

The BIRN Interview Handbook

By DJ BiGMAN

(Fall 2011)



Welcome,

This document is intended for the BIRN DJ who is interested in learning more about the interview process here at the BIRN. It will first cover the station protocol regarding interviews and then my personal take on what a really great interview consists of.

-For the sake of cleanliness, any reference in this document to "Artist" can be assumed to be referring either to a solo artist or numerous persons, usually indicated by the use of parenthesis in "Artist(s)". This to my eyes is cluttered and for this reason I will be using the singular "Artist" in all cases.



Standard Operating Procedures

The BIRN is a multifaceted organization with a multitude of processes going on at any given time. An organization as complex as the BIRN, must have Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for it to function in an efficient manner. This is no different when it comes to the interview process.

To conduct an interview, in addition to reading this document, you must also observe one of our experienced interviewers in action during a BIRN event, or attend either a one-on-one training event or an Interview Workshop. If you would like to request training, please email review@thebirn.com. More often than not, our interviews take place in the Live Room as part of a 939 event. The observation is intended to give you a better appreciation of the interview process here at the BIRN as well as the general atmosphere that an interview creates. Learning how to survive in this unique performance environment is critical to the success of any interview.

To schedule an observation, you should check the CP for upcoming BIRN events that include an interview, and request that you be allowed to attend to “observe.”

-The Interview Observation or some form of training (be it one-on-one or a workshop) is a necessary step that must be taken, regardless of any previous experience, before you will be permitted to interview an artist through the BIRN.

-This step is not required if you only intend to assist in researching for another interviewer.

-This step is not required if your interest is solely in the recording/editing of interviews. If this is where your interests lie, you should contact production@thebirn.com or check the CP for updates on Production Events and Production Training.

The distinction should now be made between interviews that are on behalf of the BIRN and those that aren't. If an interview is to be broadcast on the BIRN, or is for BIRN use, then it falls under the former category. Examples would include a 939 show, a visiting artist to the college, a BPC artist or any guest on your show that you plan to interview. On-location interviews outside of the BIRN studios that you plan to air on your show are also considered BIRN related events.

If you are conducting an interview that is neither to be broadcast on the BIRN, nor through it's outlets (blog, Facebook, newsletter etc.), this is not considered a BIRN related event. In these circumstances, you should not make use of the BIRN's name or it's affiliation to the college. Under no exception should you ever conduct an interview under the pretense that it is for the BIRN when this is not in fact the case.

-If you are planning on having a guest to interview on your own show, with or without a live performance element, you should seek out the guest request form accessible on the "BIRN_DRIVE." To have a guest on your show that is not approved through this process is a violation of BIRN ruling and will be dealt with in a suitable manner.

Equipment & its use

The equipment used is highly dependent on the nature of the interview itself. Several factors may lead you (or the production team) to make various choices on microphones and recording format.

The 939 interviews are the most common interview format and usually take place in our Live Room. A table is usually set up with seating for the DJ on one side and interviewees on the other. An assortment of swag is also placed on the table for the artist along with any forms that have not yet been filled in.



These 939 sessions are usually recorded by our Production team in the Production Room, either to be aired live or broadcast later. Usually we use SM7 microphones, the same used for BIRN1 broadcast.

Microphone technique should not vary too much from what you were taught in training, that is to say you should speak within an inch or two of the windshield. You may wish to encourage the artist to speak "into" the microphone before the interview as often they will wander or sit further back than is ideal. If you plan to do this, do so before the interview starts, as to interrupt them half way through to comment on their technique is obviously bad practice.



-If you plan on having an interview on your BIRN1 show, you will only need additional equipment and possibly assistance if there is an element of live performance during the show, in which case you should fill in the guest request form and seek further assistance from the Production Team.

There are also interviews that do not take place in our live room, but on location. This could be a visiting artist or speaker somewhere on campus, a BPC performer back stage, or a band performing at a Boston Venue. In these instances it is most likely you will require some form of portable audio recording solution. The BIRN owns such devices and are there for your use in such instances. These currently take the form of a few M-Audio MicroTrack devices. If you're hoping to use one of these devices, you should read the other BIRN document that deals with the Microtrack II's specifically.

