

"FIFTEEN" QUESTIONS

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Fifteen Questions Interview with Antje Hübner of Hubtone PR

Trimming Down the Palette

Part 1

Name: Antje Hübner

Nationality: German

Occupation: Publicist, Public Relations Manager

Recommendations: Always loved the Rimini Protokoll. They have been around for a while. But when I experienced them for the first time, I was pretty much blown away. It's a real cathartic form of political theatre. Often described as documentary theatre. The audience is part of the performance and helps developing the story in a most intelligent way. Wish they would have a presence in the States.

Otherwise, I have been working on a book about my mother, together with journalist Harald Schiller of Geschichtenwerft. It kept me quite busy. I wanted several things: honor her, preserve part of our family history, and to make the story of the Dobrudja Germans [Dobrudscha Deutsche] in Romania more known. My mother was born in Romania in 1932 and came to Germany in the midst of WWII. This is history illuminated by a contemporary witness. However, we are not sure yet whether we would like to make the book public. It is also very personal.

If you enjoyed this interview with Antje Hübner, visit the website of her PR agency [Hubtone](#) to find out more about her background, services and client roster.

When did you start out working in music PR - and what or who were your early passions and influences? What is about music and/or sound that drew you to it?

Early influences: I have always been exposed to music. It started with my paternal grandfather, who cranked up the stereo and listened to classic symphonies (because of his hearing loss, it was always LOUD). My mother grew up in a musical household with 4 children. Each family member either played an instrument or sang. This is what my parents brought along into our own household. When they had friends over, music, dance and food were part of the German Gemütlichkeit. It was joyous. At home we always listened to music. All kinds.

My older brother introduced me to Supertramp, Santana, Genesis, Mike Oldfield. When I was 5 years old I saw a commercial for a Glenn Miller record, so I wanted the music. There was a gospel record from my parents that I listened to constantly. At some point Depeche Mode, Thompson Twins, Tears for Fears, Level 42, The Cure, the entire Brit Pop and New Wave came to me. With friends I listened to Iron Maiden and Nina Hagen. Then there were the likes of Jackson, Wonder, Baker, Vandross, Gaye, Pendergrass, Benson and Earth, Wind & Fire. And somewhere in between there was the Neue Deutsche Welle and Romanian folk songs. I could go on. (Much later, I



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talked to George Benson at a privately held JFA [Jazz Foundation of America] event at Ahmet Ertegün's house in New York. He still triggered my inner super groupie. But I tried to stay cool. At last he was the headliner of a concert I drove my first long distance to with my newly obtained driver's license. Fun fact: opening act was Kenny G at the time!). Again, these were early influences.

Early passions: Music made me dance. So I wanted to become a dancer. My passion for music showed in movement or maybe my passion for movement turned into a deeper connection with music (the chicken or egg question). Either way, I started ballet class when I was 6 years old. The dance classes changed in styles along with the music. I believe that dance makes music visible. Music made me sing. So I wanted to become a singer. I studied dance, later opera.

My first acquaintance with PR was, when I was working in opera as the executive assistant to an artist's manager in New York. I helped getting a client a feature in a well-known German opera magazine. At this time, I had no idea I was going to work in PR.

For most, originality is first preceded by a phase of learning and, often, emulating others. What was this like for you? How would you describe your own development as a PR agent and the transition towards your own approach? What is the relationship between copying, learning and your own creativity?

Originality lies in personality. Every publicist is different in character and therefore unique. Gender influences the approach. I was basically thrown into this by my former boss at Ableton, Dave Hill, a leader with great people skills. He gently pushed me to do it. He trusted my skills for some reason. Together with Claudia Weidner, my then PR colleague from the Berlin office, he somehow guided me. Once I got the hang of it, they let me loose. I figured it out on the go. But I always had somebody to run ideas and decisions by, when needed. They backed me. It was a very American approach, especially for a German company.

However, I never had a boss whom I was able to observe at work, sit next to and learn from side by side.

What were your main work-related challenges in the beginning and how have they changed over time?

Starting my own business was a challenge. First you need to find people who believe in you. Somebody who gives you a chance. You need to build a roster. No roster, no clients. No clients, no roster. Americans are quick to give you a chance. I admire them for this trait. But they kick you out if you do not deliver. Hire and fire. It is fair.

You need to get to know and understand the people you are working with. The editors and writers. Their tastes. It needs time. Trust. Not all are welcoming you.

How do you see the role of music PR in the creative process? What is the scope and what are the limitations of what you are capable of doing?

