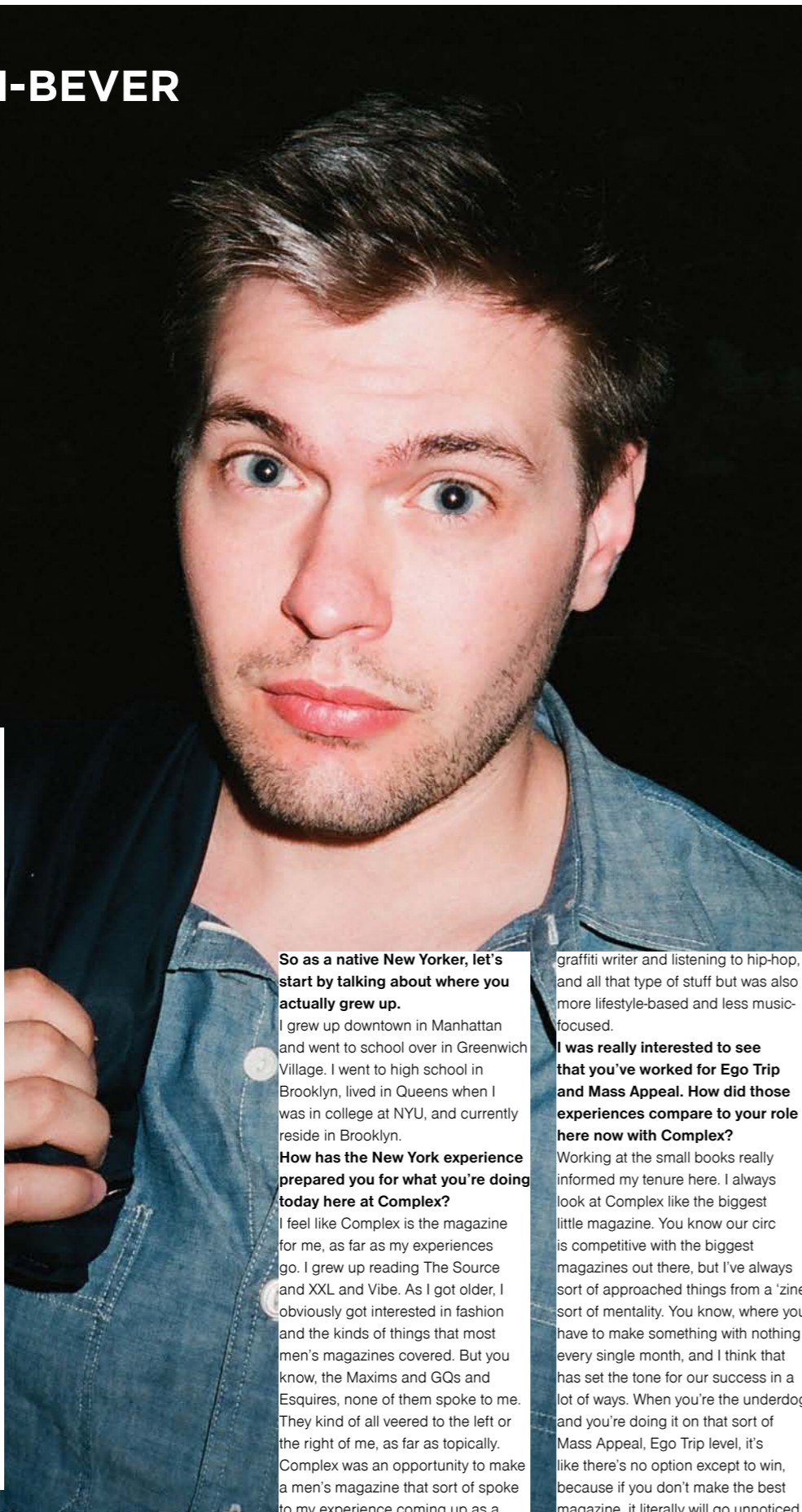


# NOAH CALLAHAN-BEVER

## QUALITY CONTROL

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Noah Callahan-Bever's resume reads like a pop culture fiend's fantasy career path: grow up in Manhattan in the '80s and '90s and witness the birth of street culture firsthand, land your first writing gig in '97 as an intern at Ego Trip at the tender age of 17. Move on to work with Vibe and Mass Appeal, before being appointed Editor-in-Chief of Marc Ecko's Complex Magazine just before your 30th birthday. It's not hard to see that the guy has talent, but it's NCB's ability to find the balance between niche and popular culture, and walk it so artfully, that has become his calling card. We spoke to the surprisingly humble New Yorker about his history, and the changing face of the biz.



**So as a native New Yorker, let's start by talking about where you actually grew up.**

I grew up downtown in Manhattan and went to school over in Greenwich Village. I went to high school in Brooklyn, lived in Queens when I was in college at NYU, and currently reside in Brooklyn.

**How has the New York experience prepared you for what you're doing today here at Complex?**

I feel like Complex is the magazine for me, as far as my experiences go. I grew up reading The Source and XXL and Vibe. As I got older, I obviously got interested in fashion and the kinds of things that most men's magazines covered. But you know, the Maxims and GQs and Esquires, none of them spoke to me. They kind of all veered to the left or the right of me, as far as topically. Complex was an opportunity to make a men's magazine that sort of spoke to my experience coming up as a

graffiti writer and listening to hip-hop, and all that type of stuff but was also more lifestyle-based and less music-focused.

**I was really interested to see that you've worked for Ego Trip and Mass Appeal. How did those experiences compare to your role here now with Complex?**

Working at the small books really informed my tenure here. I always look at Complex like the biggest little magazine. You know our circ is competitive with the biggest magazines out there, but I've always sort of approached things from a 'zine sort of mentality. You know, where you have to make something with nothing every single month, and I think that has set the tone for our success in a lot of ways. When you're the underdog and you're doing it on that sort of Mass Appeal, Ego Trip level, it's like there's no option except to win, because if you don't make the best magazine, it literally will go unnoticed.