-If you have your own portable recording solution and would rather use that for your BIRN related events, contact a member of the Production Team so that they can approve it's use. We have high standards at the BIRN and you must meet them if you are hoping to have such recorded material aired.



Documentation

Interviews for broadcast require a Visiting Artist Video/Audio Recording Consent Form (pictured below-left) to be filled out by the artist. This is a vital document that must be signed by any artist who we interview, broadcast live or take video/photos of. It permits the BIRN to use this material either online or in our broadcasts. As the interviewer, it will most likely be your responsibility to see that this form is filled in.

Berklee college of music
VISITING ARTIST VIDEO/AUDIO RECORDING CONSENT FORM

I/we, _____ hereby give permission to Berklee College of Music to record video/audio recordings for use in recording _____ at Berklee College of Music. All recordings will be limited to educational purposes and that Berklee retains all rights to these recordings.

Permission is granted for audio recordings of events on the above date as stated.

Permission is granted for video recordings of events on the above date as stated.

*As a courtesy, Berklee will provide one (1) copy of the finished program to you upon completion, sent to the address listed below.

* Copies to the following educational uses of the recordings for Berklee College of Music:
- Internal usage of the recordings in college instruction classes.
- Permission is given for use by others to support customer relations.

Also, I agree to grant Berklee College of Music permission to use any portion of recordings for purposes of the college and its activities. This may include without limitation, editing, archiving, and use for promotional purposes. I reserve the right to use portions of recordings generated for professional purposes. _____ (Please Initial if you)

I hereby release and discharge Berklee College of Music and its employees from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of the above recordings, including any and all claims for libel.

I am over the age of majority. I have read the foregoing and fully understand the contents.

Name: _____
Signed: _____
Date: _____
Phone Number: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
Phone: _____ Fax: _____

College Representative: _____

birn
Release of Submitted Material
The Birn Group (Birn Networks) (The BIRN)

I authorize The Birn Group (Birn Networks), hereby referred to as The BIRN, to use in whole or in part, the name, likeness, image, graphics, and otherwise recorded material, including the unpublished musical compositions, if any, generated on this recording session, referred to as the Submission, in all promotional manner and means, on The BIRN's social platforms in its own discretion. This takes into account all content, and reserves the right to use and release of the Submission for non-commercial purposes, in advertising, and without limitation in the promotion, branding and website of the Submission. In return, any Submission will be made for the purpose of monetary profit, without give further permission from me (myself) (The Birn Group) regarding _____.

By submitting this form I am hereby stating that I am the owner of the above stated material and I agree to the terms and conditions set forth in the Birn Group's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy. The BIRN is obtaining their legal responsibility for the content from submitting.

(If signed on behalf of a client.)

I represent that I read the foregoing to sign this release on behalf of all members of my band. I agree to the terms and conditions set forth in the Birn Group's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy.

I understand that the BIRN is under no obligation to broadcast the submission.

Name (Printed Name): _____
Address and Contact Information (Please Print or Type): _____

Band (Print or Type) (if applicable): _____

If the Band Member Program Fee is applicable: _____

Please indicate whether you agree or not (check one):
Agree: _____ Disagree: _____
Email: _____ Phone Number: _____

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-If you are interviewing an unsigned band and intend to use their music within the interview itself, you should also have them fill in and sign the Release Of Submitted Material Form. (pictured above-right) Both of these documents can be found on the BIRN_DRIVE.

A word on this document...

During my time at the BIRN, I was fortunate enough to interview many varied acts in a multitude of scenarios. Through these events I've developed a personal philosophy on the interview process that I shared when conducting an interview workshop at the BIRN. Those who attended found it helpful and insightful to the point where the station asked that I write this document. What follows is my take on the Interview process. As with many art forms, (and there is certainly an art to interviewing) there is rarely a right or wrong way of preparing for, conducting, or editing interviews. There are however certain best practices that it can't hurt to be exposed to. I hope you will take something from this document, try out the techniques that I've utilized and continue to develop your own philosophy.

Interviews at the BIRN

Every interview I have ever done for the BIRN falls into three distinct stages.

- 1) **Research:** This is where you (and/or your assistants) will conduct research into the artist that you plan on interviewing. This first stage prepares you for the second stage, which is...
- 2) **Interview:** This includes the whole day, from the moment you wake up until you say goodbye to the artist.
- 3) **Editing:** After the interview has been recorded, it is inevitable that a certain amount of editing needs to take place, whether simply preparing it to go immediately out to Broadcast, or finer revisions for a final polished product.

