

Ten Years of Spencer Kornhaber Making Music Make Sense

From dragons to divas, Kornhaber's critiques help readers digest the world around them.

By Emma Urdangen



Spencer Kornhaber resisted surf camp, skateboard and any get-outside-and-stop-playing-Dungeons-&-Dragons camp his mom and dad in Dana Point, California, pushed on him.

“My parents had this late-‘90s California fantasy of what a childhood would be, and I was just totally not into it at all,” Kornhaber says.

Instead, the Orange County tween battled medieval foes, searched for treasures and enjoyed the sounds of the Pacific Ocean while sitting at a monitor inside the walls of his home.

At 13, Kornhaber earned \$300 from the online Dungeons & Dragons publication, Dragon Magazine for publishing his first article, “Channeling the elements.” The six-page feature about the four elemental prestige classes—Earthshaker, Icesinger, Firestorm Berserker, and Purebreath Devotee—examined virtual character traits associated with the forces of earth, ice, fire, and air. Today, entering his 10th year as a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, Kornhaber can credit his illustrious career to the game.

Kornhaber, now 37, writes about the complex intersection of music and culture. Over the past decade, he’s crafted profiles like “Björk Is Building a Matriarchy” and political commentary like

“The Celebrities Are Saying the Loud Part Quietly.” His album reviews include “The Growing Gender Divide, Three Minutes at a Time,” a complimentary take on Sabrina Carpenter’s latest album. He calls *Short n’ Sweet* a “salvo against the lunkheaded stereotype that women, blondes, and pop don’t have a lot to say.”

Part of what makes his writing so captivating is its musicality, says Sophie Gilbert, Kornhaber’s friend and colleague at *The Atlantic*. As a music critic, he cares about the sound and tempo of a piece.

That’s always been the case.

With no journalist role models in his family, Kornhaber took matters into his own hands. Growing up, he consumed the op-ed and calendar section of the Los Angeles Times, while keeping up with the local happenings from the OC Register. At 15, his aunt signed him up for a subscription to *The Atlantic*.

Kornhaber’s high school newspaper adviser, Kris Evans-Degan, known lovingly as “Evs” by her students, recalls his early writing days. He walked the halls with John Lennon-esque glasses and a mop of curls “that I always thought he was hiding behind,” she says. Evs knew his potential instantly.

“When I started reading Spencer’s writing, I just went, ‘Holy shit, this kid writes better than any kid I’ve ever had,’” Evs says. By senior year, the 25-student newspaper staff elected Kornhaber as editor-in-chief. His team adored their strong, kind leader, She says.

Kornhaber’s passion for music and his vocabulary skyrocketed his writing above a high school level. “I swear to God, the things he wrote were better than what I read in the LA Times,” Evs says with a hand on her heart.

Today he uses that gift to help *The Atlantic* readers digest culture-shifting events through music and celebrity commentary. From Donald Trump’s re-election in “Why Democrats are Losing the Culture War” or “This Election Actually is about Taylor Swift,” Kornhaber knows art is always political.

Like Gilbert, former *The Atlantic* writer and editor Ashley Fetters Maloy, now a Washington Post features writer, marvels at his ability to find the cultural forces defining a news event.

Maloy points to his 2018 story “The Real Reason Grimes and Elon Musk’s Relationship Is So Surreal,” as an example of his ability to find compelling, obscure intersections of culture and politics. In the piece, Kornhaber comments on the decline in cross-party romance post-Trump.

He highlights the partnership of Grimes, a “Canadian experimental-pop musician who has Karl Marx for a profile picture,” and Musk, a “Silicon Valley billionaire who preaches against unions and previously advised Trump,” as an outlier. “Relationships of all sorts are being tested on the crucible of rising partisanship,” he writes, “which is now arguably a more significant divider than race, class, or geography.”

Kornhaber appreciates his role as a cultural “translator,” he says. “A great critic will explain how an artist fits in the fabric of our society.” He hopes to reach readers who may be unfamiliar with pop music, or hardcore music fans who rarely consume the news.