The creative process is done by all, who work on the actual "product". The musicians, the producer, sound engineers, event planners. Once I get on board, there is a finished product waiting for me, whether it is a recording or an event. My creativity is limited to advice. 'Dos and Don'ts' for the presentation of the product.

My job is to get the word out. I cannot make writers like a product or make them write about it. I can, however, let them know it's there. Send them materials. Give them info. Answer questions. Deliver an angle for a story. Follow up. Remind. Deliver quickly. Writers do not need to be convinced. They know their tastes. They are experienced. I can only lead the horse to the water ...

How are the actual music and its presentation as part of a PR campaign related, would you say?

The presentation of the product and its creator needs to be as informative and honest as possible. A quality product certainly helps the publicist. The appearance of the product depends on the individual style, taste and overall self-definition of the client. How do they want to come across? How do they want to present themselves? How to be perceived by the audience? The product is ultimately a reflection of it.

Whom do you feel your obligation to – the artists, the journalists you're working with, your own demands in terms of quality?

All three of the above.

What are the most important conclusions you've drawn from the changes in the music-, music-PR- and music-journalism landscape? How do they affect music PR in general and your own take on writing in particular? What role do social media play for your approach?

Less outlets for more music. Music schools are still going strong. Writers have lost their jobs. Papers are folding. I mourn the loss of quality, variety, diversity in the editorial landscape. And I feel for the writers, who do not have a lobby. But I am drawn to believe it will be better again. Nothing shows more proof that we are in need of quality journalism, than the current White House administration. Even though political reporting and music journalism might be a bit of a stretch. But then, it is not. We need quality on all levels, in all departments in the media business.

Smaller budgets for the same amount of work (or more work) by journalists often show in overlooked errors. Nowadays, publicists have to function as text editors as well. Lucky, if we're catching them before they go online. No chance for adjustments in print.

Publicists offer a filtering function and trim down the giant palette of new recordings. Just like a record store window, where you see select releases on display that might help the potential buyer to get to know new music, and inspire to listen.

The approach to advertising has changed. In the past, editorial and advertising were two different entities and it was unethical to combine the two. Nowadays publicists are asked to chime in for a site, a blog. What if one does? What if one does not? Think about it. But then, I completely understand the struggle of the media outlets to keep their heads over water.

Social media is a whole different story. It is a full time job on its own and reaches the customer directly. This should be done by specialists in addition to the PR campaign. Just like Radio Promoters have their own field of expertise.

How do you make use of technology? In terms of the feedback mechanism between technology and creativity, what do humans excel at, what do machines excel at?

I would not consider my work as creative in the classical artistic way. I do not really create something for the public's consumption. My work is rather creative in the sense of finding ways of how to make something work. Internet and Mac allow me to travel and work. I am in Germany answering a request from the US, double-checking with a client in the UK. Technology creates convenience but also dependency. Humans should command, machines execute. Not the other way round.

Collaborations can take on many forms. What role do they play in your approach and what are your preferred ways of engaging with other creatives, writers and possibly even the artists you're working with?

What sticks out to me is the non-verbal collaboration with a writer when it comes to translations. I often have to translate texts written by authors into German. So I engage deeply with a writer by trying to express the same thoughts within a completely different language. Sometimes it is amazing how easy it is (and how related our languages are). But often it seems impossible. And the creativity lies in finding a way that comes

close to the original without losing its flow and elegance. Words, expressions, sayings, idioms - language is a reflection of the environment it developed in. It is culture.

It amazes me how different writers can be. I think nothing brings it to your attention as much as a translation executed by yourself.

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Can you take me through your process on the basis of a campaign that's particularly dear to you, please? What did you start with, what were some of the most important aspects and how did you combine the different elements into a coherent whole?

PR is no rocket science. You meet a client and decide whether you like what s/he does and how s/he presents the music. You might advise on what materials are needed, advise on their execution. You try to get to know the person: personality, background, former projects. What drives, motivates this person? Is there a story here? You write the press release. You make sure you have all in place on time and get the word out.

You're lucky, if there is a story connected to the product. But very often there is none. You simply have good music in your hands or on the bandstand.

One project was indeed special to me. I remember when I did PR for a project by clarinet virtuoso David Krakauer. It involved a month-long engagement at the Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in Battery Park, Downtown Manhattan. The multi-media project with familiar soundtracks from iconic movies with a Jewish connection, paid homage to Krakauer's "personal discovery of his cultural heritage and in the broader sense, to the journeys we all take to find meaning and connection with our roots." For each of Krakauer's new arrangements there was a unique and newly created animated movie shown on stage. It was a marriage of music and the moving image. So, there were many components involved: the band, the museum, the management, the multi media staff. And we had two products, the recording and the actual performances. I worked closely with the PR department of the museum. It all had a deeper meaning for me as a German citizen in particular. And as a former expat, who just received the American citizenship a few months prior. On many levels, I was tremendously proud to be part of this successful project.

