

Through the Grapevine: Writing as a Tool for Non-Profit Musicians

Maddi Kartcheske

In an interview conducted in collaboration with the Illinois State University Writing Program's Outreach Initiative, Maddi Kartcheske talks to Seth Bernard, a Michigan-based musician, about the writing that he uses on a daily basis. Through the course of their conversation, they discuss the writing he uses in nonprofit organizations, music education, and as a public figure on social media.

MADDI: To start, could you please introduce yourself and explain what your job is?

SETH: Yes, my name is Seth Bernard, and I am a musician, educator, and activist, and I'm the founder of the Earthwork Music Collective.

MADDI: Awesome! What kind of writing do you do as part of your work? Not necessarily words or long chunks of writing but any written or visual ways that you communicate.

SETH: Okay, well I use writing a lot, all day long, every day, and as a singer/songwriter I use language coupled with music to convey multidimensional thoughts and emotions and stories. I also communicate with a pretty large network of people on a daily basis, some of which are members of the Earthwork Collective or partners that we work with. I do a lot of after-school music workshops and school assemblies. I'm involved with different advocacy campaigns at any given time, and also, I am a producer, so I am constantly in communication with people. A lot of it is minor details, so I do a lot of texting—just quick yes or no answers or getting information back

and forth. For example, today, I'm texting with two different people that work with partner organizations that are doing board retreats this weekend: Joe Voss with Creative Many and Caroline Barlowe with Blissfest. I'm also coordinating with my team with the festival that I started, the Earthwork Harvest Gathering, so using language to be very clear and concise about details related to planning and organizing events. I communicate with people constantly relating to gigs, booking, presenting myself and my work to others, looking for sponsorships and funding for different projects that I'm doing. I relate to all kinds of different colleagues: some people that are involved in governance and policy, people that work for larger institutions, lots and lots of musicians. I work with lots and lots of kids too, so I'm constantly modifying the way that I communicate to relate to people and meet them halfway with my understanding of how they like to relate. And that also goes with how I communicate with people. I know that texting is good for me, but sometimes I find that I can only really get ahold of this one person on Instagram, so I'll go over there to get ahold of them, or Facebook Messenger, or email, or especially some of the elders that I work with really appreciate a phone call. And that's more just communicating than writing, but the formatting for the different modes of communications is different and that's something that is changing rapidly, and it's fun for me because I think you get to be creative with it in some ways and sort of develop your own unique way of expressing yourself while maintaining concise functionality.

MADDI: That leads perfectly into the next question! So, the ways that you've found most effective for communicating: was this something that you learned on the fly, or do you have a standardized practice that's worked since the beginning? Maybe talk about that process a little more.

SETH: Yeah, it's definitely been, some of it, learning on the fly. I mean, when I started, I didn't have an email account, and I would book gigs by making phone calls and sending letters back and forth with venues, so it's changed quickly; and in the time that I've come of age and started the Earthwork Collective, the music industry has turned itself upside down, and there was a huge collapse of the record companies right around the time I put out my first album and started the Earthwork Music Collective. Not only have I been figuring out how to communicate in the digital era on the fly, and as someone that didn't grow up with a computer, too—my parents were pretty much Luddites in terms of introducing us to digital technology—but I got a lot of other very valuable tools in terms of writing. My mom was the editor for the local newspaper. She was a real stickler on grammar and spelling, and my dad is a good communicator too, so that was valued in my family; education was valued. That said, entering into the digital era as an independent artist on my own, I definitely learned a lot on the fly, and I

would just ask a lot of questions to friends. And since a lot of elders that helped me actually learn how to play music were in the same boat as I was in terms of how the industry was going to reorganize itself and how to build a website and use email and, y'know, there were chat rooms back in the early days, too, so it's just like: "How do we navigate this?" For me, it's really helped distilling it down to relationships and friendships and how to relate with someone. And if I can figure out how to relate with one person, then we'll have that communication that's open. One of the biggest obstacles for me in upholding my integrity as a communicator is casting too wide of a net because I have a large network and a lot of projects going on, so sometimes it takes me awhile to get back to people, and that can be problematic. That's something that I'm trying to work out between saying "no" more, and managing my time better.

