

Stefan Becker: The *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* Interview

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Over the course of an eventful afternoon, the *GWRJ*'s intrepid correspondent Aaron Mulnower sits down with Stefan Becker, legendary writer of liner notes—that genre of writing which appears as part of the packaging of musical albums and can take the form of anything from biography to lyrics to musician credits—in an attempt to get to the heart of the great man's writing philosophy. What results is both surprising and disturbing. Below is the official transcript of their conversation, complete with eyewitness editorial commentary.

MULNOWER: Mr. Becker, it's an honor and a pleasure. Thank you for agreeing to sit down and talk with us today.

BECKER: Yes, yes, of course. You're welcome.

MULNOWER: Shall we get right to it, then? I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning. Stefan Becker: Winner of eight Grammy Awards for Best Album Notes; recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship; the only music writer in American history to be awarded the National Book Foundation's "Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters"; guest at the White House of every president since Nixon; author of liner notes for countless iconic bands, including artists as diverse as The Rolling Stones and Lil Wayne. (Makes a "phew" sound) One almost feels the need to come up for air, and still there could be more; one could go on and on and on listing your writing accomplishments.

BECKER: You are very kind, young man.

MULNOWER: Just the facts, sir. You have had the kind of success as a writer most can only dream about achieving. Now for those readers who might be unaware of even the most basic elements of liner notes, yet still want to learn

a bit about you and your esteemed body of work, let me take a moment to sketch out the conventions of the form. Liner notes consist of the text that accompanies any physical product of music, like a CD, a vinyl record, a cassette tape, or even once upon a time, an eight-track. Liner notes most often include such pertinent information as the names and running order of the songs included; the lineup of musicians that made the recording; the names of the individuals who produced, recorded, mixed, and engineered the recording, and the locations where such work was completed; and any number of thank yous or acknowledgements that the performers wish to make. (Pauses, smiling) Now, of course you would be well aware of such things, Mr. Becker. For our purposes here, then, my question is: Which of these many characteristics interested you most, and thus made you want to start studying liner notes?

BECKER: (Shrugs) None of them. Nothing in particular appealed to me about the genre. Certainly I didn't study anything. I just did the work.

MULNOWER: Okay. Fair enough. Well then, you must have started somewhere. Describe, if you would, how you became the writer you are today.

BECKER: There is nothing to say.

MULNOWER: Pardon?

BECKER: Your request, there is nothing to describe. I was born as I am: A wonderful writer, a true artist. My abilities as a writer are God-given gifts. One day, when I was very young, I decided to put pen to paper, and what resulted was an exercise in greatness. The rest is, as you were alluding to, history.

MULNOWER: Really? My goodness, that is something else. What a blessing, indeed. I've always heard that writing is a process. A matter of—

BECKER: (Interrupts) Writing is a process? (Uproarious laughter) Writing is a process, so the young man has heard. I'm sorry, my friend, but writing is a matter of mastery. Either you master the writing task at hand, or you fail. There is no room for anything in between. Writing is nothing you can learn.

MULNOWER: Okay, well, point taken. Let's move on. I want to ask you about how you approach each, let's just say, "assignment." You've done work for so many different kinds of musicians. How do you prepare differently when writing for Miley Cyrus, as compared to writing liner notes for Radiohead?

BECKER: There is no difference. I do nothing differently.

MULNOWER: Is that so?

BECKER: Yes, certainly. I approach every kind of project the exact same way.

MULNOWER: But don't these very dissimilar kinds of bands or performers require very dissimilar kinds of writing? Just like you wouldn't write a job application cover letter and turn that in as your final paper for a history class . . .

BECKER: Oh, young man, how much you have to learn! All writing is the same, regardless of the genre of music! Liner notes for the infamous Norwegian death metal band Lunatic Grapefruit? Liner notes for Leonard Bernstein's *New York Philharmonic Greatest Hits*? It's all the same. No matter what, I am me, and I write the same.

MULNOWER: So when you are writing you are never concerned about your audience?

BECKER: Audience? My audience? Young man, are you kidding me? (Laughs heartily, with much knee slapping) Why would I ever, ever, ever worry about my audience? I don't care about them! They'll read whatever I write, naturally. For the life of me, I can think of no reason why anyone would ever consider who they are writing for when they are writing.

MULNOWER: Good to know. Talk about unexpected. I would never have thought that was the case.