In this document I will be dealing predominantly with the first two stages. These concern the DJ directly. I will offer some thoughts on the editing, but this process is usually handled by our Production Team.



Stage 1 - Research

You should think of the research stage as the fuel to your journey. The amount of research I conduct prior to an interview always correlates to the quality of the interview itself. Very rarely will an underprepared interviewer produce a great interview. On the rare occasion that this is the case, you can be sure it would have been even greater had they researched more!

When you begin researching for an interview, there are many factors that will play into how you prepare. Some may not even be listed but I will do my best to cover all that I have come across.

Time Consideration: Ask yourself how much time do you have to do research? How many artists are you interviewing? Will you be interviewing more than one at a time? How long does the interview need to be? With the answers to these questions, you can begin to plan your research; how much time you allocate to each artist and how much information you need to keep the interview going for a reasonable length of time without losing the audience's interest. You should avoid focusing on one artist, only to realize you didn't leave enough time for the second. Often you may not find out precisely whom you will be interviewing until the day itself. Sometimes due to time constraints one artist may decline an interview as they still have to sound-check or are running late. To best protect yourself from wasting time, stay in contact with the Production Coordinator and the Production Team who are usually first to be notified of any changes to the running order of an event.

Nature of the Event: It could be a 939, live room, BIRN1, BPC show, or an on-location interview outside of the BIRN studios. This can play heavily into your research, as you need to consider the artist's reason for being there. If they are on tour, perhaps promoting an album, which album is it? If they are talking at an event, what are they talking about? Are they supporting a cause, if so, what's the cause and why are they invested in it? You need to know why the event is taking place and also why the artist you are interviewing is involved as this will inevitably play into your questions.

Live Music: You may also consider whether or not there will be an element of live performance in the interview. Perhaps the performer has brought up a guitar and would like to play a couple of tracks? This can add an interesting dynamic to an interview but you should notify production if you are planning on including this element. This will have some impact on your research as you should consider listening carefully to their music, perhaps picking a few favorite tracks and maybe even study the lyrics. Artists, without exception, love it when you quote their lyrics or refer in detail to their music, especially when this comes from a fellow musician.



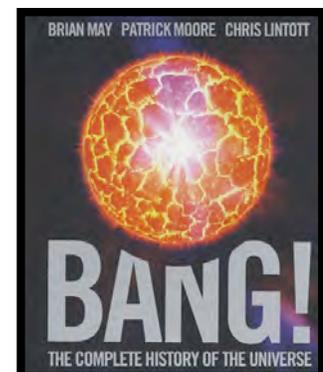
Type of Artist: Are they well known, Up-and-coming, Berklee Student, Berklee Alumni? This is key as it will give you some indication as to who might be listening and that then informs you as to what questions you should and shouldn't ask. If I were interviewing Madonna, I wouldn't ask her "so what kind of music do you play?" Yet this might be a perfectly reasonable question for a Berklee student who just released their first EP. Does the artist have a loyal fan-base? If the answer is yes, you should delve a little deeper than you would for a local act on their first tour. In the latter case, you may need to cover the basics, where they're from, how did they form, what style do they see themselves as falling into? If you have an artist who has loyal listeners tuned in, this is probably old information they have no interest in. Try to give them something new! It's your job to get out of an interview what your listeners most desire. To do this you have to understand them and to understand them, you must understand the artist.

As you consider the audience's perspective, you may become sensitive to a pitfall that can result from over-preparation. You must keep in mind that the audience hasn't done the research that you have done. They may not be as well informed as you are. For this reason you should consider asking questions you already know the answers to. This can seem counterintuitive but there are benefits to this approach. You can now ask questions where you know there is an interesting answer. You can also use the answer itself as a stepping-stone to segue into another question, as you know what the answer is. If you only ask questions you don't know the answer to, you are denying the audience of all the information you gleaned whilst researching. So as you research, make note of interesting points that you could develop questions around.

