

Rocking Writing Practices at Waiting Room Records

Cristina Sanchez-Martin

Through the Illinois State University Writing Program's Professional Literacies Project, Cristina Sanchez-Martin talks with Jared Alcorn, owner of Waiting Room Records in Uptown Normal, about his writing practices as a record store owner. They discuss various tools and modalities used in his writing, as well as research methods used to ensure he's reaching his community effectively.

CRISTINA: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? So, who you are, where you work, what's your job title?

JARED: Yeah, my name is Jared Alcorn and I own Waiting Room Records in Uptown Normal. I'm the owner and manager there.

CRISTINA: And for how long have you been working at Waiting Room?

JARED: Let's see, this summer it will be 13 years.



Figure 1: Waiting Room Records logo.

CRISTINA: Wow, that's impressive. So, what does your work involve?

JARED: A lot more than when I started. My job now entails ordering from various different vendors that we have, invoicing, I'm also the head accountant. I do all the purchasing for used stock coming in. I also make house calls for those things; I'm always out and about doing that. I'm the janitor (laughs). I do all the online packing orders and stuff like that when all those invoices come through. We do a lot of online shipping so that's part of it. Sometimes I feel like I'm just in email jail some days. I'm just answering emails for hours. That part is not a lot of fun, but. . .

CRISTINA: It's necessary?

JARED: Yeah, very necessary.

CRISTINA: Email jail. I like it.

JARED: Yeah (laughs).

CRISTINA: Wow, so it sounds like a very diverse, very complex job. Cause you do all these different things. So how many people work with you? And what are their roles?

JARED: It changes from time to time. We have one full time volunteer and then I have a couple of part time volunteers. And then I have usually every semester I have an intern. The head volunteer, his job primarily is to assist me on things that I might need. And then his other things are making sure that our items are getting listed correctly and on the correct online sites for sale. And then from time to time we have daily online promotions. I'll go over to him and be like, "hey, promote this, these sites, or these channels." And then he does a lot of artwork for the store as well. And then right now our intern as of last semester, her job was social media captain. And she was in charge of all of our promotions and things like that. She set up when we had the *Stranger Things* listening party, she set that up. She did a lot of work for us for record store day; trying to keep the public up to date with our stock as it was flowing throughout the day so people in line could make adjustments with what they needed.

CRISTINA: So, it sounds like they do a lot of writing as well.

JARED: Yes, very much.

CRISTINA: So, for your job, what types of writing do you do on a day-to-day basis?

JARED: Well, there's email jail. So I'm writing emails all day long. And those are usually to vendors or responding to questions people have on our online

sites or even through social media like “hey do you have this in stock?” “Yes.” If they have very specific questions on the color of a record or something like that, I can help them out with that. We’re part of an independent record store coalition and sometimes there’s questions we have to get answered through there. And then every day I have at least 40 vendors that are sending me information that I have to read and sometimes respond to or do data entry. That’s most of it, I’m just typing stuff into our database all day long.

CRISTINA: And what tools do you use to communicate to do those types of writing?

JARED: Well there’s regular email. We have multiple accounts that I try to follow through on. We use social media, so Facebook, and Twitter, Instagram, things like that. Also, everything in my store has a description so we’re writing descriptions of every release. We don’t necessarily write all of them, but I do check them. Usually when we get it, it might just be a normal paragraph of a band but I like to highlight and capitalize things that might stick out to people. Especially bands if it’s like, “sounds like this band,” I’ll highlight that band so people’s eyes will catch that first and maybe be more interested in reading the rest of it. That’s about it.

CRISTINA: I’m wondering, do you use the computer, or a laptop that you have in the Waiting Room or maybe do you use your own phone to do these types of writing?

JARED: The interns and volunteers use their phones. I’m getting older so I want to put my phone down way more. I’m the one that does most of the actual emailing and what not. And then for the online stuff for Facebook and the social media, I usually set them on it, they’re quicker about it.

CRISTINA: How about Instagram and the videos that you post on Instagram and Facebook, what do you use to record those?

JARED: Phones, usually.

CRISTINA: So, you’ve talked about your social media presence already, your interns do most of the work, although you’re the one responding to questions and comments by your customers, how did you decide to do Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook? And why did you decide to use those types of social media?

