

Query Letters That Rock

West Magazine (Los Angeles Times Magazine)

When you think of pitching profiles, you probably envision sitting across the table from some hunky actor or powerful politician, scribbling away as your subject spouts bon mots. But what about that lady who volunteers at the school cross walk? Or the guy who runs the little model train store on Main Street? As you'll see from this query, everybody has a story — and if you can highlight their character with a compelling voice, you've got a sure winner.

Dear Editor:

Wrapped In The Arms Of The Blues Our story in an absurdist nutshell: two years ago a middle-aged black woman named Margaret Ann Long Dolan, a/k/a Ann the Raven,* was handling announcing chores at a Los Angeles-area blues festival. She introduced her old friend, blues legend Etta James, who needed an electric scooter chair to make it up onto the stage. On her way back to the wings Ann tripped over the ramp hastily installed for Miss James, landed on her knee and tore her cartilage. She has no health insurance, so she still limps.

Ann the Raven is the blues incarnate. Unlike most talented people who arrive in Los Angeles, then achieve artistic success, then loftily declare that they're remaining true to their artistic principles, Ann — the most knowledgeable and hypnotically entertaining practitioner of her niche art form in Southern California—would love to sell out. The only problem is that nobody's buying.

In the meantime she does what she does best, and does it hypnotically well. Listeners to her two weekly programs (Sundays 8 p.m. to midnight and Mondays 9 to midnight) on public radio station

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KCSN are likely to hear a splendid set of recordings by such artists as James, B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, Stevie Ray Vaughn, and perhaps Janis Joplin or Billie Holliday. Or maybe her signature song, "Blues In The City," by Larry McCray. Then Ann cuts in:

"This is Ann the Raven, in case you just tuned in, darlin', and I'm dishing out the blues for you this Sunday night. This is a holiday weekend, yeah! And for you people who work — hey! A long weekend. You should be out there playing, having fun. I'm thinking about the things I used to do all those Sunday nights — before I got fat, you know. I used to be one wild chick! And I was thinking: I want that back! I gotta get rid of this fat! [choked sound from deep in her throat that might be laughing, might be crying]

"Life in the big city hasn't been pretty for the Raven, but she's hangin' in there. She's doin' the best she can. She's gonna make you happy tonight, though. I know I will. Because I'm gonna try. Earlier of course you heard Larry McCray with 'Blues In The City,' — and honey, let me tell you that the Raven's got blues in the city. L.A.'s a city to have blues in. Let me tell you: I've no money, fat, black, hey — what can I say? Broke, no career, no life, love — oh, I need love so bad!

Hey, my city is not pretty, I can tell you that. But I'm gonna hang in there 'till it gets better."

Or maybe more to the point, on a special "love-themed" Valentine's Day blues show:

"I don't know, guys, about playing all this 'love' music tonight. It's just not doing it for me. It's just not doing it. I want to feel the blues. I guess I'm not happy unless I'm unhappy. [approximately same choked sound as above] I just can't figure it out. I need to hear something tough. But I gotta remind myself that it is other people out there who're in love and I gotta play it for the lovers. So darlin', I'm going to stick with it for a while. I myself, I admit that I — I keep hoping that one

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day I'll have someone who I'll feel strong about. Feel good about. I don't know. I can't give up. I ain't gonna give up. I can't give up on love."

Quite an act, you say? Except it isn't. Margaret Ann Long Dolan, who of course gets no money from KCSN, the low-to-medium power (on a good day) radio station at Cal State Northridge, hasn't had a real job for over a year. She scrapes up whatever income she can by babysitting and doing other off-the-books chores and shares the rent for her tiny Pasadena apartment with her roommate, a white Belgian guy she can barely understand. She drives a 1984 Mustang convertible with a duct-tape collage top, three bald tires and one undersized spare. She sometimes has to borrow gas money to get to the station. She is indeed overweight; she huffs and puffs as she pulls her wheeled suitcase filled with her personal collection of blues CDs into KCSN's tiny studio, located in the bottom left hand corner of a dormitory building.

