

SELLING OUT

Austin Kleon

in conversation with Manjula Martin

Manjula Martin: Some writers may have an image of what “*New York Times* best-selling author” means in terms of financial success. But no one’s image is very clear. What does it mean for you?

Austin Kleon: People hear “*NYT* bestseller” and they think, *Oh, he’s a millionaire or something*, which is just ridiculous, as anyone who’s been on that list can tell you.

I don’t feel comfortable talking specific figures, but I’ll tell you degrees of what each book did for me. My first book, *Newspaper Blackout*, was a poetry collection. At the time, I was a web designer at the University of Texas School of Law, which was a state job. And the book advance was, like, just enough money to put a tiny down payment on a house in an affordable housing development in Austin. Number-wise, we’re talkin’, like, a used Civic.

And so when we sold *Steal Like an Artist*, I was working as a copywriter. The advance on that book, which wasn’t insignificant, was a year’s salary at my copywriter job. And *Steal Like an Artist* earned out its advance pretty quickly. It was on the *Times* bestseller list for, like, half a year. So it did great. Then we sold *Show Your Work!*; the money we got for that . . . it was like, okay, I don’t have to work for a couple of years.

When you say “we,” to whom are you referring?

That’s a royal *we*. It’s just me. [laughs] But then it is more than me—it’s my agent, it’s my publisher, my wife. . . .

Why don’t you feel comfortable talking specifics about money figures?

It’s simply about privacy. Everybody knows so much about everybody—I think actual income in dollars is one of the last things that we *don’t* know about each other, and I like it that way, honestly. I can’t think of any way that my family or I would benefit from letting other people know the exact amount of money I make.

How much of your total income comes from writing?

I have three income streams: books, speaking gigs, and any art we sell. Interestingly enough, the book money is still more than the speaking money, which is surprising, because those numbers are usually flipped for nonfiction. The art is just a tiny little portion. When we got the *Show Your Work!* money, that was like, okay, if you watch your finances and you keep doing speaking gigs and selling art and putting out a book every couple of years, you can make a go of this. You can do this for a living, as long as the goodwill shall last.

How do you feel about that?

It's terrifying. Look, it's impossible to complain about success without sounding like a complete asshole. But as far as *art* goes—as far as motivating yourself, coming up with ideas . . . After the *Show Your Work!* tour, I came back home and I was burnt out. I think that artistic hunger disappeared for me for a while.

There are things that happen when your passion, when your avocation or calling or whatever you want to call it, becomes your breadwinning. It gets very complicated very quickly, and it can really turn into a drag.

How so?

When you're just a web designer, and you're at your desk and you make these silly poems on your lunch break because you're just passing the time, and you just want to do something creative with yourself, then you throw them online because you're like, *What else am I gonna do with 'em?* . . . that is a different impulse from now, where the minute I post a poem, fifty thousand people see it. And that's just an audience thing.

Money-wise, it would be like being in a band that goes suddenly from “We all play the bar after work” to playing stadiums. It's that kind of shift. What happens when the thing that kept you alive suddenly becomes the thing that literally keeps you alive? The thing that kept you spiritually alive now not only has to keep you spiritually alive, but also has to keep you *financially* alive. Like, literally alive. Like, food in your mouth.

You've spent a lot of time telling people not to quit their day job.

Yeah, and I constantly feel like the biggest hypocrite. But what I quickly realized is, I'm not quitting my day job. I'm swapping one day job for another.

It's probably a lot easier for me because I actually don't consider *Steal Like an Artist* and *Show Your Work!* to be art. I think there's art in them, and I think they're *artful*, but they are primarily supposed to do something for other people. When I do those books, I know it's a product, I know it's going to be shelved in a certain part of the bookstore. So what I try to do is inject it with as much artfulness and as much of myself and as much honesty as I can. But it never leaves me, the fact that I'm making something that's going to have a barcode on the back of it.

So, how *do* you keep spiritually alive?