MADDI: So, were there any moments where you had an epiphany about why you were writing in a certain way or where it clicked for you on how to communicate most effectively with clients or networking individuals?

SETH: Hmm, that's a good question! These are all good questions. I think really settling into just being myself more and feeling comfortable presenting myself where I was at and not feeling like I had to—for example, to book a show at a club that may have seemed out of reach—to oversell myself and to make myself seem more grandiose than I was as an artist at the time or to try to use language in a more professional way (my concept of what it would be like to be professional). Getting more experience in communicating with people in different realms helped me realize that I can do both: I can present myself where I'm at and feel proud of it and comfortable with it and not feel like I need to be validated by this one person or this one relationship, because I have taken more time and more years to establish myself as an independent artist and educator. You know, it's like you're entering this big sea, you don't exactly know how things work, and then you develop relationships and allies; and I think, for me, realizing that I could have some fun with it and *that* can be contagious was nice, and that being real and being myself and being friendly can also coexist with being professional and being prompt in getting back to people. And then it helped me have more fun with my work and feel like I can be myself. That's also been part of a relief in realizing how much freedom can come with being an independent artist existing, in some way, outside of the larger industry.

MADDI: Going along with that, what sort of outside bodies (like bosses, organizations, or legal terminology) control the way that you write? You talked a little bit about how you grew into your writing and communication voice, so what dictates that voice?

SETH: Yeah, I think the purpose and the audience. So, what's my intention for writing whatever it is I'm writing, and who's the audience for it? So, if I'm writing my own bio, I might have the bio on my website that people can look at, but if I'm going to do a TED Talk, I'm going to change the bio and it'll be different than if I was doing an acoustic music festival. And I'm thinking about who's going to go to the music festival or if it's going to be something permanent on a website forever; these are considerations that go into my mind. If it's a new relationship with a larger institution—for example, I'm emailing today with a woman who's the Director of Education Programs at the Henry Ford Institute in Detroit; it's a big institution, and they have a lot of resources—but she and I have already met in person and we already have a good rapport and we made each other laugh in Austin, so I have that going into the further communication that we have. I feel I can be a little bit more informal with her and personal, but also, through her, meet other people within her organization and I might use modified language with them. A lot of it is intuitive. A lot of it is going with feeling. I love people and I have a desire to connect with people and understand them, so I let that guide me and that's very helpful. I think, also, I'm an extrovert, but writing is a great way for introverts to communicate and formulate their thoughts outside of the energies of a social construct, and to be more intentional about it. I think there's also an introvert in every extrovert, so it's nice for me to go into that side of myself in solitude and be more thoughtful about the way I use language to relate to people.

MADDI: Could you explain where you fit into the hierarchy of your job (who reports to you, who do you report to), and then how that affects your writing?

SETH: Okay, yeah! Well that's interesting because being a collective, Earthwork Music is a collective, so one of our philosophies is that we're all equals in solidarity with each other. In terms of decision-making, leadership, and the history of the organization, I'm the founder and the director. Ultimately, especially with the Earthwork Harvest Gathering (the big festival that we put on), decisions come through me, but I try to do my best to delegate and empower people so that it all doesn't have to be funneled through me and that there's this sense of shared leadership. Within a certain project that one person is delegated to be the leader of, I would defer to their leadership. That said, I'll work with various non-profit organizations to do work in schools, and that's more of a layered thing. I'm the director of the program that I'm doing, the Artistic Director, but then there's an Executive Director *and* a Director of Youth Operations with one non-profit that I work with, which is SEEDS. They interface with various schools, so on Monday I'm in Rapid City schools; they have their own

principal, and they have a site coordinator for their program. I'm working *for* SEEDS. There are multiple people with the SEEDS organization there, but their leadership is in Traverse City. So, I'm assuming leadership of the Artistic Director role: if there's something that I have to navigate in terms of the school leadership or how to deal with a sensitive situation, sometimes I would defer to the leadership of a child's parents if it's at that level. Some of that stuff is tricky to navigate for me because I don't just have one job where I'm clocking in and out and the leadership is crystal clear. It's exciting because I'm my own boss and ultimately responsible for whether or not most of the things I do succeed or fail. *But* I collaborate with a lot of people and a lot of them are my friends, so that's tricky to navigate in terms of employee/boss dynamics. I really try, like I said, it's one of the founding principles of the organization to do things cooperatively and collaboratively and as a collective to really feel like there's shared ownership, so I don't feel like I'm doing my job as a leader if too much of the power and attention is focused on me.