How she got into this fix is a blues CD in itself. She was born and raised in Stillwater, Oklahoma, where her mother, a blues fanatic, force-fed her the canon. Sufficiently bummed by her surroundings, she headed west in her early 20s. Seque to an interesting five-year marriage, her first and so far her last, to an Irishman in Sausalito. Messy divorce over, she moved down to L.A. and stumbled into a good administrative assistant job at Pasadena City College, where she enrolled part time and — most importantly — got her own blues show on KPCC. Ann the Raven had a long-running show on this perennial competitor to public radio's Alpha L.A. station, KCRW, for fifteen years. She attracted thousands of steady listeners and became a fixture on L.A.'s small-but-persistent blues performance scene. During those fairly happy years she got her degree at PCC, transferred her credits to USC, and got her B.A. — just in

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time to watch KPCC get acquired by Minnesota Public Radio and transmuted into an all-talk format.

And oh, yeah: Did I mention that Ann's USC degree is in Humanities?

Good morning, heartache. She sent her resume to KKJZ, the popular blues-and-jazz station at Long Beach State, and discovered that "somebody there definitely doesn't like me." She caught on at KCSN, if not in the job market, and now has hundreds of fans in Germany via the Internet. Also, several half-formed schemes to become a professional child custody mediator; open a combination coffee bar/blues performance space; get a job as a DJ in Europe, etc. She's also very open to working in the jazz, rock or even country radio formats: but her bluesy job history, she says, keeps her behind the eight ball in those arenas, alas.

In the short time I've spent with her I've definitely detected a strain of masochism and/or self-destruction: for instance, in directing me to our first meeting she told me that Cal State Northridge, which I'd never before been to, is at the corner of "Lesson and Zephyr." It's actually at Lassen and Zelzah. She got caught in traffic and was a half an hour late to our interview.

And yet.

If Ann was the just the Voice of Depression in Los Angeles she would be unlistenable. She's far from that. She's a big fundraiser during the station's fund drivers; as she sits and does her show she gets many calls from listeners; many of them lonely and lovelorn Angelos who turn to her for moral support. She gives it to them; she's also beloved by her public radio co-workers and by this country's under-recognized and hard-working corps of blues musicians—many of whom she's extensively interviewed and whose tape-recorded recollections disappeared forever, big surprise, when Ann's storage shed was burgled recently.

My guesstimate is that Ann's about 35 per cent vic-

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tim, 35 per cent survivor, and a sneaky 15 per cent cock-eyed optimism.

That raises the chicken-and-egg question: does Ann play the blues so well because she's so blue, or is she blue because she plays the blues so well? Either way, she seems to make it back to the studio every week. How? Why? Those are the journo-existential matters I plan to explore in this piece.

And if you don't give me the assignment, I just don't know what I'll do.

Best,
Andy

*Ann won't reveal the genesis of her nickname, which she says is "mortifying." I have a good idea how she got it, and she's right.

The Writer: **Andy Meisler**

I was listening to the radio and heard this woman on a little public radio station that not a lot of people listen to. I thought, "This has got to be an act!" I kept listening to her and then I called her up and asked to meet her; I just said, "I write a lot for the L.A. Times Magazine and I'd love to pitch a story idea about you. Can I come up there and meet you?" Obviously that won't work if it's, say, Condoleezza Rice, but it worked in this case. I don't tend to do stories about people you've already heard about, and that gives me an advantage. People like to talk about themselves — especially people who haven't had articles written about them already. So I met her and it wasn't an act. She really has the blues!

You want to get the editor's attention ASAP. The danger there is resorting to cheap tricks. I think the top of this query is a bit snarky. As I kept writing I worried whether it was too snarky and I would be perceived as putting down this person, which I certainly didn't want to do. Lower down in the query I made it plain that I think

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this woman is fascinating and that I'm not riffing on her poverty or her situation. I'm saying how unfair it is that this woman is caught in a conundrum.

The query didn't seem long to me; a lot of it was copying down her rap. I put the information in a triangular shape [with the most important information first] so the editor can read as much as he wants. The most important part is the beginning; if I can keep him reading, he'll be interested in assigning the story.

My ending is playfully "bluesy." One of the reasons this query worked is that I have a long and wonderful relationship with the editor. He knows that I can deliver. I don't know if this ending would have worked otherwise.