There's this weird self-loathing that happens when you promote yourself too much. (And of course all this is very meta, because I wrote a book about how to promote your work and then I had to go out and promote it.) So the armchair Buddhist in me is always trying to figure out how I can destroy my own ego. How I can talk about the work without making it about me. So there were little tricks on the book tour I would try, like pick five books off the shelf in the bookstore to recommend during the talk. Just to try to emphasize to people, *Hey, it's not just about you, it's about what you love and what you're interested in.*

And it's been incredibly important for me to read a lot. Devouring books, trying to get excited again about this thing that I used to love that then became the work.

All this [success] is so new for me. I don't have all the answers. I can tell you what I'm struggling with, but I can't tell you that I've come out the other end. To be perfectly honest, there isn't a week that goes by that I don't think about getting a proper day job again.

I'm going to venture a guess that when you were younger you didn't envision growing up to be on the *self-help* bestseller list.

It's funny, I just bought a first edition of [Nathanael West's novel] *Miss Lonelyhearts* at a bookstore in Austin. It's this really cool New Directions hardback, for like fifty bucks. And that is a book that I've reread since becoming shelved in self-help. Because it's the story of a guy who—the weight of human suffering is causing him to crack, you know? Becoming an advice giver is . . . you know, I get more e-mail than I could ever answer. And a lot of the e-mails are really heartfelt and they're from people who are

struggling, and they're trying to make a go of what they want to do, and it can be really crushing.

The word *creativity* only showed up, like, one or two times in my original *Steal Like an Artist* talk. And then we put the word on the cover of the book, and all of a sudden it's an advice book about creativity. And at the time I wasn't sure what exactly it was, but I wasn't sure it was about creativity, either.

Well, creativity is a handily broad and attractive category in terms of marketing and audience.

Absolutely. But it's weird. I have a little bit of baggage about that I guess!

You've written and often ranted about your dislike of the phrase *Do what you love* (which is usually followed by *and the money will follow*). Why do you think that's bad advice?

Because not everyone can do that. There's a selfishness to it. *Do what you love* implies that the only person you're responsible for is yourself, but if you have children or a sick spouse or people to take care of . . .

The other side of that kind of thinking is that it makes people with good day jobs feel like shit, too. And then there's the idea that you *could* make a living doing anything you love. Like, if you love avant-garde poetry . . . I mean, c'mon, man.

Why do you think so many artistic types want to make a living, or think we should be able to make a living, from our art?

I don't know! I think in some ways it's the worst thing to want. I do think that if the economy was better and better jobs were available to people, this desire to make a living off art wouldn't be so big. But certain professions are disappearing entirely. I don't know anyone that's in a profession who feels amazing about the state of that profession.

Except start-up dudes, perhaps?

Right, except start-up dudes. So, unless you have a Ping-Pong table in your office . . . But seriously, even doctors or nurses I talk to don't feel great about where things are with their professions. The institutions are pushing on us in such a way, and the culture is such a culture of overwork and busyness. If the options were better for people, if we had universal

health care, and everyone was paid a living wage, and college was free . . . then I think making money from art wouldn't be such a big deal.

You and I are both in our thirties, and I wonder if the culture of overwork has become accelerated during our lifetime. At a certain stage, I actually *did* work twenty hours a week, and then I did my zines and whatever art I wanted to at night. And I actually wasn't living that much more cheaply in my twenties than I do now. Anecdotally, it's a common experience among artists and writers I know. It used to be you could do your day job and not have it be your entire life.

What job are you gonna get now where you only work forty hours a week and you don't have to take any work home, you don't have to check e-mail on weekends . . . where are those jobs? Because as far as I can tell, everyone's so worried about losing out that we go into this culture of overwork and stress.

I did have those jobs. I got so lucky. I had a librarian job that was twenty hours a week that actually had benefits. My second job out of college was my state job as a web designer, and people went home at five thirty.

Okay, so we live in this culture of overwork now, where a day job doesn't leave much room for writing. So artists and writers are feeling that. But then they learn that they're also expected to promote their work. And they're like, are you kidding me? Now *this* is my job, too?

[Laughs.] Again, I'd say to them: Are you sure you really want to do this? Are you sure you really want this job?

