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Alumni Voices: Dr. Kim Simpson, Austin-Based Author, Musician, and Disk Jockey

by Carrie Andersen

Kim Simpson is an Austin-based author, musician, disk jockey, and English composition instructor. He graduated with a Ph.D. from UT in 2005, and his book, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution*, was published by Continuum in 2011.



How is the work that you're doing right now informed by the work that you did as a student in American Studies at UT?

First of all, it taught me not to dread the writing process. In my application to the program, I said something along the lines of wanting to "write, write, write." Until then I had tended to drag my feet even though I had specific projects I wanted to tackle. The admissions committee granted my wish and I wrote a torrent of words during my time in the program, many that I'm happy to forget but many more that I still like. I'm proud to have made it through the demanding writing regimen the department requires of its students in terms of both quantity and quality.

Next, it taught me that deadlines are my friends. From day one, the American Studies program expanded my field of vision quite dramatically, and just about anyone else who's been through it will likely say the same thing. While this is certainly a bonus, it presents additional challenges to people like myself who enjoy exploring things still further and further still, tinkering, and procrastinating outright. Big projects like dissertations and books, I came to realize, exist only because their creators found stopping points, made certain concessions, and obeyed deadlines.

It also taught me to welcome criticism, to understand that validation did not need to take the form of continual praise, and to appreciate the diversity of viewpoints my work would be subjected to. I was lucky to get into the graduate program at a time when I could learn from—and bounce ideas off of—venerable American Studies trailblazers like Bill Goetzmann, Bill Stott, and Bob Crunden (who, when I first spoke with him, referred to the program as a "haven for oddballs"). The feedback given to me by all of my wondrously varied professors was invaluable, as were the opinions and thoughtful comments from my fellow students. I realize now what a luxury it was to have so much feedback readily available, and much of it still dances around in my head.

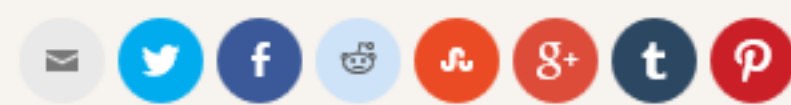
Do you have any words of wisdom or advice for students in our department about how to get the most out of their time here?

I imagine that those who consider entering the program have all been driven by a specific subject they'd like to spend more time with. I'm a believer in holding fast to this subject and approaching all of your studies in relation to it. The program, by nature, is already so kaleidoscopic that you won't be doing yourself any disservice by keeping a narrow focus.

My next word of advice is that although you should take full advantage of every opportunity to bolster your academic marketability, you shouldn't overlook the power your work has in developing credentials for yourself in the non-academic world. My early hunch about American Studies was that it could "open more doors," whatever they might be. The doors certainly did open, in my case—most of them granting me entry into sectors of the world I'd written so much about.

At the risk of contradicting anything I've just said, my final words of advice are to resist any notion you may be harboring of a prescribed and correct way to go about earning a degree in American Studies. That kind of thinking will almost certainly slow you down, dim your flame, and cause you to doubt the subject matter you're passionate about, which is not the true oddball spirit. You're not there for the program; it's there for you. (Thank heaven it is, though...)

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