



J'na Jefferson Interview

Todd L. Burns 10 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.

I sent J'na Jefferson interview questions in January of this year, and we agreed to wait to publish this interview in April. J'na was freelance at the time, and the thinking was that she might have gotten a regular gig by then. I'm happy to report that J'na did get something: As of two weeks ago, she's now a writer over at The Root. (She's also available for more freelance writing, just so you know.) So while this interview may read a tiny bit dated, I think it's also an example of manifesting your dreams into reality.

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

To start at the very beginning, I've been reading and writing since I was about three years old. These have always been "my things." I was basically ripping and running through books, magazines, newspapers at a very young age, eventually getting second grade-level Easy Reader books in Kindergarten, because I was moving through those baby-ass books too quickly.

My interest in music was also sparked at a very young age. My dad was a deejay, primarily house/Motown/R&B, so I grew up watching him spin on his turntables in our basement and learning about musicians who were decades before my time. Additionally, my older brother is on the spectrum, and most children on the spectrum respond and communicate strongly to specific stimuli. His stimuli of choice was hip-hop music (namely Jay-Z). Lastly, growing up in a predominantly white town on the Jersey Shore in the early-2000s gave way to my long-term affinity for pop music and other genres (I will go to bat for Britney Spears as long as I have air in my lungs).

Throughout my grade school years, I was in accelerated English and creative writing

courses. I ultimately decided I wanted to be a journalist/writer in the fourth grade after watching a reporter conducting an on-the-street interview near my mom's office on Pearl Street in Manhattan. The ultimate dream was to become a reporter for *MTV News* like Sway, Kennedy and SuChin Pak, so I basically was locked into music and entertainment since then.

I was an entertainment reporter for my middle school newspaper, and I revitalized my then-defunct high school newspaper during my senior year. When I told my mother I wanted to go to college to study "Journalism or Dance," she told me she wasn't "paying that sort of money" for me to be a dancer, so I studied Journalism and Digital Media at Rider University from 2011 until 2015 (full disclosure: I'm a damn good dancer, but now that I'm older, I'm aware that dance is even more unpredictable and fleeting than journalism).

Midway through my sophomore year at Rider, I decided I wanted to be the black Tina Fey. While I still studied Journalism and had a music blog of my own, I was dead set on becoming a television and comedy writer. I even got an internship after undergrad ended at *College Humor*. However, around the second month of that gig, I was getting more and more into journalism again and remembering those *MTV News/Swaydreams*. So, I realigned, refocused, and applied for as many internships in music journalism as humanly possible.

Shout out to [Adelle Platon](#) for giving me a shot at *VIBE* in 2015, and shout out to me for checking my spam folder in my email, for if I hadn't, I wouldn't have seen that she wanted to speak to me for a potential interview for about a week before I responded (apparently a lot of her emails were going to spam during this time!). After heading into New York City the next day, I met with Adelle, and I didn't even get back home to Jersey on the train before getting her "You're hired and start on Tuesday!" email. I interned at *VIBE* from September until December 2015, then was in freelancer and permalancer limbo for two years before officially being hired as a staff writer in 2018. During that stage, I wrote for a few other publications like *Billboard*, *Paper*, and a few news posts for *XXL*.

I was laid off from *VIBE* in September 2019, so I didn't choose my current full-time freelancer life, it chose me. I'm actively looking for full-time gigs at publications, brands, and labels, but if I'm going to be a freelancer, "I'mma make it look sexy" (word to Kendrick Lamar). Currently, I'm freelancing for a few splendid places (*Billboard*, *The Recording Academy*, *Uproxx*, a few *Medium* platforms, and more), and also doing some on-camera

moderating and interviewing for Yahoo's *BUILD Series*. If anything, I truly enjoy the freedom freelancing has given me to step outside of one lane, and to be out of a not-so-great situation at my former publication. I am still hoping to become like Sway one day.

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

Besides the magnificent and encouraging Adelle Platon (who is now in sunny California writing for Netflix and still answers whenever I hit her up), I have to give a heaping helping of praise to the excellent Stacy-Ann Ellis. Stacy was one of my editors at *VIBE*, and during our time there, she really did make me a better writer (I think she is one of the best writers in this industry). She taught me to not be afraid of adding color to my work and using my voice, which, I admit, was a bit robotic in the beginning. She was also a shoulder to cry on when I was going through not-so-great freelance/permalance/full-time situations, ultimately letting me know that it's okay to be your own boss, and to go where I was wanted and appreciated in the media industry. I will truly always be grateful for everything I learned from her.