JARED: At the moment, those are the most successful and quickest ways that we know to get to people. I do change what we’re gonna put on either/or. So, I know for our demographics, if I’m gonna take a photo of some new releases, I know that this release might be a little bit more curated towards an older demographic so I’ll probably put it on Facebook vs. Instagram. But if

I'm gonna shoot something for our 20-somethings or what not, I'll probably put that on Instagram and then Facebook, but it will definitely be shot towards Instagram more. I don't want to waste time and just promote to air, so I want to make sure it goes to the correct people that will follow through.

CRISTINA: So, there is a purpose and there is a reason why you choose either Facebook first, Instagram first, or both.

JARED: Yep. And with Twitter, both accounts are linked to it, so whatever I post, it automatically goes to that.

CRISTINA: We also saw that you're the author of some of the blog posts on the website: how do you go about writing them? Or how do you decide to write about those specific topics?

JARED: Usually it's a part of some sort of promotion we're doing with labels or bands or for our coalition I was speaking about. We have certain titles that are put into programming every month that we are supposed to highlight in certain ways. They'll send us web banners, we'll put them up, and I usually try to throw in the description of the album. Or if it's something that's gonna be close by—we do a lot of work with the Castle Theatre—I'll try to highlight some of the bands they are bringing in if it corresponds with an album coming out or not.

CRISTINA: Do you do a lot of research before writing the posts and while you're writing the posts?

JARED: Sometimes, yeah. Most of the time that I do research on any sort of thing is for interviews with GLT. Every now and then they have a segment called "What's in your Turntable?" and, if I'm going to be speaking, I want to have some sort of an idea of what I'm talking about, so I'll sit down and write out kind of an outline of what I'm going to say. That way it makes it easier when doing an interview to kind of follow. I'm pretty good at changing course really quick, and I don't want to do that. I want to stay focused, and writing an outline really helps out.

CRISTINA: Do you know the bands and the albums that you're writing for? Or do you have to maybe listen to the album a lot of times before writing the post? What else do you have to do before writing the post?

JARED: Sometimes there's kind of a snippet the label wants us to say, so, honestly, I'll cut and paste it, but if it's something we're promoting. I try to find relevant things. You know, like this band's touring now, new album out now—I try to link it to something else that's important. Sometimes if we want people to read some interesting articles, we'll highlight it. There was

an article not too long ago about the Riot Grrrl movement, and we had just unknowingly ordered a bunch of great Riot Grrrl stuff, so we're like, "hey check it out we just got this, and here's a link to an amazing article that will explain all these bands and why they are important."

CRISTINA: You said that you work with the Castle Theatre and the Independent Record Store coalition. Do you feel like those bodies control your writing sometimes, or they have some influence on your writing?

JARED: Not necessarily. Sometimes you have to say specific wordage on specific things. For instance, when Record Store Day comes around, there are bands that put stuff out on Record Store Day, but they are not actual Record Store Day pieces, so you have to be very careful how you word those things. I honestly don't want to confuse a customer, and that can easily happen if you don't phrase things correctly. And so, if it's something like that, something that's really important, or if there's a color variant or some sort of pressing variant that's out there, I want to make sure that I word it correctly so you know, "oh you're buying the white vinyl version vs. the black vinyl version, or this one's some sort of rainbow color, or whatever." I want to make sure that people can see the difference between the two.

CRISTINA: And so, they know what they might potentially buy.

JARED: Exactly.

CRISTINA: You've talked about record store day, so do you do special types of writing for those events? And if yes, what are those types of writing that you do?

JARED: Usually we do a lot of heavy flyering for that. And that could be online or actual physical going out and stapling it to a wall. We kind of try to highlight some of the things that we're gonna do. It's like looking at a flyer for a concert or something like that. I don't want to overflow it with information, but give enough to where you'd want to either check it out or look into it further.

CRISTINA: And how about label for the coffee in the beer bottle?

JARED: So, every year on Record Store Day I've been trying to work with another local business somehow to do something that supports all of us, and Coffeehound came down to us last year and donated hot coffee for everybody in the morning, which is really nice. This year we talked about it and decided to up the ante, I guess, and they made a limited edition cold brew coffee, and we discussed how it should be promoted and thought it would be better if both of our logos were on there. So, they took an image we had from our

Record Store Day flyer, and we spliced that up and were able to have enough room to say what kind of cold brew coffee it was. We sold out, so it went over well.

CRISTINA: Yeah, it was really cool. And the coffee was really good, too. So, who designed the label?

JARED: That one was Trevor.

CRISTINA: The intern?