The most important thing you need to convey to an editor is that you want to do this story, not that you want to fill some perceived hole in the magazine. Obviously you see what sections the magazine has and what articles they have in each section, but you want to show that this is a story you really want to do instead of saying, "This will fill a hole in your magazine." Don't try to sound like the Writer's Guide — let it all hang out.

And for God's sake — when I was an editor, the worst thing was seeing stationary that says what writer's association the writer belongs to. No real writer puts "Travel Writers of Montana" on their letterhead. It just looks amateurish, like you're the kind of person who goes to writers' conferences a lot but doesn't do much writing for money. I can't tell you how many letterheads we got that had little doodles of guys or gals sitting under palm trees with typewriters. Next!

The Editor: Martin J. Smith, Senior Editor

This pitch was pretty irresistible...and I have no idea who this woman is. There may be 500 people who listen to her, and it doesn't matter because she's so compelling that you're immediately engaged. Andy is a storyteller. The voice was the preeminent thing here, and Andy's got a knack for that. He takes a different eye to things.

Voice involves unlearning a lot of what you learned in journalism school. You've done all the research — now shove that pile of notes aside and tell me a story. Don't fall into the formulaic

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quote/attribution set-up. Learn how to set scenes, learn how to develop characters in a way that I'm immediately engaged and I care what happens to them. This isn't about efficiently conveying information; it's about sucking me into somebody's life and helping me understand something important.

I could tell Andy put a lot of thought into the query, and it's perfect. The ending is so good, I can tell you what the last line is from memory. I just thought, "Yeah, this is something he'll knock out of the park." He seemed to understand the blues experience.

I think that normally, one page is plenty to sketch out an idea. If the idea is something we're interested in, we'll have a conversation to flesh out the idea. But in that initial pitch, you need to have voice. I need to know you're not going to make a few phone calls and do a few interviews and write it up. I need to know why this is an important story to tell.

If the object of a story is to "show not tell," the object of the pitch is to tell. Connect the dots and tell me why our readers would care about this. Don't just show it and expect me to connect the dots. Explain to me, "This is important because..."

The pitch should be timely, and make it very clear why the story is important at this point in time. More often than not I get ideas that lack that component. The writer will say, "This is the 50th anniversary of such-and-such." So what? Last year was the 49th anniversary of such-and-such. If it's important now because there's legislation that's coming up for a vote in June, tell me that. We're a news magazine.

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Women's Health

It's not often that an editor is hit with an idea that makes her sit up and take notice — but that's what happened when this writer combined two unexpected topics: pregnancy and sex. Start your query with a lede that shocks the editor and makes her want to keep reading. Julia Rosien did it by starting off with a shocking anecdote from a source. (Of course, Julia backs up all this surprising stuff with solid research.)

Dear Leah:

Lori didn't catch wind of her first orgasm until she was thirty — and pregnant. "I could never find that last sweet spot, no matter how hard I tried." She's not alone. According to the Journal of the American Medical Association, 70 percent of women don't have orgasms during intercourse, and 30 percent miss out completely.

All right, the truth. Pregnancy isn't likely to conjure images of a sexual free-for-all. We know it's shocking, but good old-fashioned athletic sex isn't topic number one in most of those baby manuals stacked beside your bed. Consider this: a pregnant woman's body increases blood flow by one third, and blood vessels dilate quicker and with less stimulation. "Unless there is a specific high risk situation where the MD warns the couple against it, there is no reason why pregnant sex life, including intercourse, can't be as juicy as ever — even juicier," Dr. Shoshana S. Bennett, Ph.D., perinatal specialist and author of *Beyond the Blues*.

With the help of experts (as well as the first-hand knowledge from my own four pregnancies) I'd love to share some knocked-up sexual knowledge with your readers. "A Field Guide to Great Pregnant Sex" will explore the exciting sexual changes, as well as some

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common misconceptions about sex during pregnancy. I'll interview experts in the field and delve into the different options (and positions) that make pregnant sex the best sex ever. Possible sidebars could include information on when sex isn't fun during pregnancy. It sounds like shutting the barn door after the horse has escaped, but falling out of sync sexually during pregnancy isn't uncommon. While I estimate a word length of 2000 words for this story, that's flexible depending on your editorial needs.