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

I've become more concrete in the pieces I want to pursue. When I was first starting in music journalism, I was dead set on proving I knew everything about hip-hop specifically (which I don't), trying to get the hottest rappers to do a feature with me, writing about artists and projects that didn't matter to me outside of the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Now, especially as a freelancer, I'm trying to focus on the pieces that really speak to my interests as an all genre-listening, intersectional feminist, 26-year-old black woman from the Jersey Shore, and that set my passion for this art form ablaze. Hopefully, the pieces that I work on say something to the reader as well. I'm a firm believer that if you're passionate about the work you're doing, it will resonate a lot stronger with those who are meant to feel it, and that's been my intention for the past few years.

Where do you see music journalism headed?

If we continue to put the wrong people in power who don't appear to care about their workers, their happiness, their longevity, or their livelihood, we're in for a bit of a sticky situation. If media corporations keep putting power over principle and making decisions that in no way, shape, or form benefit the publication or those who work for them—

ultimately treating them as bodies to fill a room—we're in for a bit of a sticky situation.

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

More access to artists of all genres for music journalists of color AND LGBTQ writers. I know a few black journalists (myself included) who can and will write about pop music, yet it seems that we're relegated to hip-hop or R&B, while white-cis male and female music journalists can write about all genres. If you're interested and capable in writing about a specific artist or genre, you should have that opportunity regardless of the color of your skin, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Also, we need better wages and a bit more stability for full-time writers, as well as fairer rates and **TIMELY** payments for freelancers. (I'm hoping and praying that I won't be full-time freelancing for much longer, but in the meantime, mama's gotta eat.)

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

A few things. Twitter egotism is a big one. Contrary to popular belief, a big social media following is not indicative of superior skill, and some people really let that little bit of Twitter fame get to their heads. (That's why the mute button exists.) Editors hire certain people and enlist certain freelancers knowing that their following is going to bring clicks, but in most cases, they're not the strongest writers. (I hear stories!) I know we're all about "branding" in the Digital Age, but social media is really deceptive.

I'm also really hoping we can stop the artist/friend of artist interviews. I didn't study to become a journalist so that I could read an interview conducted by Frank Ocean's *Blonded Radio* co-hosts about his skin care routine, I studied to one day interview artists like Frank Ocean about his music. (He has lovely skin though.)

Lastly, I've also seen a lot of first-person accounts during artist features, and not just in the intros while setting the scene. This goes back to the egotism I suppose, but *it's not about us*.

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

RUN! Just joking. I would say to really be concrete in what you're hoping to accomplish in this field, because it makes it easier to get by. What are your plans in five years as a journalist? What sort of journalist do you want to be? Do you want to be an editor? What

are the things you'd love to improve upon? Do you think you'll pivot? What will you pivot to?

What's one thing you'd like to see more of from editors, in general?

Personally, I'd like to know the reasoning behind why certain pitches get rejected, in order for me to better myself and my ideas for the next time I pitch that specific publication. We know rejection stings, and being left on "read" when you're jazzed about a pitch stings even worse, but the idea of growth and development is something that I really value in this field. I can't get better if I don't know what needs improvement.



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

I think that this is going to be Yebba's year. She is a superior talent and I think she's going to blow up in 2020.

What's your favorite part of the job?

I love being able to humanize those who are seen as these otherworldly beings. I like carving out an actual person underneath a persona and getting to the core of who they are.

I'm also a huge research nerd and use that skill to ask deep questions. Nothing feels better to me than someone saying, "That was a good question," or having them pause for a bit to really think and reflect on the question asked.



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

Personally, Brittany Howard's debut solo album *Jaime* really struck a chord with me. I've been super interested in artist narratives and features more than usual lately, and knowing her story and listening to the way she was able to convey it was very moving to me. I cannot listen to "Short and Sweet" without crying, and I can't remember the last time a song from a recent album made me that emotional.

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

This is like picking a favorite child, but I think it would have to be the deep dive I did into why female rappers are often cast out on music festival bills/why there (was) one female rapper at a time for a long time. I wrote this in 2017 for *VIBE* after one of my editors examined that Rolling Loud Fest (before it was super popular) had maybe two female artists on the bill out of over 50 acts. I went deep into hip-hop festival archives, used studies and

numbers to prove my point, and interviewed rapper Kari Faux about these issues. In the years following, Rolling Loud has had more and more women on the bill. That was the catalyst for the female rapper pieces that have really become a staple in my portfolio, and it also set the tone for me to really start writing about feminism, equality, disenfranchised individuals in music, culture and society in general.

Anything you want to plug?

My portfolio, jnajefferson.com, is the best indicator of what I bring to this industry. My other favorite article children are featured on there, so definitely give it a click. I'm also on Twitter- [@jnajefferson](https://twitter.com/jnajefferson). Please don't let my lack of a blue check deter you from keeping up with me. I share my writing, crack jokes and praise Beyoncé.

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