Some of his “cultural translation” sparks heated online discussion among die-hard fans. Kornhaber’s Taylor Swift album reviews, including “Taylor Swift Could Use an Editor” and “Taylor Swift is Having Quality Control Issues,” reach every corner of Swiftie X, Reddit and TikTok discourse.

“This album is OK.” Kornhaber begins his The Tortured Poets Department album review, “I understand that Taylor Swift is not someone you’re supposed to feel OK about.”

“Spencer, take my hammer because you nailed it *hammer emoji*,” Reddit user Missiablearcher commented.

“Kornhaber said Swift is “having quality-control issues,” but consider the irony of saying that in a review that was released not 12 hours after the album.” Reddit user Two-of-Stars commented.

“Get behind me, Spencer,” Reddit user Expressive_Traffic596 commented, worried about Swiftie backlash.

But Kornhaber shrugs off push-back. Instead, he points me to a Swift-recorded audio trending on TikTok. “It’s just part of the job,” Swift says.

“The reason pop music is so interesting to write about is because it provokes these incredible reactions,” Kornhaber says. The community, the “stans and antis,” the shared adoration or vitriol. He loves it.

“He feels the fan-like enthusiasm for the art,” Gilbert says. “But he’s always trying to shush it down and listen to this intellectual side of him that’s always questioning it too.” This interplay makes his writing so authentic, she says.

Kornhaber sees it as his job to help readers, in a “lawyerly way,” process the work. “You have to make the case without the passion or sparkle, and that is inherent to the art form,” he says.

Despite fervent rebuttal from colleagues, a persistently humble Kornhaber says his edge is not in “raw brilliance or passion” in these pieces. Rather, he credits his editing experience.

Kornhaber started at *The Atlantic* as an associate editor and later became a senior editor. As an editor, he learned discipline, structure, and how to argue in an orderly manner.

Maloy says she grasped the “art of restraint,” with Kornhaber as her managing editor. He allowed her to take a first pass at pieces, where he taught her the important editor’s question, “Is every sentence justifying the space it takes up?”

Other than receiving her pieces back in “ridiculously large font” when glasses-wearing Kornhaber edited her work, Gilbert sings his praises. He’s rigorous and thoughtful about structure and analysis, and he understands what is essential to the piece, she says.

More than that, he’s a stand-up guy. The people in Kornhaber’s life practically shake my shoulders to get this point across.

Maloy remembers entering *The Atlantic* as an intern, feeling nervous and inexperienced. Yet, Kornhaber offered her a safe launching pad. Maloy felt comfortable asking the “dumbest questions that could possibly arise,” and he took each one seriously. “I can’t thank him enough,” she says.

In 2020, Gilbert had just given birth to newborn twins in New York City while her entire family was living in the United Kingdom, a period she describes as “no sleep and mental breakdowns.” Kornhaber showed up one day with two Sweetgreen salads—a lunch they shared every day for two years while working in the same office—and a bottle of wine. They spent the day playing with babies and laughing. “He didn’t tell me the whole time that it was his birthday,” she says. “He’s just such a kind, lovely person who sometimes wraps himself up in this facade of a curmudgeon.”

Kornhaber values these relationships. Living in Brooklyn, he spends his personal life with his boyfriend and friends talking about how he “should have real hobbies.” He enjoys a DJ night out – for work purposes of course! Always a critic, Gilbert describes Kornhaber at karaoke as “skeptical,” with an eyebrow raised, evaluating the song choices and performances.

He still combs through books and magazines, mostly reading the work of his colleagues at *The Atlantic*. “I should probably read other publications,” Kornhaber says with a laugh. In the past few years, he’s picked up an old pastime and reentered the video game world. In true fashion, he published pieces “Confessions of a Sid Meier’s Civilization Addict” and “Hell Welcomes All,”

using writing to process this return to his roots while examining the role of gender and escapism in gamer culture.