Resources: As far as resources go, the Internet is probably your best medium through which you can gather information. Websites including the artist's official page, wikipedia, blogs, tweets, myspace, music publication's websites, are good sources that I make use of. Once less obvious source of information may be fans. Friends or fellow DJs on the BIRN might be familiar with the artist and can give you some insight as to what they would like to find out were they listening to an interview.

Music and lyrics are key and often overlooked. You should become failure with the Artist's work, especially their more recent releases. You might also consider looking into side projects or old bands that the artist has been associated with.

There may be aspects to their life aside from music that you should at least be aware of, even if you don't plan to mention it. Brian May, the guitarist for Queen, has a PHD in Astrophysics and co-wrote a book on the subject with one of the UK's leading academics on the subject. Never assume the artist is "just" a musician.



Past Interviews as a Resource: By far the most useful and interesting source of information I've found has been past interviews. These can either be either written Q/A or audio, the latter of which provides you with yet more information. I'm thinking specifically of interviews where your artist has been the subject. An audio recording is preferable to text as it can inform you as to how they respond to questions in the interview environment. As you listen, keep an eye out for which questions they were most responsive to and which ones they ignored. Do they have a habit of swearing?

Feel free to repeat questions that worked well, it's unlikely the listener has heard the other interview and wouldn't pick up on this repetition, especially if you rephrase them. You could also rephrase questions that didn't work, to try and get an answer where a previous interviewer failed.

I had an instance where an artist's debut was so eclectic as to make the listening experience jarring and a little unpleasant. One song would be folky, the next, electronic. I discovered one question they were always asked was "what genre do you fall into?" They never responded well to that question and seemed to take a little offense. When I interviewed them, I didn't wish to avoid the topic so I enquired as to why they felt it was such a sticking point for so many people and how they feel about the whole genre classification of music in the United States. I got a fantastic response from them; they even commented on my approach saying, "I love the way he asked that question." Had I not listened to previous examples, I would have fallen into the pit trap many other interviewers had with this Artist.

So try listening to past interviews and see what they can teach you!



Note Taking: Once you've assembled your research, you obviously can't take it all into the room with you. Somehow you need to assimilate, reorder and condense the information. When evaluating the technique that best suits your style, you should consider the following.

Eye Contact: As the interviewer you need to embody the audience. Whilst you may hold little interest in the artist or already know the answer to the question you just asked, the audience doesn't necessarily and is eagerly awaiting the response. The artist needs you to synthesize that interest for them. Were you to look down at your notes and break eye contact, they will assume you are not interested in their response or that they are dull. They won't think "Oh that's right, this is for the audience back home, not for this Interviewer." So embody the audience, show interest, smile, laugh, be emotive and maintain eye contact

Both Fluidity & Coherency: Fluidity is especially important in live interviews, you don't want to be "uhmm"ing and "err"ing whilst you try to find or form your next question. Make sure your notes are clear, legible and that you know how to use them in the interview. Get a feel for where things are; spacing different elements out can help you find the material you need when you need it. Perhaps you have all notes concerning live shows in one area with recorded albums to another.

The Footprint and Appearance of your notes on the table: If the artist comes in and sees the table covered in paper, it will look unprofessional and suggest you did not prepare fully for the interview. Also consider the appearance of your notes, if it's a page of typed up questions, one after the other, this could seem intimidating to the Artist and suggest to them you have a preconception of the interview in your head. Try to make your notes appear inoffensive and perhaps even appealing to the eye in some way. The artist should feel wholly comfortable in the environment you create.

Conversational or Interrogational approach: Obviously in almost all cases we would suggest the former. Remember we're not interviewing a Politician here or a refugee from a war torn country. Everything you do should make the artist feel comfortable, so you should be your questions in ways that are inviting of a response, try not to make it too formal. The more the interview emulates a conversation, and the less you take part in that conversation, the more the storytelling happens and soon the listener forgets you're even there. This is ideal in my opinion.

Lastly, your notes should allow you to feel confident in the room. Don't adopt someone else's method of note taking unless it feels right. Try different approaches and evaluate them. Here are some suggestions to get you started.

Should your questions consist of fully formed questions or just notes?

