, you may also want to do other versions for targeted niche groups you're marketing to. Maybe a different bio for corporate or college gigs versus club gigs. If you're marketing yourself to particular type of charities or hobby organizations, write a bio specifically for them.

It seems like a ton of work. But you should be able to use your basic 4-paragraph bio as a starting point. Then slip in some different credits or reference different bits or songs in the middle. It's still your work, so it won't be a huge difference except for the some wording.

And there you have it! A bio that will actually communicate for you rather than just acting as some fluff for the flyer.

Your art is going to evolve which means your bio will too. Revisit it every 4-6 months and see if it still makes sense with what you're doing now. If not, give it a tweak.

You can read some more insights on the artist bio writing process in [this article](#) and [this one](#). But [avoid information overload](#) and just get started.

Got questions? Leave me a comment below and I'll be happy to answer them as best I can.

Want some personal help from me to write your bio? [Contact me](#) and we'll get you figured out.

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