



Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 48: Andy Baio

Transcript

March 2016

Visit Cool-tools.org for shownotes

Our guest this week is Andy Baio. He loves making things online. He's written waxy.org for the last 13 years, helped build Kick Starter, and organizes XOXO — an independent art tech festival in Portland. His upcoming projects include the XOXO Outpost, which is an experimental workspace opening this January, and the reboot of the collaborative event calendar, upcoming.org.

Mark: Welcome to the Cool Tools show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, editor and chief of Cool Tools- a website of of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at cool-tools.org. I am joined by my co-host, Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools.

Hey, Kevin.

Kevin: Hey, it's great to be here.

Mark: In each of episode of the Cool Tools show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite uncommon, and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about.

Our guest this week is Andy Baio. He loves making things online. He's written waxy.org for the last 13 years, helped build Kick Starter, and organizes XOXO- an independent art tech festival in Portland. His upcoming projects include the XOXO Outpost, which is an experimental workspace opening this January, and the reboot of the collaborative event calendar, upcoming.org.

It's really exciting to have Andy on the show. How's it going, Andy?

Andy: Fantastic. Thanks for having me.

Mark: Yeah. XOXO is an amazing event. You invited the Boing Boing crew, I think the 2nd year.

Andy: That's right.

Mark: Which was really a lot of fun. We had Glenn Fleishman on the stage with us, and we had a blast.

Andy: It was so much fun.

Mark: Yeah, and this year you had Kevin come.

Kevin: It was a blast, I had my wife who normally does not attend these things and she thoroughly enjoyed the conference saying, "This is not so techie, this is very human."

Andy: We try to focus on stories related to being independent. It really feels more like an arts festival than anything. Though it's definitely in the crossroads of art and technology. We just did the fourth year in September, here in Portland.

Mark: Four years, amazing! That's cool. Andy, before we talk about your tools tell me how things are going with XOXO Outpost. Is it a traditional maker's space? Or is it going to be different?

Andy: It's pretty different. It's been a little hard for us to describe. I think Andy McMillan and I (my co-organizer on the festival) we have an idea for what we want this to be. We found this incredible space, it's a thirteen thousand square foot office work space in the Central Eastside of Portland. We want to carry some of the vibe of the festival into a year round workspace because there is only so much we can do in four days out of the year. There's just this community that has popped up, we'll talk about this a little later, around the festival. The hope is we can bring these people together, run events there on the evenings and weekends and support their projects. Help more interesting and independent work get out into the world.

Mark: You do a lot of stuff, you're really prolific. The stuff you turn out is really high quality. I'm not surprised the tools you are talking about today are about communication with other people, planning, organizing, and information retrieval. There's a theme there. Why don't we start and tell me about Notational Velocity.

Andy: This is the funny thing, I was listening to some of your older podcasts, trying to think about what I wanted to talk about and it was really difficult for me. The more I am listening, the more I realize how odd I am. I have very little interest in gadgets of any kind of physical ... None of my hobbies involve the physical world at all. I don't cook, I don't hike, I don't build physical things. I'm not a hands-on maker in that sense. I'm not handy at all. I have a single tool box, which isn't very good, I own a

can of WD-40, a wrench, and some Duck Tape. Those are three cool tools ... Pretty much anything I fix involves some combination of the three, but I figure anyone listening to this probably has those three anyway.

Even in the digital world my tools end up staying pretty static. I'm not constantly trying to optimize and re-optimize my life. Once I find something I like, I tend to stick with it. As an example, I run waxy.org on a version of mobile-type from 2008, and it works! It's survived every version of slash dotting through the year, from Digged, daring fire-ball, to Reddit's front page. I would never recommend that someone use ... Try to install movable type now, but it worked for me. Similarly, I use my laptop and my phone and whatever else, until they are literally falling apart or until software I want to use simply won't run on them.

Kevin: Maybe what you have for us is the digital equivalent of WD-40 and Duck Tape.