BECKER: It's true. It's why anyone who tells you they spend a lot of time organizing their thoughts or doing (Here Becker makes air quotes with his hands and adopts a high-pitched, whiny voice for the next sentence) "research" about what they're writing, they're both crazy and foolish.

MULNOWER: Really? How so exactly? I can't imagine a writer able to produce work of such quality without doing any kind of research . . . (Curious, his eyes narrow)

BECKER: Young man, surely you jest! Since when have you ever heard anything about research for a writer? Writing research? WRITING RESEARCH? (He practically shouts this phrase the second time before bursting into such vigorous laughter that he begins to cough furiously. He takes about thirty seconds to recover from this fit before speaking again, during which time he clears his throat repeatedly, pulls out a gold trimmed handkerchief from the pocket of his tweed blazer—which he uses to clean his circular, tortoiseshell glasses—and lights a large, expensive looking cigar) Excuse me, my apologies. It's just, writing research, what a funny thing to think about. No, no, research is not for the writing, my dear boy. Research is

all well and good, but it is something for the scientists and laboratory peoples. You do research to cure the cancer, to make the pandas have babies, to learn about the dinosaurs, to discover how to travel through time. You do not research writing, you simply write something. I've never researched anything about writing, and look at how much I know about how to write.

MULNOWER: Okay. Hmmm. Well, I suppose this is as good a time as any to ask you, if I may, about the controversy surrounding your most recent piece of work. Your recent liner notes for Taylor Swift's new album *Red* have come under fire for being, as *The New York Times* put it, "wildly inappropriate" and "a laughably poor effort from a once great artist." Do you th—

BECKER: (Interrupts) Nonsense. I couldn't care less what the, who, what'd you call them? *The New York City Times Review Free Daily Leaflet Paper?*

MULNOWER: No, it was, in fact, *The New York Times*.

BECKER: Yes, *The New York City Times*. I could care less what they think. My writing, its intentions are pure and holy. I do what I want, of course, but I never intend to offend any overly sensitive souls. To complainers and simpletons like these *New York City Times* people, I say: If you do not understand my work, then you must be confused. There can be no other explanation.

MULNOWER: So would you say you never concern yourself with your audience?

BECKER: (Responds haughtily) I never worry about anything, young man. Worrying is a waste of time, and Stefan Becker is not in the business of wasting time. Stefan Becker is in the business of being a writing master.

MULNOWER: (Unfazed, he continues) Mmmm. So as far as you are concerned, external things—like, for instance, cultural and historical factors—have no influence on the interpretation or reception of your work? You create, as it were, in a vacuum?

BECKER: (Eyes widen grotesquely to express seemingly superhuman levels of incredulity) Whatever do you mean, young man, with this nonsense about external things influencing my writing? (Angry) Nothing affects my writing!

MULNOWER: But you do acknowledge that at a certain, inevitable point in the writing process, the text is out of your control?

BECKER: What are you saying, young man?!? Out of my control?! (Yelling) OUT OF MY CONTROL? My writing is never affected by anything but me. By nothing, you hear me! This is the deal, young man, this is how it is: I write. I finish writing. You follow so far?

MULNOWER: Yes, sir. So you “write” (now adopting air quotes himself) without any planning, research, attention to your potential audience, or concern with the consequences of your production?

BECKER: Listen close. This shouldn’t be hard, even for you, as there’s not much to writing after all. Yes, I write. I finish writing. Then it’s over. You hear me, son? Everything is done with at that point in time. Nothing else matters. The work is dead when I conclude it. My readers, they read it, and they accept it as I the writer, as I the artist, make them accept it. As I intended it to be read, so it is read. They read it and understand what I mean, no ifs, ands, or buts. End of story.

MULNOWER: I see wh—

BECKER: (Continuing his rant) And if they don’t, they are fools.

MULNOWER: Okay, thank you. So, I take it you are not a big believer in the idea of the “trajectory” of a piece of writing?

BECKER: (Disbelieving, unknowing, voice raised) The what?!?

MULNOWER: The trajectory of . . .

BECKER: Trajectory? Like an airplane? I am a little boy, picking my nose and making the paper planes that fly through the air?

MULNOWER: No, that’s not what I mean. I meant like the trajectory of a text, the way a text has a process of production, how any given piece of writing has a different relationship to any number of other entities, be they people or institutions or whatever.