Could you take us through a day in your life, from a possible morning routine through to your work? Do you have a fixed schedule? How do music and other aspects of your life feed back into each other - do you separate them or instead try to make them blend seamlessly?

My work and personal life are more connected than I actually would like them to be. But this is the fate of most freelancers. The beginning of a campaign is always the busiest time. The mailing, possibly on two continents, needs to be arranged and coordinated. All materials need to be prepared and ready when



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needed. Everything has to be quick, so there is not too much time between the client's agreement and the product arriving to a writer's desk. The e-press release needs to be configured and emailed. Before, you have to figure out what writers would be a good fit and good candidates to receive the music. Who would like it? This is especially difficult with genre-bending music. You want to make sure you respect the writer's taste but then you do not want to miss an opportunity. One writer once told me "No singers for me, please". When he learned about a particular one I promoted, he said, "but THIS one I like." It can be a dance on a tightrope.

Emails need to be checked regularly, in the morning and throughout the day, even at night (depending on the time zone you're in). My Mac always travels with me. I am trying to find out how to be offline for some time in a row without losing my work. It can be tough to be always 'switched on' but then the Internet creates a lot of freedom and possibilities as well.

A reliable team is essential. I could not do it without my extraordinary colleagues Barbara Kloth and Inge Orth. And I am proud to be part of the Levenson Creative Group.

The results of a campaign are not always easy to measure. How do you define success for your work?

If the client is happy, I am happy.

There are many descriptions of the ideal state of mind for being creative. What is it like for you? What supports this ideal state of mind and what are distractions? Are there strategies to enter into this state more easily?

Every person is different that way. I need to be totally alone and quiet. I get easily distracted (too many antennae). Distractions can range from people and phone calls to TV, Internet and street noise. What helps me is to have phases of doing nothing, just sit with a cup of tea and stare ... I do not want anybody around me then. It is like a reset - ideas and thoughts slowly fall into place.

It also helps to go on a hike. To take a stroll through the woods, taking some deep breaths. Nothing is more beautiful and calming than the smell of soil. Planting works well for me to recharge batteries and release pressure. Nature always puts everything back in perspective.

Art can be a purpose in its own right, but it can also directly feed back into everyday life, take on a social and political role and lead to more engagement. Can you describe your approach to art?

Talking about the arts often ends up in phrase mongering. There is nothing that hasn't been said about art.

Art brings people together. Creators and consumers. It creates exchange, dialogue, experience, memories. It can deliver food for thought. It can distract for a moment. Art speaks to the intellect as well as to the emotions. It helps its creator to channel, consumers to discover. Maybe the other way round. It helps forming an opinion. It requires being in touch with your surroundings. The visual and performing arts mean craftsmanship. So does writing. You need to know your tools and how to use them. Whether it is a brush, a musical instrument, your body, or a pen. It requires training, education, a constant search, and an inner exchange. It means growth. What could be better than that?

However, I do not want to see self-therapy on a wall or on stage. It's a fine line.

I admire the Gertrude Steins of this world. Connoisseurs, who were able to evaluate art. Predict trends. Perhaps setting them. They were always a step ahead. Amazing.

However, as Ted Gioia, an American music historian, pointed out, the development of art as a science is basically finished. And he quotes Arthur Danto, a philosopher and art critic, who wrote the



essay "The End of Art". Danto concluded that the history of art is coming to an end. And as Gioia explains further, that the historical progression is coming to an end. So far, the idea has been that each generation has certain artistic techniques, passed on to the next generation, who built on it, improved it. New techniques are added. Art has progressed like a science. But art stopped progressing in the 1950s/60s. It still changes but there is no longer a steady evolution. So Danto came to the conclusion, that in the future artists must go back to what always has been the most important function of art: artists have to go back to serving human needs!

[Here](#) is his full-length talk.

It is remarkable, in a way, that we have arrived in the 21st century with the basic concept of music PR still intact. Do you have a vision of your job, an idea of what it could be beyond its current form?

No, I do not. And I am not concerned. It will keep adjusting to the changing editorial landscape. Fact is, the public needs and appreciates information. We'll see where this will go.

People are always on the look out for something new. They leave old concepts, try new ones and might come back to the old ones because they were already sufficient. Who knows?

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