Andy: I think that's exactly right. I've sort of built up a stable of apps I am fiercely loyal to. When I can't find one that does what I need, I'll build one myself. I'll talk about one of those today. So yeah, Notational Velocity, I've been using this since 2009. It's an OS10 app that is used for taking notes.

Kevin: This is a Mac ...

Andy: A Mac app, free, and open source. It is a note taking app that has search and auto-complete built in. It's so dead simple. You're not encouraged to ... There are no folders or anything like that. You just start typing and it creates a new note. Anything you're searching is just a full-text search. For me it becomes this dumping ground for project ideas, interviews I do, SQL Queries, to do lists, anything, and everything will go in there. I have thousands and thousands of little notes, some are stubs, like a wish list. It ends up coming up around the holidays because I'll jot ideas for my wife down. Because it's full text search, I don't have to remember what I called something or how it's ... What folder it's in, or how it's organized. I just start typing and it retrieves all of the notes that match those keywords. They're organized by data modified and that's it. It syncs with Simple Note, it syncs with DropBox, in plain text if you want to do that. It's just great.

Like movable type, it's not actively developed anymore, but because it's open source there's a fork of it people have carried on and made new additions to, added new features, as time has gone on.

Kevin: As I try to imagine myself using this, do you add tags to the notes you make, so you can find them? If you have an idea for a gift for your wife ...

Andy: I don't even do that.

Kevin: How are they resurrected? What would be the word you would search for unless somehow you labeled it gifts or something?

Andy: Basically, all these notes are is a title ... There's a title ... When you're creating a new note, you don't have to click "add note" or anything, you just type. A title one, if it's one that doesn't already exist, it creates it. There are really only two fields for this thing, title and note. For me, it was "Wish List" and various wishlists, my own, my wife's, my son's. Over time I'll go and edit them, remove things, add to them, formatting is very simple.

Mark: Andy, I'm seeing something here, if you put something in double brackets that will turn it into a tag so you could call up all your notes that have that tag.

Andy: That does not surprise me at all that it is in there. I don't use ... I don't even use that feature.

Kevin: It's just two fields, title and the body, and you're able to just dump everything in and don't think about it. You can just search for it to get it back?

Andy: It's stored in ...

Kevin: Plain text?

Andy: ... It's stored in plain text. I've carried this from computer to computer and I can go back to the moment I started using it, see old project ideas and whatever else. It's just something ...

Kevin: Is this Duck Tape? It is just Duck Tape. It's really really simple.

Mark: Are there versions of it for iOS and Android?

Andy: I have not idea. I believe that it's a Mac app only.

Kevin: I'm using the little notes in OS, but the reason I do is it is synced with my phone. Whatever I put into notes I can read on my phone.

Andy: This supports syncing with [crosstalk 00:09:39] which is 3APP developed by automatic.

Mark: I imagine it can work with ... I see something that says "Synchronize with iOS App". I'll bet people have created notational velocity apps for this.

Andy: The fact that it's open source ... I haven't been following the most recent fork of it, which is called ... I can't remember, I think "nvALT" is the new fork and that's more recently updated and on GitHub, so people can add their additional browser extensions for that.

Mark: I really like the simplicity of it. I use WorkFlowy as my to do list making app. It reminds me of that, very simple text, you don't get to mess around with formatting or making it fancy. It just makes you focus on the work, which helps.

Andy: I don't use it as my dedicated to do list. I use Wunderlist, which is also a great app, free, syncs to an iOS client and a Mac client. I think with the to-do list I need a little more structure ... The ability to be able to check stuff off and have that sense of accomplishment over time. For little micro-things thrown into ... I'm looking at it right now, because I wrote my notes for this podcast in it. It's a place for ... I don't want to have to worry about creating a file and storing a file somewhere or having it in Google Docs. Even Google Docs is overkill for a lot of the things I use it for.

Kevin: It resides as an app, so it's not like a drop down or anything. It's just an app you have open all the time basically?