BECKER: (Snorts dismissively) Trajectory, what a thing. (Laughs again, in what is getting harder and harder to describe as anything but a mean-spirited manner) Once more, young man—and I will make sure to talk very slowly here for you—my work, my writing, it doesn’t matter what anybody else thinks of any of it. Their opinion doesn’t matter at all. The whole of human history, the entirety of our contemporary culture, (pounds table with his fist as he says each word, cigar ashes flying through the air in short, little, fiery bursts) NONE OF THAT INFLUENCES ANYTHING THAT IS WRITTEN BY ME.

MULNOWER: (Sarcastic) Okay then, so, how do you write? What technologies do you use as part of your process?

BECKER: (Frustrated, visibly angry, and now making little attempt to hide it) Again, process is imaginary. I have no process. Why have process when you can just write!

MULNOWER: Technology. I mean, just technology. What do you use?

BECKER: I don't use any technology.

MULNOWER: Come again?

BECKER: I don't use any technology.

MULNOWER: I am afraid I don't follow. You say you don't use any technology?

BECKER: Young man, I swear you are on my very last nerve. Are you now deaf, in addition to being dumb, which you have already well established? I . . . do . . . not . . . use . . . any . . . technology.

MULNOWER: (Confidently) My journalistic integrity compels me to follow up: How so?

BECKER: (Eyes shoot daggers at Mulnower. Now unquestionably apoplectic. The threat of violence is in the room.) I, STEFAN BECKER, DO NOT USE ANY TECHNOLOGY WHEN WRITING! I write out everything by hand, and that's that!

MULNOWER: So you would deny that paper is its own technology?

BECKER: (Face bright red, veins visible in forehead, breaths short and forced. In his trembling hands the cigar is moments away from being snapped in two.) Technology? No, you fool! Technology is computers and The Internets and things of those natures. (Looks around the room, presumably for his manager/agent) With all due respect, young man, I am not sure you are qualified to be conducting this interview. I was under the impression that I was going to be interviewed by someone who knew a lot about the magical craft of writing, not some chump who ceaselessly brings up inane things that have nothing to do with being a writer.

MULNOWER: I am sorry you feel that way. I, and many others, would consider even pencil and paper a technology.

BECKER: (Laughs, bitter and disgusted) Okay, fine. Silly as that is, if you are just expressing the ideas . . . if it's just the crazy ideas of you and your foolish band of confused friends that you are babbling about, I can accept that and attempt to forgive your ignorance. (Sighs deeply)

MULNOWER: Thank you. Shall we try and continue with another question?

BECKER: (Rolls eyes, sighs deeply again) Sure, why not.

MULNOWER: I appreciate your time immensely. Let's wrap this up. Mr. Becker, I must ask about this. What do you make of those who would say that

because of iTunes and MP3s and digital downloads and all that, that album liner notes are a dying genre?

BECKER: I don't follow you, young man.

MULNOWER: No one buys CDs anymore, let alone vinyl records. How do you expect your genre of choice to continue to survive going forward in the future?

(There is a long spell of silence. When Becker next speaks, his words are measured and monotonous, but somehow still carry an air of real menace)

BECKER: Young man . . . do you . . . I ask you . . . do you mean . . . to imply . . . that there won't . . . always be . . . liner notes?

MULNOWER: I'm not implying it. That's exactly what I'm saying.

BECKER: Liner notes have always been liner notes, and they will always be liner notes, end of story. **HOW DARE YOU?** Why I ought to . . . I'll teach you a lesson! (Becker rises from his chair, cigar ash cascading off his stomach and chest as he springs forward, attempting to attack Mulnower. However, Mulnower is too quick for Becker. He grabs a manila folder from his stack of interviewer's papers and moves away from Becker, keeping the table strategically between them. Becker picks up a chair and chases Mulnower around the table. This lasts for several minutes. Finally, the two men pause to catch their breaths. Standing, edgy, paranoid, they eye each other from across the table.)

MULNOWER: You are a monster! You really are a monster!

BECKER: I am judge, jury, and executioner! No one questions Stefan Becker! No one! I'll be the end of you, you inconsequential fool!

MULNOWER: No sir, I'll be the end of *you!* I didn't want to do this, but you made me: No more Mr. Nice Guy. (Waves the manila folder at Becker) Do you know what this is?

BECKER: (Wheezing) I've no idea, and I do not care.