I'm a senior editor at ePregnancy Magazine, an international monthly consumer magazine. As well, I'm a freelancer who's contributed to publications including Wedding Style, The Christian Science Monitor and CBC Radio. I also hold memberships at various professional organizations, including the Professional Writer's Association of Canada (PWAC).

Please let me know if you have questions about this story idea. I'll be happy to fax or email you samples of my writing. Thanks for your time; I look forward to hearing from you soon!

The Writer: Julia Rosien

I was looking for a way to use some of my expertise to get into new markets. I do a lot of pregnancy writing, and I thought this was an unusual topic that I hadn't seen covered before. I look for things you haven't seen in every magazine. I wanted to write about sex during pregnancy with honesty, and to give all the details readers need. It's a pretty edgy topic and I knew that Women's Health isn't afraid of tackling those topics.

I've never had any trouble finding experts for my queries. I just approach the expert professionally and say I'd like to write an article about X. I don't mention who I'm writing for, but if the source asks where the article is to be published, I'm frank with them and tell them I'm in the query stages and I hope to get it placed in Y magazine.

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New writers get nervous about how to approach an expert, but it's in your own head. It's not something most experts are concerned with. They're happy to talk because they know the potential of being mentioned in a magazine is far greater if they're helpful.

To get the women-on-the-street quote, I just went trolling on different discussion boards online where pregnant women post questions. It's amazing how many people are willing to talk about their sex life. Because it's e-mail, there's that computer screen between you and the interviewer that makes it easier to open up.

I didn't put her quote in the article itself because she wouldn't give me permission to use her last name. But all of my expert advice pointed to the fact that what she had said is statistically true. It's a touchy topic for someone to allow their first and last name to appear in a magazine.

I offer sidebars with every query I write, even if it's just a FOB. Sometimes the editor doesn't like the article idea, but the sidebar sounds interesting so we have a discussion about that. I always offer a little bit more so there's room to negotiate.

I always include a proposed word count — and it never is the word count the editor wants. For this article I had proposed 2,000 words but ended up writing 700 words. But it shows that you have an image of what you want to write and have a plan in place. The word count doesn't help the editors as much as it helps me; I have a visual image of what I want to write and how it's going to look. If the editor comes back and says, "I can use 700 words, would you be willing to do that?" I can reformulate plan in my own mind.

Looking back on it, I think the query was too wordy, but I was proposing a 2,000 word article. I don't think it's a detriment to the writer if the query is long but really well written.

As an editor, I'd like to tell writers to always include contact information. It's amazing how many writers will sign with their name and e-mail, and I have no idea who they are or where they live. Even though it's e-mail, projecting an aura of professionalism lets an editor know you're serious and will follow through what you've promised in your query.

The Editor: Leah Flickinger, Senior Editor

The first line really grabbed me... it was really compelling. I do

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see a lot of sex and relationship stuff, and this was counterintuitive in a way. You don't hear so much about women who hit 30 who haven't had an orgasm. And the fact that she was pregnant — women have so many different feelings about sex during pregnancy; it's such a loaded issue.

Ultimately we went back and forth on structure and format. Julia had pitched it as a much longer story and we decided we couldn't do as many words. We have FOB opportunities for shorter pieces. Our readers' average age is 31, and most are married or in a committed relationship. Some of them have small children, but not all of them. So pregnancy sex is something we wouldn't necessarily want to devote too many pages to.

It didn't bother me that she gave a word length. All it took was one e-mail asking if she'd be willing to do fewer words. And she was perfectly willing. If you're going to put a word length in a query, it might make sense to say, "I estimate X words, but that's flexible."

Including a proposed title is good because it ties the idea up with a nice bow. You want to be concise in a query, but if you have a couple of title ideas, it may not be a bad idea to put them both down.

Writers often do quote experts in their query, which I think is fine, but I don't think it's necessary. Although I do like to have an idea of what kind of experts a writer will talk to. I know a lot of experts in the sex and relationships area, and some are used over and over, so I like to see new ones. Also, I like to be confident that the writer is not going to be relying on their own OBGYN or the local doctor next door. You want the most qualified expert for the topic, maybe someone who's done research or written a book in addition to having a practice.