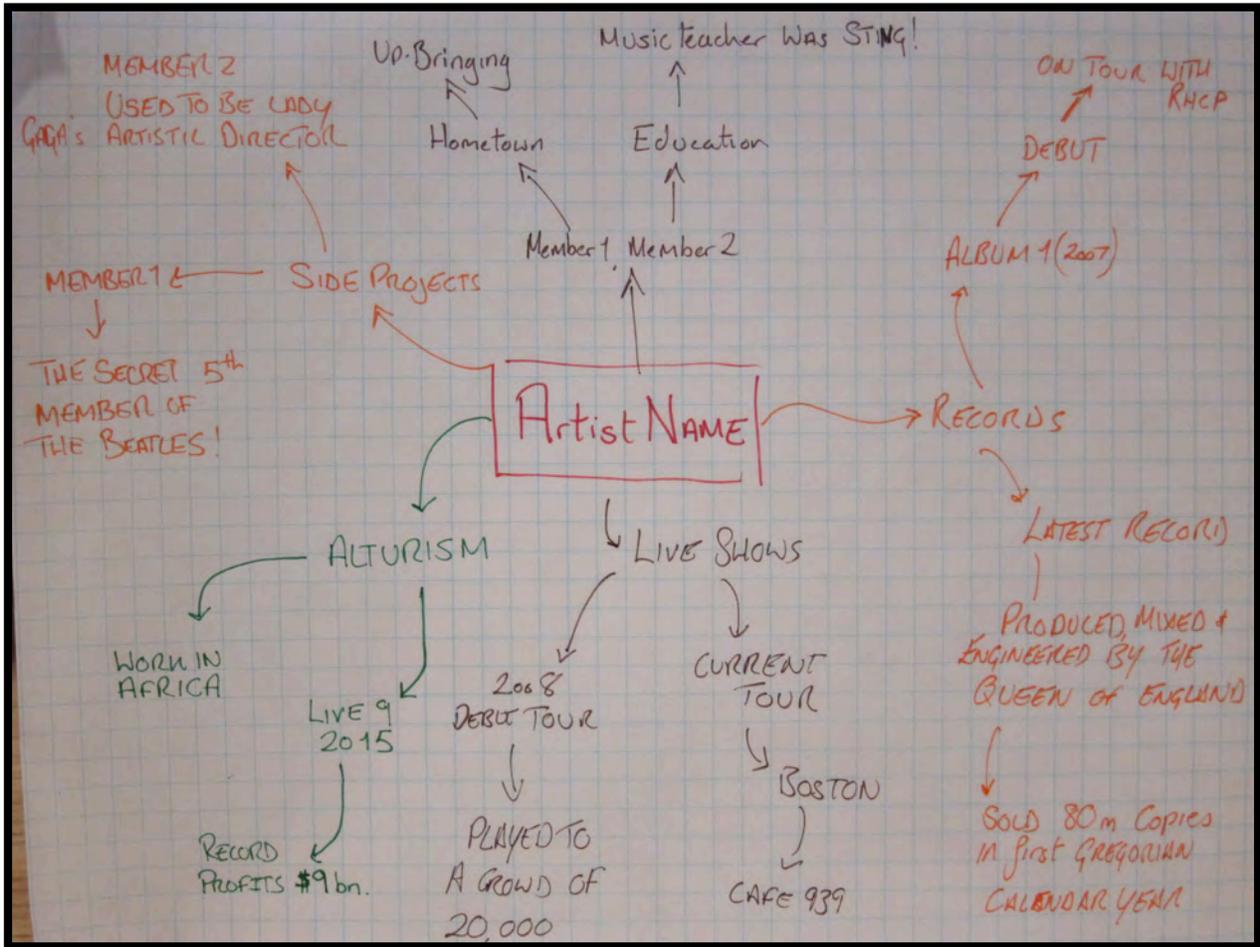
Writing questions out in full can save you from making blunders or rambling on till the point of your original question has been forgotten. It can also lend a structure to your interview. I on the other hand, prefer to use just notes, as they allow me to react to the unpredictability of the interview environment. If the Artist is discussing a point that I want to delve into further, I'm not constrained by my original concept of the interview form, then allowing us to discuss it more deeply. I wouldn't want to jump to a wholly unrelated subject for no reason if the last answer has taken us somewhere that I didn't anticipate.

If you do use fully formed questions, should they be in a set order or scrambled about?