MADDI: Great! So, how much do you think that mechanics, style, grammar, and spelling affect your daily operations or on a large-scale level?

SETH: Well, I mentioned already that some of this is ingrained in me through my mother, and I was under tight surveillance in terms of all of those things (mechanics and spelling and grammar), which was to my benefit because I started realizing early on, even just applying to colleges, that it's really important to have good technique as a writer. I was really into basketball as a kid—so it's pretty obvious right away, if I wrote a few sentences, it would be pretty obvious to a professional writer whether or not I was educated—just like if I went out on the court, within one minute people would know whether or not I knew the game, if I had any skills, and what parts of my game were not tight. So, it's important to me, and it is something I observe in other people. That said, there's a lot more of a license to be sloppy these days because of so much content. People are oftentimes in a rush, responding quickly. I'm in touch with certain authors and writers who are at the top of their field, but they might be so inundated with email that there's a couple spelling errors or typos in a quick response that they give me. I can navigate that pretty easily, but especially if I don't know the person and we're introduced to each other through writing and not in person, it's really important. And also, it's just like with music, like if I am really sound and I've practiced and I know my skills and I know the neck, it's so much more freeing for me, and I have so many more ways to express myself. So, learning that stuff, the elements of style and everything, it can be boring at first, but then you've gone through this empowerment and you have way more skills, more of a bandwidth.

MADDI: Could you talk about your experience in schooling and the sort of writing that you did, and how that affects the writing that you're doing now outside of an educational setting?

SETH: Man, I had a great English teacher in high school. She let us call her "Rupe," Jackie Ruple was her name. She was so fun, and she was in love with stories and language and novels and writers. She was very skillful at drawing out our interpretation of what we were reading and then helping us come into a heightened awareness of what we were taking in. We read a lot of classics; she helped me understand and appreciate some Shakespeare. Once that channel was open, it was like a lot of other things from that era were accessible, when before it was almost like a foreign language. My high school English teacher really helped me. Then I went to Interlochen as a postgrad, and I mostly did arts education. I did a poetry class with Michael Delp, who's a wonderful poet from Northern Michigan, and I did a lot of writing. He helped guide me in terms of expressing myself with poetry. The Jim Harrison quote that I love about poetry is, "Poetry is the language your soul would speak if you could teach your soul to speak." At first, I was writing stuff that was really kind of demonstrative and over-the-top "poetic," and he was like, "you definitely have the heart of a poet, but try not to be too 'poetic.' Just say how you feel with as few words as possible." It was empowering, but it was also a good critical atmosphere where we were workshopping what each other did, and he was trying to draw out the best of what I could do. And then after that, I took a year off, and I was an independent freelance person. I did a lot of different jobs. I did a job setting up equipment in New York City at all these venues in New York. I was only 19, but I was doing three different things on any given day. I would do songwriting and hang out with songwriters and do a songwriters' circle, which was also outside of institutional training, but it was kind of "in-between schooling" for me, so it informed what I was heading toward. It was a thing where I was the youngest person there, at 19, and I think the oldest guy there was probably 70, but people of all ages and of all experience levels playing a new song for everybody else and bringing one sheet of typed lyrics for everybody to read, and you just had to be open to whatever critiques anyone would have to say. And it had to be a new song, it couldn't be something that was tested. That really helped me hone things in and learn how to edit better. I was coming in with, like, a first draft, and people would be like, "Okay. Edit it. Change this, this, and this. Tighten this up. You're saying the same thing twice in this verse. There's a *lot* more you can do." Then after I was there, I went on tour with the National Theatre for Children, and that was a lot of communication with schools, helping me learn how to be more professional and coordinate things and do logistics efficiently. Then I went to U of M, and I took another poetry class at U of M that was really cool. Then I took theatre, and I studied theatre at Interlochen