**What have been some of the highlights in your career with Complex?**

In Complex, there are a bunch. The one that's very close to me was my first cover with Lil' Wayne and Travis Barker, and it was an interview where Lil' Wayne basically threw Jay-Z under the bus. To be able to deliver a story that arguably made more noise than any other Complex interview in the magazine's history, and would also go on to sell double what any Complex had ever sold prior to that, that definitely was a very gratifying kind of moment. I was like, 'There's a lot I really need to still figure out about all this, but I got this one part of it down'. So there's that, but honestly the shift from being a print team to being a fully integrated content development team that does the blog every single day as well as the magazine, that's probably one of my biggest professional accomplishments.

**How important is having young-blood as part of the Complex team?**

Very. Our latest hire is 21. He graduated from college three weeks prior to us hiring him. When I was at Ego Trip, I was incredibly blessed to be an apprentice to these guys who were insanely smart, and I saw what they were able to impart on me, none of my competitive peers had, because I had this level of mentorship and that prepared me in a way that no one else that I dealt with received.

And when I went to Mass Appeal, I was really bent on sort of giving back to the next generation. It's giving back and it's also helping yourself, because you're aware of who the smartest people in the next generation are, and you mentor them, and then they make you look smart and you hopefully make them a little smarter too. That core team there, is still the core team that I work with to this day and it just sort of grows. I think that the whole company is a lot stronger because there's a certain rigidity for quality-control that gets passed on, but there's constantly this new crop of people with new energy and new ideas.

**How much has the New York that you grew up in changed?**

It's not even the same thing. It's funny. New York went from being very New Yorky, to then being a very, very clean version of that in the late '90s, and now it just becomes more LA every day.