Again, a set order can give structure to the interview, however I would suggest you order them only so that related questions are close to each other. You should be able to jump around from question to question and know where they are to be found. This allows to some level of flexibility even though you've already written out the questions you intend on asking.

Writing out questions in full can often disfranchise your creative mind from considering additional questions in the live interview. Just because you didn't write it down, doesn't mean you can't ask it. If you do write out questions in full, try not to read them from the paper as this can seem disingenuous, as if you're asking questions someone else gave you. Perhaps all you need is a few words to prompt you to the question. Instead of looking down and reading "I understand on this latest record you worked with Tom Phillips who produced Muse's latest record, what was it like working with someone of his caliber?" Perhaps all you really need is a note saying "Tom Phillips (Muse)" to get you to the question.





My Method: This is an example of the kind of notes I take into an interview. They are assimilated from word documents where I put all my research initially. This acts as a mental trigger to that wealth of information and for me it hits all the points above. This is clearly more of a free form approach but I can write in specific questions if I wish, there's no set order to the interview and whilst I often preconceive some kind of form, I can also depart from it with ease. It's easy to space out the information into related groups, making it easy for me to find the information I want in a quick glance, this is further aided by my use of colors which in turn make them visually appealing and not imposing or intimidating from the artist's point of view. The technique is adaptable to any size and I favor the 4x5 cards as they can easily be held in my hand, don't make noise when I move them and they have a small footprint on the table.

Top & Tail: The one element of an interview I may consider writing out in full and reading from a sheet is the Top and Tail. This includes the artist's information, a quick sentence on who they are, why they're here and the date. An example might be...

"Hi there, I'm DJ BiGMAN and today I'm joined here at the BIRN with Helena Stipski who on releasing her debut album, "Shades of Gre"y in 2003, went onto stardom releasing a slew of albums, two of which went Platinum. She's responsible for such hits as "Snow in Springtime" & "The Man Went South" and today, November 7th 2011, she joins us for an interview as she prepares to perform at The Red Room at Cafe 939 She's currently touring her latest album "Blights of Passion" which she recorded with none other than Paul McCartney. Thank you for joining us. So how was it that Paul McCartney became involved with the latest record?"

There's a lot of information there that I had to hit and had I not written it down, I may well have missed some key details, forgotten the name of an album, or stumbled through it. I also wrote ended on a question which went nicely along with my "Top" to kick off the interview.



Along with writing the Top, I suggest you write the tail for the same reasons. Here's an example...

"And on such a point note, I think we'll end. Thank you Helena for joining us. That was Helena Stipski who joined us today, November 7th 2011, as she prepares to perform tonight at The Red Room at Cafe 939. Tickets are \$30 and the show will begin at 8pm. If you are unable to make it to the venue, you can check out our live broadcast of the event on BIRN presents. For more information on Helena you can check out helenasripski.com. For more information on BIRN scheduled programming, you can check out thebirn.com. Thanks for listening."

Stage 2 - The Interview

-For our purposes, I include the whole day up to the interview until you say goodbye to the Artist in this stage.

Preparation: Do a self-check in the morning, make sure you know the following: Call-Time, Artists to be interviewed, where your notes are, if anyone is observing the interview. Also give careful thought to your appearance and cleanliness. I always try to go for smart/casual. I bring a professional mindset to my interviews and want my appearance to reflect this. I don't, for instance, wear an Iron Maiden T-Shirt, MoHawk and piercings when interviewing a timid singer-songwriter. This may be appropriate for another artist but in this situation, could come across as overly aggressive/flamboyant. They might assume I have no interest in their music as I've made my tastes quite clear through what I'm wearing.

Consider warming up your voice before the interview, read through the Top and Tail to familiarize yourself with the text. Lastly, make sure you're clean and have fresh breath. Keep some gum on you; the Artist won't appreciate being sat across from you as you talk directly to them if you had a curry beforehand.

The Meet: When you meet the artists there are a number of things you may wish to do. Firstly, it is often common for one of the production team to welcome the artist first and check when they would like to do the interview if it's to be conducted in the Live Room. I would advise you go also and introduce yourself in advance of the interview. Feel free to offer assistance if they are unloading, ingratiate yourself to them, be helpful and welcoming. Maybe consider bringing them a gift besides BIRN swag. This is a special step that doesn't always need to be taken, but on the occasions I have done so (whether in the form of home made cookies or bringing English Tea to an English Artist on tour,) the response has been invaluable and they seemed to open up to me in the interview as if we had been friends for years. Feel free to chit-chat, find some common ground if you can, even if it's just that you're both musicians, so that you can relate to one another on a common ground. Don't pressure them for time. They have probably just gotten out of the car after hours on the road. If they aren't ready to do the interview yet, neither are you.