JARED: He's the full-time volunteer.

CRISTINA: Cool! So, how did you come up with your album inventory? What albums get picked, and which ones don't, and why?

JARED: I've always wanted my store to be probably bigger and better than it can be. I don't want to hone in on one particular genre. I'd like at least to have the best of every single genre. So, anybody can come in and be semi-happy with finding something. I tell a lot of people that we have classical and metal and everything in between. My shop isn't big enough to do what I want to do, and we might not have the people power to pick up certain genres, but even with things like classical, it doesn't move very well, but then 6 months later there's a huge dent taken out of it, so I'm like, "oh, I gotta hunt more down and find some more for people." I'd like to get better with every genre, but I try to build it up where I can. When it comes to used stock, you're kind of stuck with whatever the town is bringing you. When it's new, I can kind of curate it a little better for what I need. But for what does come in and what doesn't, sometimes that just history. So, I could hear a lot about a band, and I'll bring a bunch in, and if it doesn't sell very well, I might not be so keen on bringing it in next time. Or sometimes it's the opposite—we'll sell a ton, but music changes so fast that 3 years from now that band could not be relevant anymore. That's happened a lot more than usual where I'll order heavy stock thinking it's gonna sell. That or it gets bad reviews, which hurts as well. It's always a game of checks and balances. Try it out and see what happens. I'd rather, I guess, get rid of something than have to get more, but I also want people to come in and have the thing that they're looking for.

CRISTINA: Because you never know.

JARED: You never, ever know. I could never, ever figure it out. There's never gonna be a day where I'm like, "I nailed it. Got it. Figured it out."

CRISTINA: And you mentioned that you start hearing about a band a lot, for example, how does that happen? Do you listen to radio programs? Do you go online? Do you read blogs? Podcasts?

JARED: I don't have time to do most of that, but a lot of it comes from email jail where vendors will be soliciting information, and I kind of read their . . . well they just call it a "one sheet." It's one piece of paper that explains everything it can about the album. You know, give you song tracks and some sort of biography of the band and pictures and then maybe tour support. Basically, as much as they can to help me understand why I should be paying them for it. And then I have to take that information and hand it over to the customer so they can also understand. Some labels will send us play copies of records. That's usually the best way because I can put it on and see if anyone cares, or, if I like it a lot, I'm like, "I think I can help some people find this record."

CRISTINA: So, like if you're in the store and you're playing this record that you got from the label, do you look at the customer's reactions and see how they feel about that specific album or maybe you get questions about it, how does that work?

JARED: Sometimes I feel like it doesn't happen as much as it used to, but sometimes people will come up and talk to me about the record. I like that the most because we can interact and have a discussion about what we are listening to. But sometimes I think that people just go, "what's this?" I assume they type something on their phone and walk out. Maybe they're going to do their own research, which is totally fine. But if I can see, sometimes it's almost like being a DJ, if there's a lot of people in the store, and I'm playing something and kind of gauging the room and seeing, "ok, no one is into this." If I have a bunch of—not that they don't listen to this—but if I have a bunch of moms and dads come in, I'm not gonna be blasting metal. Unless they don't seem to be bothered by it, then I'll turn it up. But if I see that they are getting a little agitated, I'll switch it up. And that's just DJing; you got to figure out what people are doing. But at the same time, I try to know my customers really well, like personally. I like to know their names and things like that. That helps me figure out what kind of music they listen to. So, if I've listened to some of those promos and they come in, I can be like, "hey I've got something I want you to hear," and then I can play it and if they like that, I can find other things for them and what not.

CRISTINA: That's really cool. So, do you have a background in DJing?

JARED: No. Not at all. I've DJed twice in my life. And then every day at the shop.

CRISTINA: How about international albums? Do you get anything from outside of the US?

JARED: We do get a lot of imports. We get a lot of imports for jazz and electronic music. When it comes to full on international music, that's one genre I'd really like to do better with, but my knowledge on it is very thin. And then there's so much that I wouldn't even know where to begin. But I try to, if people are looking for it, I try to sit down with them, and we can figure it out together.

CRISTINA: In our program we are interested in transcultural and translingual genres which are like types of writing that include more than one correct way of speaking English and different varieties of that language, and different languages, so which cultures and languages do you think are represented in your inventory? Including domestic cultures in the US that get represented through music?