**So when you say that, do you mean the original culture of New York is starting to die?**

New York used to thrive off the friction

of high and low. What's interesting about New York is that everyone is thrown together and they're really, really close and they're really on top of each other and you walk around, like the Upper West Side and you're on a tree-lined block with million dollar brownstones, and then you get to the corner and there's the projects, and then the next block is a tree-lined block. You meet kids from the Upper West Side and their experience is informed by friends who grew up in million dollar homes, and also kids that grew up in the projects, and they all go to the same public school and know the same people. Same thing growing up in Brooklyn. There's a cultural mash-up going on. Now I just see, especially in the nightlife scene, it's become very balkanised and there's this very Hollywood celebrity, weird plastic nightlife that goes on.

**It's become fake?**

Yeah, it feels weird... I hate being the old man that's all grouchy about shit like this because it's just lame. Shit is what it is, and it changes and what are you going to do, but there's definitely a sort of plasticness to a lot of New York. Here's a perfect example to me: if you live in New York, going to a bar in a hotel, that's the lamest thing ever. What a fuckin' tourist thing to do. But now, it's standard and it's regular for new New Yorkers to go to a hotel bar. And that to me is quintessentially LA.

**To me LA feels really plastic. It's just about celebrities and whatever's hot. Whereas when I come here, I still notice that there are a lot of different things going on, and people have a unique sense of themselves and their own style. The neighbourhoods still feel really unique from one block to the next. But I guess I'm not a New Yorker, so you see a different side.**

I'm obviously hyper-sensitive to it, when you're in it as deeply as I am, you sense very small shifts. Like the Lower East Side, once these neighbourhoods go from being sort of artsy cool, to then being where young Wall St guys from out-of-town move, because they work all day and they wanna party at night, it turns into a college town in the middle of what used to be a cool hood. You see the shifts. It's different today, like the whole gallery/graff/cool-guys scene is different today than when I was running Mass Appeal. It really felt like in 2002, this was the most happening thing in the city and then things change, time goes by.

**One thing I really noticed that seems very different to me now is**

**the hip-hop music that came out of New York really had a sound that seems to have disappeared. How do you feel about that? I mean music is obviously something that's influenced you a lot.**

It's disappointing. I still love a lot of rap music and I think that there's a lot of great rap music that comes out, but New York went from being leaders to being followers in the last 10 years. It's disheartening because it feels like now, here either people are just sort of jumping on the bandwagon of whatever regional sounds are hot, or they're doing this like nostalgia-based retro thing, which to me is as equally uninspired. Because, dude you know what? You're not gonna make a record in 2010 that sounds better at being a 1996 Mobb Deep record, than the 1996 Mobb Deep records that already exist. It's not possible.

But you know, I hope that there will be a sort of emergence of something new here, but I feel like it's past that point now, where New York is now just this totally bizarre melting pot of all kinds of people, and so the more interesting shit that comes out of New York is more likely going to be made by Theophilus London, than it is by the next rapper of Queensbridge, which is a little disheartening just because of my personal taste, but you can't go home.

**Is there anyone that to you personifies the New York that you love?**

Still to this day? To me, not really. I feel like it was a moment, you know what I mean. Like Mobb Deep and all that type of stuff was like a really amazing moment in popular culture and in niche culture, but I don't think there's any way you can sort of still embody that without being a little bit of a relic. I mean, I think in his own way, Jay-Z kind of does, but even he is very transient in his aesthetic and in his style. But he is a super New York guy. I mean, that's probably the closest.

**Can you nominate one place in New York that's a favourite spot that you would say to me 'You know you've gotta check this out while you're here'?**

That's kind of tough... Go to Great Jones Café. Me and my friend Darth can be found there pretty much about twice a week, every week. Probably been there twice a week, every week for like the last 12 years. It's on Great Jones between Lafayette and Third. It's just like a little hole-in-the-wall place, but it's a great place to have some food and get drunk.

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