And, of course, he listens to music. Kornhaber shuffles through pop, hyper-pop and dance music, with occasional throwbacks like Nine Inch Nails and Radiohead, but usually he explores new tunes. Work and life overlap in that way, he says.

With a life full of friends and fun, Kornhaber wants to make it clear that he is “no longer a hermit!”

Kornhaber references his Dungeons & Dragons years as this “hermit” era. In addition to battling monsters, he developed a passion for music during this period. He contributed to Radiohead message boards and obsessed over his pop-punk and alternative rock CDs of Astro Lounge, Eve Six, Len and Smash Mouth.

And once he heard Britney Spears, Kornhaber fell in love with pop music. “Baby One More Time” played on VH1 one afternoon when he was home alone, and it blew his sixth-grade mind. Yet, for a teenage boy, Spears felt forbidden and taboo. “That tension was always in the background,” he says. “That took me many years to work out.”

When Kornhaber entered Medill-Northwestern’s Journalism Institute for high school students, known as the Medill Cherubs Program, his dreams of pursuing music journalism gained momentum.

He continued on to pursue a Bachelor in Journalism from Northwestern University, where this momentum took off. There, he co-founded the campus news publication, North by Northwestern, which quickly rivaled the well-established university paper, The Daily Northwestern. He wrote album reviews for the publication including “The Shins, Wincing the Night Away,” he commented on the campus political landscape in “What we can learn from McCain and Obama's Northwestern commencement speeches” and he helped readers digest culture in “What the “Facebook five” tells us about ourselves.”

North by Northwestern went on to win the 2008 National Pacemaker Award, known as the “Pulitzer Prize for Journalism” for its news site, and today it exists as Northwestern’s leading independent online and print publication.

During his junior year, Kornhaber completed an 11-week Journalism Residency at Spin magazine. There, he forged career enriching relationships and tackled the challenging task of critiquing music in a limited amount of space. After graduation, he felt “lucky enough,” to continue freelancing reviews for them.

Although Kornhaber veered from music journalism in his first jobs after college, he was grateful for the opportunity to write “long-form cover stories about local kooky figures,” while working at Village Voice Media and writing for OC Weekly.

It was during his time as an editor at Patch.com that Kornhaber sent a job application and a Radiohead album review draft to *The Atlantic*, where he landed a job as an associate editor of its culture section.

After three years of editing, Kornhaber became a staff writer.

When *The Atlantic* announced Spencer’s transition to staff writer, “everyone cheered,” Maloy says. The whole team thought, “We get to read Spencer more! It’s such good news.”

Writing these pieces “tortures him,” but in a fun way, he says. He likes the challenge of reviewing an album he adores, because it’s so hard to articulate that feeling. He also appreciates the rigorous work necessary for a serious feature, like his profile, “Hip Hop’s Greatest Critic,” on Dream Hampton. The result of that effort is rewarding, he says.

Memorably, Bjork’s publicist once invited him to Iceland for an interview with the avant-garde musician. Kornhaber likened the “magical and unique” experience to joining a special club. He recalls her engaging in deep conversation, asking him questions about himself and parting with a hug. “Her art is about being a warm, welcoming connector of a human,” Kornhaber says, “and you feel that.”

In October 2023, Atlantic Editions published Kornhaber’s book of essays, “On Divas,” about musicians, celebrities and moments that characterize the term. The project piqued his interest to venture into future book writing.

“It’s not a burning desire,” Kornhaber says, but he considers it as a change of pace and way to maintain longevity as a writer.

Above all, Kornhaber is living the dream.

Evs, who never misses an issue, never doubted him and hopes to read his stories in *The Atlantic* for many years. “He’s reached the pinnacle of what he loves doing,” she says.

Kornhaber, typing his Dragon Magazine piece, “very self-consciously” dreamed of becoming a music critic, he says. “I never let myself believe too much that it would come to be my real job.”