Andy: Yeah, I bring it up with ... I use Alfred, I used to use Quicksilver on the Mac. Basically, like a one key-stroke way of popping up an application. I'll do CTRL+SPACE and type the letter "n" and it's always there. Then I can pop up Notational Velocity and start jotting some ideas, either quit it or keep it in the background.

Kevin: Yeah, me too. Okay, that's good, that's the Duck Tape. What's the WD-40?

Andy: The WD-40 ... Rather than the stickiness, it would be the thing that eases your work. I'm going to say that the second utility ... I know there is an entire industry of productivity tools out there. That is not my scene either. You can go so deep on this ... For me there has been ... I've been able to narrow down my productivity utilities into three things. I mentioned one on your list already, but two very very small apps to keep me focused.

One is called Pomodoro One, which is ... It's one of dozens and dozens of Pomodoro timers and stay focused apps. Pomodoro for those who aren't familiar is a technique for helping you stay focused on your work. It's a timer where you take 25 minute stretches of work, working on a single task, then a five minute break. After four of those, you take a longer break of 15 minutes. This has been one of the only things that has worked for me. I'm easily distracted, I'm constantly flitting around the internet looking for interesting things. When I actually need to work for an extended stretch a pomodoro timer keeps me moving and keeps me more likely to fall into flow. This one is a free app, free utility, it's dead simple. Pomodoro One is

one button, it's a start button, and that's basically it. It'll do the 25 minute timer and then it'll do an alarm, then five minute. It's configurable, there are things you can do with it, but that's how I use it, that's it, it's dead simple.

The pairing with that is StayFocused, which is a Chrome add-on inspired by a FireFox extension I used to use, called LeechBlock. For Safari users, there's a similar add-on called WastenoTime. StayFocused, all it does is a timer that keeps you from ... It'll track, block ... Let's say time wasting websites. You define a list of sites that you're likely to fall into, whether it's Twitter, Facebook, TVTropes, Meta-Filter, whatever your community is that you fall into. You add those to a list, then it watches those as you're using your browsers and it will give you warnings, "You've got 5 minutes left, then I'm going to block them." If you keep going, it blocks them. At that point you've set up these goals for yourself and it's trying to protect you from yourself. It has also worked for me, it's easy to fall into those things. The problem is my entire life is in a browser. It's like having your office inside Disney Land, it's where you work, it's where you play, communicate, socialize. I've had to build tools like that, because otherwise ... It's impossible otherwise.

Kevin: Pomodoro I think is based on a physical timer that was in the shape of a tomato originally. That was the old ... It was the analog version, this idea that you had a timer. Pomodoro now is a digital version of that, much cleaner and much simpler. You combine the two in a sense so you have a timer with five minutes and if you do need to go online, you have a secondary limit of where you can go and how long you spend on these diversionary websites. That works?

Andy: It's worked for me.

Mark: Andy, I have a question about this, Pomodoro. I'm familiar with it, I've never really tried it. You do something for 25 minutes, then you take a five minute break, then you do it again. Do you go back to the same task that you were working on?

Andy: I think in theory, the theory with the tomato timer, the pomodoro technique is you pick a task and if you have to continue doing that for the second stretch then you go ahead and do that. It's a moment to take a pause and think about, "What is it that I'm trying to get done for the next 25 minutes?"

Kevin: On your five minutes are you allowed to waste it?

Andy: Oh absolutely, and I do. I fully fully do.

Kevin: You have to stay focused except for those five minutes, I get it.

Mark: Do you feel that is more helpful to have that five minute break than to do a real deep dive into something, and work on something for like two hours straight without looking up?

Andy: For me there are rare occasions I will ignore the five minute break. I'll get so caught up in what I'm doing I'll say, "Whatever." It's often, I think in my experience, ignoring those five minute breaks is not helpful in the long term. Use the five minute break to go stand up grab a drink of water.

Kevin: That's the whole point. You want to do something physical at that point. What they know is sitting, where ever you are, long term is the real detriment. You should use those breaks to at least get up and move around.