as well, and that involved reading a lot of plays and scripts and doing a little bit of writing, too. So that's a whole other can of worms in terms of how writing and language goes. But it was fascinating, and I got to direct a play once, too. So, reading various one-act plays and choosing one to bring to life was a cool way to interact with language. I also had a couple friends who were screenwriters at the time, really getting interested in that, so I got to sort of "be nice" to their process. My best friend at the time was really into writing short films. At U of M, more theatre, and then I started to create my own degree, which was going to combine the performing arts and the studies of ecology and the environment. Then I made my first album, and I got the opportunity to go on tour. I had kinda had that year off between post-grad and college which gave me a thirst for travelling and learning in the world, so I took another year off, and I never went back to U of M, never went back to college. Shortly after that, I started the Earthwork Music and the Harvest Gathering.

MADDI: Our next question deals with the nonprofit SEEDS. So, we know that areas of your life where music specifically does more to reach out into communities rather than just for the act of performing. We read that in your work with SEEDS and through other programs that you do a lot of work with kids and music. Can you tell us a little bit about how writing plays a part in that work?

SETH: Okay, yeah, wow! Well, it's interesting, because right now I just started a new program that's poetry and music. Historically, I've just done a music program, but it's collaborative songwriting. So, it's a lot of experience in using writing to facilitate a group collaboration in a short amount of time. That's been *really* fun. I can briefly describe it. The basic process that I developed that works the best starts with going around the circle and doing a quick intro so people are kind of . . . like an icebreaker/warm up, checking in. And then we go around the circle and everybody names one word or phrase, and I write them all down. And then I recite the words back and have the kids close their eyes so they're hearing the words and visualizing them. Then, we do another round of brainstorming, one word at a time, and usually on the second round the whole group has already sort of formed some sort of a picture of words that connected with each other during the first round. The process sort of subconsciously lends itself to people associating with each other, like, free association with a pattern of words and what they evoke. So, after the second round, we look at all of the lists of words almost like letters on a fridge. What's already here? What can we organize a little bit better? We start drawing lines between words or drawing asterisks next to themes. We recognize the themes, and we can start to talk about a story arc. I try to keep the container really strong and encouraging,

but also encourage democracy. If people want to guide it in a certain way, we vote on it. That turns into creating a song structure: verses, choruses, bridges, different elements of songwriting. That can lead to all kinds of stuff. Sometimes a group really finds their flow and they work together and people aren't as nervous about sharing ideas. Other times, there's a lot of push and pull, so I have to navigate and facilitate it and sometimes make a decision for them. But for the most part, it flows pretty well, they get into the world of their collective imagination and things are moving quickly. It's good because we have a limited time, so I'm kind of guiding them into a flow to prevent it from stagnation. As a songwriter, I know that if I don't have a timeline or a deadline, things can gestate and marinate for a long time. That type of work, right when I'm in the field, when I'm doing the workshops, we're writing the whole time, and I'm trying to get everyone to participate. In that situation, I might ask more questions of someone who's an introvert or is quieter or is maybe not feeling like they're as much a part of things and try to take their ideas seriously. Sometimes if it's a young person, you have poetic license (especially in folk music) to use bad grammar. I try to at least explain that if we're going to use slang and bad grammar, that we're doing it with intention. Writing with the kids, with songwriting, kind of takes care of itself. With poetry, I'm finding that I really have to have a good understanding of where the group is at and have a couple adults in place to take dictation. I'm working with some really young kids right now, and to introduce poetry to a kindergartener is wonderful and magical in some ways. There's one little girl in particular that I'll mention in Mesick (Michigan) that I talked to yesterday. We do a freewrite at the beginning of each period. I'll give them a theme, and then I'll play guitar for three to five minutes, instrumental music while they write. The theme was "if I were a bird." So, "if I were a bird" today, what would I be, what would I do? And her poem was so great, and she just sat there, and thought about it, and then whispered her ideas into the ear of her teacher, and her teacher would write it down and say it back to see if she got it right. She just really took her time, and she wrote a poem! It was really sweet and wonderful, and it really helped me realize that I didn't really have a teacher in place to do that ahead of time. The teacher just knew her and knew that that would be supportive, so that's going to reorganize the way that I work with littler kids now and try to plan ahead to have the right person there to draw out—it's an important thing—a lot of kids are just really, really ready, and all they need is someone to show up to encourage them to be creative and to be artists, to be poets, musicians, songwriters, but if they have a bad experience with it, first of all, it can be tragic. There are a lot of kids who've had a bad experience the first time they tried to learn an instrument or something like that, so I take it really seriously. A lot of times, like I said before, it goes back to relationships being really important. Another