MULNOWER: You will care. This, this is research, something you wouldn't know anything about. I've done some research into your writing and I've discovered some interesting things, Mr. Becker.

BECKER: (Trying to maintain his haughty demeanor, but wary now) Oh, really? Like what?

MULNOWER: (Smirking in triumph) I have research here showing that you are a fraud, Stefan Becker. A fraud! You're a terrible, terrible writer, and a horrible, horrible person. How could you ever be a good writer? You've

never done any writing research in your life. The only reason you have been successful is because of . . . your mother!

BECKER: You leave my mother out of this!

MULNOWER: Your mother wrote all those famous liner notes that received all those fancy awards. She was quite the writer researcher, and in the way of doting mothers she loved you so very much that she devoted herself for forty years to developing and then protecting the myth of Stefan Becker. (Waves folder again) It's all here, every gory detail. It's all here. That's why your liner notes for Taylor Swift's *Red* are so bad: Your mother died earlier this year. They are the first liner notes you yourself have ever written. In your arrogance you thought you could carry on without your personal writer researcher, but you couldn't. You couldn't! My goodness, man, look at these liner notes! Listen to what you wrote as liner notes for Taylor Swift—

BECKER: (Stricken) No! No! Spare me! Do not throw those notes back in my face! Not here! Not now!

MULNOWER: Oh yes, yes indeed. You dodged me once, but we are going there now. Over the picture of a koala, you wrote, and I quote: (Reading now from a piece of paper drawn from his folder) "What you must understand, you morons, is egg salad. The beauty, the perfection, the elegance. Music. Words. Sounds. Eggs. Mayonaise. Tasty, tasty mayonaise. And therein lies the power of song." (Laughs derisively while tossing the folder on the table) And you didn't even spell mayonnaise right. Two N's, Becker! TWO N's! (Intensity of his speech changes. Mulnower is no longer the prosecutor passionately arguing his case before a judge, but rather now sounds like a teacher patiently explaining a new concept to a student) Mayonnaise is spelled with two N's, Mr. Becker. What was that gibberish, sir? Because it sure wasn't liner notes. Liner notes are a way to convey to the reader additional information about a piece of music to which he or she is listening. Sure they can vary wildly, taking the form of anything from abstract artwork that reveals little in the way of tangible detail about the music it accompanies, to an erudite essay that painstakingly describes the product at hand from conception to completion; regardless, I can promise you liner notes, like any other form of writing, require more attention and research than a couple of sentences about egg salad superimposed on a picture of a koala.

BECKER: (Slumps forward, his left arm resting on the back of a chair, his right hand massaging his forehead) I thought . . . No one . . . All these years . . . My secret was safe . . . (Looks up at Mulnower, crestfallen, unbelieving) And you accomplished all this by . . . by . . . by research?

MULNOWER: Yes, yes I did. And now the world will know the truth about Stefan Becker.

BECKER: NEVER! OVER MY DEAD BODY! (Stands up fully and lunges across the table, grabbing Mulnower by the collar of his shirt. Mulnower goes somersaulting backwards over his chair. As the two men tussle, the tape ends in a squeal of static.)

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Author's Note: Fear not Gentle Reader, in the end our brave man in the field, Aaron Mulnower, came out of this little dustup no worse for wear. However, your writing won't be fine if you listen to the ranting of a literary lunatic like Stefan Becker. His callous message of writing being an activity that you do not think about, or study, or research, or work hard at like any other craft or labor of love is one to avoid like the plague. Shut your ears and avert your eyes! Maybe even boycott Becker's work if you are so inclined . . .

Nah, on second thought, who are we kidding, there's no need for that, as fortunately, Stefan Becker and Aaron Mulnower and their terrible tussle are mere figments of our overactive imaginations. None of the above encounter was real. Instead, what is very real is the challenge each and every one of us face each and every day as we attempt to go about learning more about the ways of writing research, and what exactly it means to be a "writer." Also, very real: All the fun and different and strange yet exciting things you can do when writing. For instance, you can create a fake transcript of an imaginary interview involving fictional people to make legitimate points about a serious topic, and somehow it might work. Or maybe it won't. Either way, there are so many roads you can explore when writing. Just remember, though: No matter what path you take as a writer/writer researcher, don't take the path Stefan Becker would take. Think: What Would Stefan Becker Do? And do the opposite. Don't be Stefan Becker. Just say no.



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