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## Interview with Nick Kaufmann

Nick Kaufmann

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**Interviewer: Catherine Fisher**  
**Interviewee: Nick Kaufmann**  
**Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine**  
**4.25.2015**

CF: We're here at Portland Public Library for Makers@PPL, a makers fair. It's the 25th of April, 2015. This is Catherine Fisher, and I'm here with Nick Kaufmann, who has been doing some fascinating things.

NK: Hello. I've been making a lot of stories and I've been meeting a lot of people. I've just been back in Portland since last November, but I grew up here. I went to Waynflete School and grew up here and in Biddeford, my hometown. I've just seen so much change every time I come back. And I've been all around. I've been to Oregon for school and I've been to London and lived in Japan and studied... Every time I come back here, though, it's totally moved so quickly, and there are so many new things happening, both in Portland and in Biddeford, where all the old textile mills have totally changed back into these active spaces of making things.

Lately, I've been hanging out a lot in my neighborhood in Bayside. Some young people have started up these new music spaces there, and there's just all this activity in these old buildings that you would never think to notice. A lot of people are finding spaces again to make things and do things. Make music, make events, teach people different skills and stuff. I'm trying to document it in different ways. I've been using a lot of audio lately and experimenting with audio storytelling and podcasting. I ended up meeting five other people that are also doing podcasts here. We decided we're going to make a collective of people who make podcasts and try to support each other. Sort of maybe like a record label, where we critique each other's work and then release these sort of mixtapes, with different parts of our stories all mixed onto one tape.

You know, what I've been noticing also is that a lot of people are starting to listen to old cassette tapes again. And that surprised me because vinyl sounds very good. Cassette tapes you never think of. For some reason, they're making a big comeback. They're selling a lot of old cassette players. Thinking about podcasts, a lot of them are on iTunes, including some of the people in our group. A lot of people here don't actually listen to iTunes, or they may not even use a computer that much. But they have been listening to tapes, funnily enough, and I think there's sort of a nostalgia. People around my age used to listen to cassette tapes and make mixtapes with cassettes. We were thinking, what if we took our digital stories that we've made and recorded them back onto cassette tapes and had a little library where people could listen to cassette tapes. There's a co-op on Congress Street called Local Sprouts, and they have this zine library, which is handmade photocopied magazines that you can take out and read in the place. We were thinking you could do the same thing with cassette tapes. It can be hard to find a player, but if you have a bunch of tapes there, there's something really tactile about taking a tape and playing a side through and then changing the side. It just keeps your attention, I think, so much better than listening on a digital format sometimes.

We've been thinking about these multi-platform ways of releasing our stories, and just seeing what clicks. Seeing what people will listen to and how that can connect to a project of making new, locally-made stories that aren't part of the same old platforms. We have really great radio stations and we have public radio, but it'd be nice to just do something totally independent, and I think there's some interest there.

CF: Are you a fan of things like *This American Life* and *The Moth*?

NK: Of course. I think *Radiolab* was very foundational for me. The WNYC show. The way that they do their production so that it sort of looks handmade almost, where they have their audience reading the credits of the show. They include a lot of parts that would normally be clipped out of your editing, like when you're talking about the interview and a lot of the meta stuff. You think that it's easier to make something like that, where it seems like it's sort of ad-hoc, but actually, they put a lot of work into polishing it up so it looks that way. It's something I've been learning. When I first tried to do it, I like to do things without a lot of production, just on the fly. Very, very raw. But you do have to really think about the story and what people are going to hear, and it does take a lot of work to do that. So I'm trying to learn right now. More ways of doing that style.

CF: Do you find that doing these things in community is inspiring for you?

NK: Yes. It's a way of getting to know these places I haven't been for a couple of years since I've been back. I've always felt half like a local and half like I'm not a local. So it's really good to have a way of reengaging with my place again and figuring it out.

Also, it changes. The neighborhood's totally different than the last time I was living here. There are so many different things going on. Having a record of it on audio is like a little time capsule. A lot of the development now in Portland is very precarious. We don't know which direction it's going to go in. There are a lot of new buildings and new real estate, and everyone's a little worried about keeping their way of life or making sure they have a place. I think there's a sense in the back of our minds that we really want to preserve what is happening now, because it feels like everyone's thinking about the future. But actually there's a lot of stuff happening right now, and if we don't record it, it can be erased.