thing that we do with kids, sometimes I'll play a popular song or a really silly song, and I'll ask them to come up with lyrics. So, they're not "writing," but they *are*. It's a way to "trick" them into being songwriters without being "a songwriter," y'know? Maybe I'll ask if any of them are songwriters and nobody will raise their hands, and then we do that, and afterwards I'll say, "we just *all* wrote a song right there." It's not as hard as it seems; it's not a big deal. And that was part of what made me feel empowered as a writer and as an entrepreneur who is an artist but has to write as an independent business person, too. It's just to feel like it's accessible and that I can do it. Does that answer your question?

MADDI: Oh, yeah! Absolutely! So, then, as a performer with a lot of followers on social media, are you especially conscious, in our current troubled political climate, of how what you write impacts people? Can you also give us an example of this?

SETH: Another good question. Yeah, it's . . . the word is very powerful, y'know? At the root of "spelling" is "spell." So, you're casting a spell when you spell things out. It's something that all of us have to do . . . if we spend time on social media, everybody is a spellcaster, and sometimes you wish you hadn't seen stuff, or you see something that brings you down, and makes you want to react to it; and then sometimes, if you act from a *reactive* instead of a *proactive* standpoint, as a writer, you're generating more trouble for yourself and others. I have been trying to learn more about de-escalation in general and creating opportunities for nonviolent communication to take place, and, therefore, greater understanding and empathy to take place. My neighbor, right across the street from the farm where I grew up (he and I grew up together) we don't see eye-to-eye *at all*, politically. We often communicate with each other on the Internet, on Facebook, and he'll sometimes be the first to respond to something that I post, and he'll just use a lot of capital letters and exclamation points. But I know him, and I know that we're friends and we love each other and respect each other. But sometimes we'll really get into it, and I wonder what people think, so I try to . . . it's actually a great opportunity to, I guess, demonstrate how to be . . . and I don't always get it right, but I do take it seriously, being able to create an example of how to disagree with someone respectfully. Not to insult them as a person but to defend my position totally authentically and honestly while showing them respect and actually listening to them—not belittling them. It's so easy to belittle people on social media, and we have way too much shame culture, which has left us feeling very divided and a lot of people feeling very isolated. I also, genuinely, try to be fascinated with people who have a different point of view, and it's an opportunity for me to learn why they hold that position. I try to draw more information out of them and be inquisitive and let them

know that I'm glad that they're sharing what they're sharing, and I don't feel threatened by it, but I *do* want to learn more and ask some clarifying questions. And then sometimes other people will jump in and things escalate again, quickly, and I can't manage everything. Things can get pretty hairy, quickly sometimes, on social media when you're talking about politics and other hot-button issues. I try to be a peacemaker without stifling dialogue. I think that getting into better habits of public discourse is really important right now. Even if it's just in our own neighborhoods, it's absolutely essential, and we have to learn how to do governance at every level. It's very hard to do. Making decisions together is challenging for families, it's challenging in a band, but it's absolutely essential. Otherwise things are totally dysfunctional, and you get into a situation where people feel disenfranchised, and that's a danger right now, too. So, I think, especially with young people, I try to set an example of being very strong in why I hold a position, if I hold it, but then also being open-minded enough to hear other people and allow myself to be corrected, if that's what needs to happen, y'know? Being a man in this society, a white man, too, to respect women and people of color and to allow myself to be educated *by* women and people of color about how their experience is in this society and how it's different from my experience, I think that's really important right now.

Maddi Kartcheske is a junior at Illinois State University majoring in creative writing and minoring in civic engagement and responsibility. She loves her home state, North Carolina, large bodies of water, and studying the English language. Her goal is to attend graduate school and eventually teach writing at the college level.



