



[Wax Poetics: A Niche Publication Thriving By Its Own Rules](#)

June 29th, 2010 - By TheEditor

By Felicia Pride

Andre Torres doesn't have a background in publishing. But he has passion and perseverance. So much so that he eventually learned how to run a magazine and evolved into the guy at [Wax Poetics](#) "who tells people what to do." Translation: He ensures that the Brooklyn-based Wax Poetics brand is fully enforced across everything that the company does. Everything comes through Torres at a certain point because he knows how things are to look, feel, and sound. He's the editor-in-chief, but on any given day, acts as creative director and publisher.

Wax Poetics magazine isn't for everyone. And Torres works hard to keep it that way. It caters to a niche of music enthusiasts and in any given quarter, it may feature Michael Jackson, Ice Cube, or Fela Kuti on its cover. Since 2001, the magazine has grown organically into a multimedia brand with several arms including a record label, digital store, film and book division. The Atlanta Post spoke with the enthusiast-turned-business man about diversification, price points, and black music.

How did the magazine get started?

Initially, I had an idea for a documentary about beat-digging from a hip-hop perspective. The intent was to show this subculture as a larger part of hip-hop culture. It was important part of our history that was under-documented. When I did my research I found lots of legendary artists but not much information on them. There were plenty of books on Bob Dylan and The Rolling Stones, but nothing that tapped into our world. So before the documentary, I thought that it was necessary to put something in print. No one else was doing it.

What was it like putting together the first issue? What were your resources like then?

A college friend of mine, who is now my editor and one of my partners, shared a passion for the music. When I got the idea for the magazine, he was working at an editorial startup. I told him, "Dude, I want to do this magazine about beats, funky music, and hip-hop." He responded, "Sounds dope, I'm down." He had a friend who was a designer who could do layout. This was 2000.

I was working at the World Trade Center at the time, selling software, just floors below where the plane hit. Before then I worked in IT recruiting. So I utilized those recruiting skills to recruit writers. I'd read articles online and hit up the author saying, "I have this magazine, are you interested in writing? We don't have any money, but hopefully down the line we can get something going." I think they sensed my passion. I assembled the content over the course of the year.

I got fired in August 2001 and went on unemployment. Then 9/11 hit and I was depressed for a couple of weeks. I started to rethink things, like 'would anyone want to read a magazine about records now?' We were about to go to war. But then I figured we had got this far and honestly I could have been in the towers then. So I went back to

the team and said, “let’s put this issue out.”

Through my unemployment, a friend’s credit card, one dude’s parents who kicked in cash, we had enough money to get it out.

Where were you distributing your magazines?

We didn’t have any distribution. We went to Fat Beats and they asked for about five hundred copies. Those sold out and our print run went quick. But I didn’t know anything about the publishing world, so I had to wait a long time before receiving any money. We didn’t get a second issue out for another six months even though we wanted to be quarterly. We had no advertising experience either. I think the first issue had about three ads.

When did you realize that you had a business?

Around the third or fourth issue. I was at the point where although it was cool to put together the content, I had to do so many other things like deal with printers, chase down money, and think about circulation and distribution.

That’s when I started to assemble people. I brought on someone to sell ads. I also realized that the basis of what we were doing was advertising-supported content. In our independent, DIY world, people thought it was charming that our first issue didn’t really have ads. But I had to tell them, “You don’t get it. If we don’t have ads, we won’t be around.”

So you easily embraced the role of entrepreneur?



Ice Cube graces the May/June 2010 Hip-Hop Issue

It took years before it really congealed for me. Within the last couple of years, I’ve become even more serious once I got married and had children. We had thought about [the business] as a side project for so long, but it finally had to come to the point where we had to commit 100 percent. So a few years back, my two partners and I quit our jobs and became goal oriented about what we were trying to do and where we wanted to our brand to go.

In the past, I would always be at a job saying that I could do things better than management, but that's coming from the employee perspective, as an entrepreneur, there's so much more than that. You can't do it all on your own when you're an entrepreneur. You have to bring people in, be a manager, train them, manage them, ensure that they're performing their job correctly. That's another level of being a business owner that people take for granted.

Then as an entrepreneur, worker, and manager, you have to make big plans and strategies about how you'll act in each of these roles.

What accounts for Wax Poetics staying power in what many consider to be a declining magazine publishing industry?

I think knowing our niche. That's most important. Although it seems like a negative, you're better off starting out on something that's very small. I knew what we were doing was very small. I wasn't trying to do a commercial hip-hop magazine and sell 300,000 copies an issue. That space was almost exclusively occupied by XXL and The Source. We could have tried to appeal to everybody, but would probably ultimately appeal to no one. If you don't have a voice or vision, no one will want to read it. We do what others aren't doing. It's very rarefied.

When people open the magazine, they know instantly whether it's their thing. And even though it's a small group, I knew that once I got them hooked, I'd have them there for life. Then they'd want everything that we've done. They go to our store and buy our back issues because they want to get caught up.

Then it's about growing the niche. The way most magazines have done business is throw as many copies at the wall and see how many will sell. They want instant success. Pulping seven out ten magazines has translated into a successful publication for many of the big corporate publishers. You're starting to see how it affected them all. You can't survive on that.

That's why we've begun to expand into other ventures beyond the magazine. Just putting magazines on the newsstands doesn't work.

I was trying to create a brand that would grow organically outside of the magazine. Our growth has been very organic; it wasn't planned. Growth is what happens when you stay in it. When you stay on your path and just keep doing it, all kinds of windows and doors open up. Persistence is a huge part of carrying through to the next level. Unfortunately, a lot of people don't get to it because they don't want to wait for it.

The magazine has a \$9.99 price point. How are you able to justify a higher price than charged by the average music magazine?

The price started at \$8.00 which is still higher than the average music magazine. But even then, I had people tell me to charge more. Our design and production values are pretty significant. There are no staples; it's perfect bound. We use good paper. I wanted it to look like an art journal and a reference tool, not something that you'll throw away. People pay money for the experience. The more that we move towards a paperless existence, it's important that this magazine has a presence as an object.

How would you describe the Wax Poetics brand?

We're a music media company that strives to put music in context. What I was trying to do and am still trying to do is show that hip-hop isn't some foreign entity that came out of nowhere. It's linked to other music of the African Diaspora—blues, jazz, soul, funk, rock and these are all part of our history.

This isn't my father's magazine even though we talk a lot about the artists who were around when he was coming up.

We want to preserve our culture—this evolved sound that we’re all so captivated by. We want to show how it started. You come to us because you’re looking to learn something and go beyond what you already know. Our reader doesn’t go to the club and want to hear the same thing they heard on the radio. Our reader probably isn’t listening to the radio. They’re inquisitive. They care. They’re passionate about the music.

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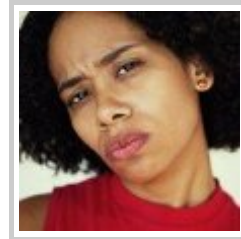
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