I was reading about a big apartment complex they want to build in Bayside, and a lot of the people were debating whether or not it was going to be good to build this big thing there. The first one was supposed to be a very tall building, and then they made it shorter. People were arguing back and forth. A lot of them were making arguments based on what it was going to look like from the highway as they drove by. And you realize, no one really has any concept of what this neighborhood is like to actually be in and walk around. It might as well be the moon to them. They have this impression of Bayside Portland as very industrial, as very gritty. Worst case, they call it a ghetto or something. But come on. All it takes is to walk around and listen a little bit, and you'll see there's a lot of stuff happening there. It has a totally wide range of uses.

It may not be that way in the future, to be honest, so I feel it's really important to preserve what is going on so that the old memories, the false memories, of people who only ever drove by it in their car, that doesn't become our memory. Our memory becomes what the people who were actually in the place were thinking about and doing. It's sort of pessimistic,

I think, that notion of, "I need to record this because it might not be around." But you do carry that, and then you hope that, by recording it, maybe someone will notice and someone will actually preserve that kind of diverse place.

CF: So how are you getting these recordings? How are you actually doing it?

NK: I find it's a lot easier than taking pictures, because I can just turn on...It's an ethics that you have to navigate. Recording for a big institution, like an archive, is different from recording for a personal project. In January, I did a workshop-with MIT Community Lab. Part of the Urban Studies department. They were doing a workshop about storytelling and civic engagement. What I did was an audio story. I rode the trains and buses back and forth between Boston and Portland for about two weeks, and I recorded everything at that point. I didn't know what I wanted, so I recorded the whole trip. All the noises. Yes. The sound of the train, announcers, everything. Sometimes I would interview someone, but it would just slip in naturally. I would literally have a five-hour recorded piece, and there would be an interview in there, but I would have to figure out...I just tried to get everything.

At some point, you realize you can never get everything with audio. You can only transmit what you are listening to. It's very subjective. You can't record, objectively, a place and expect that everyone's going to hear what you heard. You have to really put a lot of effort into trying to transmit what *you* were hearing, that subjectivity, and transmit that. When I got to the editing portion, I had to decide what parts of this huge trove of audio that I had were really important for telling a story that I was trying to tell.

CF: What kinds of stories interest you most?

NK: I really like stories about place because I studied geography and urban design and sociology. So I really like stories that emphasize the geography of the places that people are in. I think a lot of storytelling is very good at telling history and time and how things change over time, but it's much trickier to tell about place and talk about place. It's not something that is often privileged in our storytelling traditions. How to talk about places or physical architecture of things. It's very valuable, I think, because you can tell two really, really detailed histories about two really detailed topics. And then, if you don't talk about place, you won't even realize those two things were right next to each other. Or that story about that place was actually right across the street from where this story happened. They can get separated. But if you talk about a place, all of those stories can overlap each other. That's what I really like about that.

I'm trying to experiment with how you might combine mapping with storytelling. I'm really excited to see a lot of stalls here in the maker fair that are talking about place. Even your question there says, "How might place impact your product?"

CF: And your making impacts your place.

NK: Just the fact that you're having it here at the library, in downtown, on Congress Street, and Jason with the Open Bench Project is here. They're on Thompson's Point. He is really good at getting a lot of new people involved in his space, but you can only do so much when you're out behind the train station. People don't see you very clearly. But if you come on Main Street for one day, on Congress Street, people can actually see...I met three new

people here that I was talking to. A couple guys from South Sudan that were really interested in what kinds of projects... This kid was talking about making a model of the globe that's like a solar clock so he could tell how much daylight there was here versus in Africa at the same time. And another guy was doing business in China and looking for things he could do here with technology. This is the thing about a city and being in a really nice, dense place. You have so many more chance encounters. People you would never expect that they had a good idea. All of your biases would tell you that, "I would never approach this person and ask them if they had an idea." But because you're here, you can actually get so much more unexpected potential out of the people around you. Great thing about cities, that's what I love about cities.

CF: This really starting to feel like a calling for you.