Andy: I also have problems with my eye sight. Focusing on anything in the distance is fundamental for me as I get older my eyesight is getting worse. It's important to very that.

Mark: Yeah, join the club.

Sometime Kevin I would love to have you go over your work routine, you get a lot done too. That would be very interesting.

Kevin: What about slack? You're using slack.

Andy: It's funny to me to put this on the list, because so many podcasts are already sponsored by Slack.

Kevin: We're not!

Andy: You're not! This is a tool that is relatively new compared to others I use, but has absolutely transformed the way I work and socialize. To the point now that I am in half a dozen different Slacks. Some professionally, some socially, several private and invite only. For those not familiar, it is effectively a incredibly well designed chat room. I know there are people saying, "Just use IRC." First off, IRC takes some effort to set up and to administer, clients are all different. If you want IRC working on your phone ... It's just beautifully done, search is incredible ... I think the thing that separates it from everything else is it has a since of whimsy and fun to it. You don't see that in work collaborative tools. It has all the little playful things like third party integration with animated GIF tools, emoji picker, emoji reactions, it does an incredible job of unfurling links you paste in. If you paste in an image or a video or whatever else, it will expand it and make it ... It's just a very natural place to collaborate and throw ideas in and get work done. In practice it has eliminated email for so much of what I would have previously used email for I now do in Slack.

It started for me using it with some friends in a private chat room. Then I was using it with the Kick Starter team, then with XOXO with Andy and the collaborators of the festival. What blew it open for me was, we started a Slack this year for all of the attendees of the festival. There are around 1200 people in there now. They've self organized into all different channels based on their interests, location, things they care about. If a topic is breaking, sometimes they'll go create it to go talk about it. They've created channels for introductions and for their projects. There's one called "Bad Attitude" where people will go siphon off and go vent and have negativity that doesn't poison the general chat room. It has been incredible for building a community around the festival.

In our work focused ones, it's incredible for getting things done. Referring back to conversations when you invite ... When you bring someone new to the team they can search and see what has happened in the past, instead of trying to re-communicate that over and over again.

Kevin: It's a chat room that is productive. You mention all these other bells and whistles that make it fun, does it start to veer into this category that you are trying to fence off with StayFocused? Does it become another social network that you don't have control over?

Andy: That's a great question.

The XOXO Slack, the big one with all of the attendees, that can be a distraction. I will close that one and use, if I need to get work done, I'll ignore it entirely. That is outside of the whole StayFocused ... You can use Slack in the browser, I highly recommend if you do use it, you use the dedicated clients. They're really well designed.

Mark: We have slack for Boing Boing. Everyone uses the standalone. We have a channel for editorial, we have a channel for our social media, a channel for advertising and we stay focused on the topic. It does tend to become this social hang out thing, and we have to be aware of that, where we're just chit-chatting about stuff that is non-productive. I tend to not like that part as much. It's turned out to be, like you said, the best thing for me is it is an email replacement. It gets really fast responses from people, because we are always there.

Andy: You can direct message people if you really need to talk to them. I just ... Over the years I grew to hate email. To resent it. Partly because it's this asynchronous ... You're asking something from someone, they're asking something of you, you don't know if it's received, if they've read it, if they're working it, non-response. It demanded a composed response. For collaboration there is so much better way. I

still use email for people I don't know that are contacting me, but almost anything else is better.

Mark: I have a Slack channel set up for Cool Tools Kevin.

Kevin: Yeah, I know, I'm still emailing.

Tell us about your fourth tool, we have a couple of minutes left, Belong IO.

Andy: Belong ... This is an example of where I'm always looking for interesting new projects. Partly because I am just voracious about things people are making on the internet. I'll link to them on waxy, on Twitter. I'm always looking for interesting things to bring into the Festival. That process is time consuming and, more than anything, blurs the line between work and play. A lot of that is happening on social networks. It's happening in places like Twitter, Reddit, Digged, Feed Reader. I built this site ... It's strange and hard to explain, but it's called Belong.IO.