As you bring them up to the station, check how much time they have for the interview and assure them you won't keep them longer. Ask whether there are any specific questions they would like you to ask or if there are any announcements they would like to make using the interview to do so. Perhaps they are pushing a new single, the tour, you should accommodate this as it is not only good manners, but also lets them feel some sense of control. Let them feel like they can mould the interview around their own agenda and they'll thank you for it through giving great answers.

Along with all of this, check that there aren't any topics they would rather you avoided. If they don't want to discuss something, they won't answer a question regarding it in positive way so don't assume that you'll be able to get an answer from them on a touchy topic just

because it's an interview. If you did discover something you would like to ask that you think might be controversial, check with them that it's "all cool." Lastly, mention that swears should be avoided if possible, especially if it's being broadcasted live.

At the Station: Once at the station, introduce the artist to the head of production, anyone who's observing the interview and anyone else you feel they should be introduced to. Offer them water, swag and make sure they're comfortable.

The interview should be a breeze if you've prepared well. Here's a few points to keep in mind.

-Don't forget the Top & Tail.

-Smile!

-Remember it's about them, not you.

-Avoid questions that lead the artist to a "Yes/No" response, these will kill your interview.

-Embody the audience through being interested and maintaining eye contact.

-Remember to namedrop, don't make arbitrary references such as "The Producer," "The Drummer," be clear about whom you're talking about on every occasion, the audience may not be as familiar with these people or their stories as you now are.

-Be ready to improvise, create segues based off of what they are saying in the moment, be prepared to recover from a fall or dead end, try to anticipate a good question on which to end even if you miss out on asking a couple of questions you had planned. Better to give a sense of ending then tagging additional stuff on the end, remember less is more!

-Lastly, get them to record some material for a BIRN tag before thanking them, making them aware of future opportunities to perform in the Live Room next time they're in town, then walk them back to the venue and assure them you're looking forward to the show (if you plan on attending).



Stage 3 – Editing

Postproduction is as much a creative process as it is technical. It involves the creation of a finished product(s) for broadcast, created out of the raw recordings and any other assets that are available. Depending on the location of output, there may be many different versions that need to be created if varying length and content.

As this last step of the interview process is more often than not handled by our Production Team, the advice I offer is perhaps more relevant for material you recorded specifically for your own show which the Production Team may not have time to edit on your behalf.

So what's the first piece of advice I would give to someone editing his or her own interview? GET SOMEONE ELSE TO EDIT FOR YOU! The reason I say this is because you have already been working on this interview for a few days, perhaps even weeks. With so much invested in it, it's hard to have an objective point of view, which is critical to the perspective of any editor. Instead of listening to the quality of the content, you will be thinking how hard it was to prepare for that question, how creative the question itself was, how sexy your voice sounded perhaps? So yes, if at all possible, try to get someone else to edit on your behalf and limit your contribution to their process. The more they resemble an audience member, the better. They will edit according to what they want to hear, what's interesting, what isn't. As soon as you make suggestions, you are skewing the end product towards your own enjoyment rather than that of the audience's.

If you have to edit it yourself, at least leave the material alone for a week or two to separate the editing process from the interview itself. Keep all that's been mentioned in mind and put yourself mentally in the position of the audience. Ask what would you already know about the Artist, what wouldn't you know and crucially, **what do you want to know**. Be sure to keep in mind how long any given audience member may care to listen to your interview for. Quality should always reign over quantity and the hardest thing I've found is to condense an hour long interview into a much shorter version, perhaps 10m, 20m, however long I honestly believe the audience would care to spare on this Artist



Thank you for taking the time to read this document. Doing interviews at the BIRN has been one of the most rewarding aspects to my college experience and I hope it will be likewise for you too. I hope that this document has proven useful and that some of it will remain with you as you move forward and conduct interviews on behalf of the BIRN.

DJ BIGMAN