NK: Totally! I've been doing this for seven years. I dropped out of graduate school. But I was studying this stuff, and I was really interested. I just keep moving around in different places. I haven't really had a steady job with this stuff. I've been doing odd jobs for seven years since I graduated from university. It is [a calling], it is. I've been trying to hone it in a direction.

It's weird, the kind of experience you get, when you travel around a lot and you see the same kind of stuff happening in a lot of different places. You have a comparative perspective. But I also don't feel like I ever get too deep into technical things. So I'm really trying to deepen some of my technical knowledge now in terms of actual technology but also some of the fields and crafts that I've encountered that I really want to get a depth of knowledge in. It's good. I feel really comfortable. If I could only get more of a steady job as a foundation to help me do the other stuff, that would be great. But I don't even know where I want to be yet. We'll see.

CF: Would you want to teach this somehow?

NK: I love teaching. Yes. I'm a writing tutor. I've done writing tutoring in universities in Japan and the US, so I deal a lot with ESL writing and how people write in English who speak other languages. Which is also a really interesting way to collecting audio stories and oral history—how people speak very much depends on their mother tongues. I'm getting more interested in language preservation and how we might use audio storytelling to preserve so-called dying languages, or help people learn more languages. There's a group called Living Tongues and there's are some other organizations that are about that. I studied anthropology, so I'm always really interested in languages and stuff.

CF: You're on the pulse of what's going on!

NK: I'm addicted to the internet. I can't get off the internet. I'm always on, talking with people, and seeing what's happening in other parts of the world.

It's good. I like connecting other people together, but I often spend a lot of time looking at a screen as well. I'm trying to balance out my life.

CF: Have you recorded your own story?

NK: I have recorded a couple of things. I'm mostly used to writing, so I've written a lot of stuff. I'm going to be doing more.

CF: Have you been tempted at all to move into film?

NK: Yes. I used to do film. I used to do 3D animation on the computer when I was in high school, a little bit, as a hobby. For my senior project, I made a 3D animated film. When I was junior, we made a documentary about people's religious practices in our whole class. All the different religions and what their traditions were. I went to a prep school that was very secular-focused. People came from very strong backgrounds, but it never really came through in daily life. The dean of students decided that it would be interesting to do a project to document people's different religious traditions, and we did a documentary about that. I did a lot of that in high school.

In college, I got away from film a little bit, but I'm starting to come back to it. I think audio is just a really good first step. It's like half of film, and it's something that you just focus on. When I was in Boston, I was thinking about how I could record without pictures, because I'm so used to taking pictures. Thinking like, "Oh, there's this part in the bus station that has this floor that's a tiled floor that's a very nice pattern, and I would like to take a picture of it. But I don't have a camera. I only have an audio recorder. How am I going to transmit this pattern to someone using only audio?" And then somebody walks by rolling their rolling luggage, and I hear the sound of the rolling luggage over the tiles that gives the pattern perfectly. It's like, "Duh duh duh duh duh duh." And I can record that. That's a way to describe it through audio. I think when you limit yourself, if you say, "I'm not going to do any pictures. I'm only going to do audio," and just eliminate one of your senses, like your vision or whatever, you can then focus on one sense and really discover everything you can portray using only that one sense. That's been a really cool experiment for me.

CF: It's that attention, I think, that you were talking about, too, with flipping the cassette over. That somehow you're attending closely.

NK: Yes. People are trying to get back. In the '90s, we had this upsurge of technology. At one point, it was really comfortable, and we had just enough that we could also focus on our other things we were doing. And then we just kept going. And then people realized, "Wait a second. It's sort of too much. Now we don't have any attention left over for anything." I think now people are trying to say, "Okay, well, we could have tech up to our eyeballs, but what's the right amount? How are we going to design things where you're focusing really deeply on one thing?" I think the biggest myth of the last ten years was this notion of multitasking. How could anyone do more than two things at once? You can't do that. They've said, actually, multitasking is rapid cycling of attention. It's not multitasking. You're just changing what you're paying attention to really quickly. Actually, if you do learn how to focus on one thing that at a time, it can be better. I'm the worst person to say that, because I am horrible with that. I think another buzzword that someone was talking about was "calm technology." It's starting to come back into people's minds, I think. It's good. Right about time, too.

CF: Nick, thank you so much.

NK: Yes, thanks.