JARED: I'm sure we're missing quite a few. I think it would be probably a lot better if we had a wider international section, but even with any genre, we'll have it from all over the world, so if we go back to like metal or punk, I have stuff from all over the world. It's not just bands from the US.

CRISTINA: And electronic, do you get anything from Germany and Italy?

JARED: Yep. Germany, Italy, France, Spain, UK, sometimes there's stuff from Poland. Lots of stuff from the Netherlands.

CRISTINA: What do you get from Spain?

JARED: It could just be pressed in Spain. I've got a few vendors that carry a lot of international music. But it's primarily gonna be just straight international stuff or it will be electronic music. And so basically when it comes to writing, whatever they say, I can find some pinpoints that people might be interested in.

CRISTINA: And you've said that maybe the albums were pressed in a different country, but that doesn't mean that the music is from that country, right?

JARED: Correct. In fact, quite a bit of Capitol Records, that record label, well not just them, but quite a bit of stuff from the major labels is pressed in Mexico, or a lot of CDs are pressed in the Netherlands and shipped here. The new Gorillaz album I'm pretty sure was pressed in the Netherlands and sent over here.

CRISTINA: Very interesting. I wonder how that happens, but that's another conversation. So how about the media of music distribution? What are the preferences of the customers? And your preferences? CD? Vinyl? Cassette? Digital?

JARED: It was a lot easier when I started my store because the only format that people were looking for was CDs, so now it's a little more of a battle of how many CDs and records and cassettes am I ordering of any title. So, I kind of have to split up my money a little bit. And there's gonna be titles where I think we'll never sell and CDs of those, and then I'll never sell any of the records, and people keep asking for the CDs, so I'm like, "aw man." Every band is completely different with that. There's no way to figure it out.

CRISTINA: But all of them are present?

JARED: Yes.

CRISTINA: So, you try to anticipate the customer's reactions and what they are going to buy by deciding I'm going to divide this into this many CDs and these many records? Anything can happen?

JARED: Yeah. A lot of times for cassettes, it comes down to that I don't want to rip my customers off, so maybe with vinyl and cassettes, I might not order it or I might cut down. For instance, there's this band called Gas, and they've been around forever, and they have a new album that's coming out. Well the CD is gonna cost the customer 15.99. No big deal. The record is 60 dollars. That's a huge jump, and 60 dollars is actually the store cost, which means it's gonna be more than that. And I just can't justify charging my customers that much money for anything. Some cassettes if they're like 10 dollars and under, yeah, I can do that. But there's been cassettes with list price of 15–23 dollars for a cassette and I'm like, "no." If they really want it, I'll get it for them, but I just, as a human being, I just don't want someone to like come into my store and be like, "bleh."

CRISTINA: So, you don't think that's ethical?

JARED: For me it's not. I don't like ripping people off, so that would go a lot into what I'm ordering. If the price is too high, then I might cut down on it, or not at all. But unless someone specifically wants it, I'm like, "are you sure? 'Cause here's the price." And then there's also the factor that records are non-returnable. So, if I buy them, they're there. That's it. I'm stuck with them. Cassettes and CDs I can send back for credit.

CRISTINA: So, if they spend 60 dollars on a record, that's on them.

JARED: Yes, and it's out of my store.

CRISTINA: So that leads me to ask you about online shopping. How do you deal with trends of online shopping? Do you embrace them? Or do you negotiate ways to go around them? How does that work?

JARED: A little of both. We do sell online. I'm not opposed to it. I prefer people came into my store, but I know that we don't live in that era anymore. And so instead of hating it, I try to join in with it. We sell on many different sites. We're very meticulous how we list our stuff. We want to make sure you get exactly what our description says, so you're gonna get it and be happy. There's certain standards out there on grading certain things, and we always kind of over grade so we make sure that when people get it they are going to be a little happier. There's some variations you can have with some of the grading, and we just really try to go overboard on it. And usually it makes the customer happy. And then when it comes to regular online selling, we do a lot of mail order. We'll also do mail order for local communities. Like if you live in Champaign and you want something, we'll mail it to you. It's no big deal. And then we'll have some customers, like we have a lot of stuff that's not on the floor, that's in our basement warehouse, and I'll give out our online site information to certain customers and be like, "hey, we have an industrial section and it's very small, but we actually have tons of industrial music, it's just in the basement. We're just not in an area where that's relevant anymore." And I have people come by quite a bit and be like, "hey I saw this on our site," and I'll be like, "cool, but don't buy it on the site. You're here, let me go to the warehouse and get it and then we can bypass fees and tariffs and all that stuff, but you're still buying from a shop and you don't have to worry about anything else." So that's how we can kind of still embrace online and have the local shop at the same time.