And is that because a person actually can't be successful at being a writer without self-promoting?

Oh man, that's the big question, right? But look, a lot of the people who ask me for advice, they're not just asking about how to be a writer. Because everyone knows that: How to be a writer is: you write all the time, and you read all the time. And you do it for a lifetime, and eventually maybe you'll write something worth reading. The question people are really asking is: How do I become Cheryl Strayed? How do I become J. K. Rowling? How do I become Jonathan Franzen? And that is a whole different question. I'm sorry, I'm dodging your question about self-promotion. . . .

I think you can bring it back around. Go for it.

Okay, it's weird, because this rosy picture is painted of traditional publishing and how it used to be. But if you look at most of the great artists of the twentieth century, they were also amazing marketers. Andy Warhol was a marketing *genius*. The Beatles themselves? You could argue it. Or if they weren't, they had people working for them that were. I mean, Paul McCartney is a self-promotion whiz; he knows what he's doing. So to color all previous artists as not having anything to do with self-promotion is really a disservice that people pay to themselves. Vincent van Gogh had Theo. He wasn't successful, but he had someone sending him money and trying to sell his paintings. There's always some machinery working.

If you're not necessarily interested in having an audience, if you're not interested in making a living off your art, then you don't have to worry about self-promotion. Don't self-promote.

Something I hear a lot is, "I'm not interested in being on social media." Or "I'm not interested in being on the Internet."

Right. Which is like saying "I'm not interested in the printing press."

Sure, but I actually relate to that, because even though I'm on the Internet a lot, it frazzles me.

I relate, too. And that's what I try to do in *Show Your Work!*—get people to quit thinking about self-promotion and start thinking about sharing. How do you share yourself and your passions in a way that's interesting or helpful to others?

Think about you and your writer friends. What do you do when you get together? Well, you probably bitch about how you don't have any money. But after that, you talk about books you love. So when I talk to young writers, I tell them, *You should be keeping a reading log online. And every book you read, post some quote from it or say something about it that's interesting and just, like, become a good citizen.*

When I started out [blogging] I was just trying to shine a light on the stuff I really liked. I wasn't thinking "self-promotion." I mean, in the back of your head, of course, you're thinking, *How can I be part of this?* I remember reading Maud Newton's blog in the very beginning and being

very inspired by her. I thought, this is just some woman, and she writes about books, and she writes stories. And she works in law!

What kind of books do you want to write when you grow up?

Oh, that's a great question. I just read Roz Chast's latest memoir. It's so fucking good. It's just so funny and so heartbreaking. I think that's the kind of book I want to write. And I'd like to get a little less bossy. Eventually I'd like to do a book that doesn't tell people what to do!

Look, I do not have it figured out. I feel really good about my output up until this point. It's been my dream to be able to stay at home and have a family and go out to my studio and do whatever I want. But I think the whiplash of it has been so quick that I'm still catching up with it. It's the imposter syndrome thing, where you think someone's gonna knock on the door and take it all back.

So for me it always comes back to the daily practice. Making sure you do that every day no matter what. Do the thing that feeds you, first. Then do the crazy business stuff.

That sounds a little bit like “do you what you love,” but I’ll let it pass. . . .

I mean, sure, do what you love, but do it on the nights-and-weekends plan.

Well, there’s “do what you love,” and then there’s “love what you do.”

Right, and that's the other thing. It's like, now that I am in this gig, how can I become the best? How can I write the best book I can do next? How can I be the best speaker possible? How can I make art that's as good as I can make it? And that's where I find the challenge.

I'm thirty-one, man. I haven't even *done* anything yet. People give her shit a lot, but I thought one of the most honest things I've seen was Elizabeth Gilbert getting up onstage [at a recent TED Talk] and saying, “It's very possible that my best work is behind me.” I thought, man, that takes balls. Because that's what everyone is thinking. But for her to say, *Look, maybe there's a different way to think about this. . . .* I thought that was great.

And maybe my big one is behind me, who knows? But I can't do anything about it. You just do the work that's in front of you. Keep going. Oh god, I sound like a self-help author!