What it does is essentially streams the Twitter feeds from 2300 people. Everyone who has ever attended XOXO. Then it ranks them ... It grabs just the links they post. It tosses out everything that is just a Tweet, it grabs just the Tweets that have a link in them. They're saying, "This is a new project." Grabs those links, expands them if they're short URLs, then ranks them based on three factors popularity, freshness ... When was the last time it was seen in the database, how many days old is it? The third looks at the complexity of the URL. The idea is I am favoring shorter, simpler URLs over longer ones.

This is a really ... It's a bit of a flawed technique, but it generally works to favor projects over blog posts, news articles, and so on. A site that launches on its own domain ... And that's what I mean by URL complexity. Something that launches on its own domain and has never been seen in the database before and sever people in this stream are linking to it. It's going to pop it to the top. Just looking at it today, the top result today is for a Kick Starter fulfillment report. It's an independent analysis with the University of Wharton. Ten by Fifteen, where ten artists are re-imagining the album art from their top ten favorite albums of the year. The redesign them, they're beautiful, it's part music recommendation and an art project. Also in the top five is Relay.fm which is a podcasting/networking community. They're doing memberships now. It's a way of surfacing interesting things from a like minded community.

I know that Matt Cutts, when he was on this podcast, he recommended Nuzzle.

Kevin: Nuzzle, which I just turned into a cool tool. It takes the Twitter streams from the people you follow on Facebook and Twitter and elevates the ones that are most

common among them. It's not as sophisticated as what you're doing, but it's very similar.

Andy: It's a personalized version, it's a different use. If you already carefully curate the people you follow on Twitter and you have a good hand-hold on the things you care about, Nuzzle is perfect for you. It's just surfacing stuff that is happening in your network, or friends of friends. Belong is a little bit different because I can't follow the 2300 people that have been to XOXO, but they have this interest in common.

There are other things like this in different areas. Latest.is is something similar, it surfaces ten projects from people in the, maybe, advertising world, seems to be how it skews.

Kevin: It's cool, do you have an RSS feed?

Andy: I get asked that a lot. Because Belong's rankings are constantly shifting, it's a little challenging to make an RSS feed for it, or any kind of chronological listing for it. A fan of the site created a Twitter bot for it that tried to do that, effectively looking for chronological ... Creating a feed from it. It didn't work very well, so he ended up shutting it down recently, but may bring it back. I may try doing a feed with a threshold, right now it was something I made, it's weird and experimental. It has a bit of a glitchy aesthetic, seizure warning. The animated GIF at the top changes constantly, it's pulled from a Tumblr dynamically, I'm not picking them.

Mark: I would love to have this as a tool where I could put my followers into it and be able to sort it in the way I want to. Are you thinking of expanding it?

Andy: That is what Nuzzle is. If you want a personalized version ... I like surfacing stuff outside of my network.

Kevin: One of the greatest things about Nuzzle is it's not just friends, it's friends of friends. I find more at the second level, friends of friends, than at my friend level.

Mark: Your friends are boring.

Kevin: Yeah, but my friends of friends are really exciting.

This is a real find, I love this Belong. I had no idea it was there, it's really cool, and does exactly what you're suggesting. It resurrects the off track, off road projects that you would probably not encounter otherwise.

Andy: That's the hope. It's weird and it's flawed in a bunch of ways, but I built it for myself.

Mark: I'm going to use it to get stuff to post on Boing Boing.

Andy: It's perfect for that.

Mark: Very cool Andy, it's been fun catching up with you. Good luck and congratulations on all the projects you've been working on. People can find you at waxy.org? That's where they can find out?

Andy: Or if you use Twitter @waxpancake

Mark: Okay, very cool. Thanks so much Andy.

Andy: Thanks for having me, it was great, I enjoy talking to you guys.

Kevin: Stay focused!

Bye.

Andy: Bye.

Kevin: Bye.