CRISTINA: Right. So, it seems like the relationship with the community is important in your business.

JARED: Very.

CRISTINA: Can you tell us a little bit more about why it's so relevant? What is the relationship with the community like?

JARED: It's always been important to me. I didn't realize how important it would be when I started my store until I started the store. When I first started, I didn't really have a lot of stock or money or anything for that matter, and I had members of the community, some people I knew, some people I didn't, come in with boxes of stuff and drop it off and be like, "it's yours, good luck." And when people do that that you don't know, that's pretty huge. That's why we try to make record store day not just all about commerce and stuff like that. It's more about people having fun and hanging out, and that's why there's beer there, and we're gonna start to integrate live bands so people can have fun instead of it being just about the money. I want my store to be more of a place to enjoy than . . . yes, I'm gonna need to pay the rent, but at the same time, it's a nice place for people to meet and hang out and talk.

CRISTINA: So, we call this socialization and it's a part of writing, so when we produce writing we also engage in different interactions with different people and it sounds like you actually want to promote these types of interactions with the community and among different people in the community.

JARED: Very much so. With having the community as well, that's why I try really hard to work with other local businesses. We are all a lot stronger if we work together.

CRISTINA: Yeah, and it works out really well. We enjoy record store day a lot. So, does a small community help an independent business from your experience?

JARED: Yeah, I think so. You're always gonna have the big chains and corporate companies making things, or trying to make things so much easier, but at least for my life, I like going to whatever businesses I'm going to and knowing the person that runs it. Or the person that's working there or something like that. It's just, I don't know, it just feels like you're living in a cool place if you're like, "that's Mary the baker, and I'm buying my food from this actual farmer in town, like I know these people." It just makes living a lot better to me.

CRISTINA: For sure. Can you tell us a little bit about the sorts of writing you did before the Waiting Room and how does that compare to the writing you do now?

JARED: I didn't honestly do a lot because the Internet wasn't as big as it is now, I guess. Before I started my business, I worked at another record store, and the most writing we did, we didn't have like a weekly email blast or anything. It was just descriptions on the bin cards for the bands. And that was very helpful for customers because there was no other way than you having to hunt down a magazine to find a review. This would be the best way to read up on how bands worked. And so that's why I have bin card information. Anytime I go to another record store, if I see that they are doing something really cool or really neat, I'll try to put that in my business as well to see if it helps out.

CRISTINA: Interesting. So, does that mean you go to many other record stores to kind of like gauge what they do?

JARED: I usually go to shop and then while I'm there, I'm like, "oh, I like what they did here, and, "oh this is cool, I like that," and if the owner's there I'll try to talk to them about it, and it could be no big deal to them, but I'm like, "oh I didn't know this." It could be something as simple as, I saw a

display at a record store once and I'm like, "I like how you guys made this 3-D, how did you do it?" and he was like, "you just fold it like this, dummy." But it was still helpful and I started doing it at the shop.

CRISTINA: Genre research. That's what we call research. And finally, what is your favorite band, song, album, anything?

JARED: Dear lord.

CRISTINA: We knew it was gonna be difficult.

JARED: So, my favorite band is Fugazi. And the name of my store is after the song "Waiting Room" by Fugazi. Favorite song, that can change any day. Favorite album, that can change any day. I do have, you know, favorite band is always going to be Fugazi, just kind of how it formed my idea of music in general, and they have really good ideology on how to look at life. But, you know, there's also tons of other bands that I love equally. I'm always gonna love John Coltrane and Albert Ayler and Unwound and Ten Grand. Those are probably my favorites. And if I thought about it, I could name bands for like a half hour, but I'm not gonna do that.

CRISTINA: Well I think that's it. Thank you again for joining us and this wonderful interview, because it was really, really useful.

JARED: Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Cristina Sanchez-Martin loves asking questions, so she tries to do that as much as possible for her job as the Professional Development Coordinator in the Writing Program at Illinois State University.

Frank Macarthy is the Writing Program tech coordinator. Please restart your computer before contacting him with questions (as he has told Cristina to do many times).



Jared Alcorn is the owner and manager of Waiting Room Records.



waiting room
—r-e-c-o-r-d-s—
normal, illinois

