



Davy Rothbart, Creator of FOUND Magazine



Davy Rothbart has been putting together discarded love letters, birthday cards, Polaroids, to-do lists and diary entries and compiling them into FOUND Magazine since June 2001. What started as a cut and paste 'zine for friends has gone on to spawn a number of books, a Dirty Found line and helped launch his own career as an occasional NPR correspondent and author of the short story collection "The Lone Surfer of Monatana, Kansas."

Davy will be a part of several events in town over the next couple of weeks, starting with tomorrow night's launch party at Crash Mansion for the new magazine The Rumpus alongside Michael Showalter, Will Sheff and others. He's also hosting a free Valentine's Day Party next week called "Kick My Heart's Ass," where they'll be showing short films on love inside peep show booths. He talked with us about walking through New York naked, being an inside joke of Drew Barrymore's and how "holding it down" might be keeping him down.

How do finds that get sent into Found from New York differ from anywhere else? Well we get a lot of stuff from New York, so it's clearly fertile territory for finding stuff. But what I'm struck by is how similar finds are from around the country, even from around the world. Yeah, people might express themselves a little different, but the things going on in people's lives are so similar no matter where they're from.

I got two letters recently in the same week and they were really similar. They were two guys both writing to siblings about the recent loss of a parent. One was from New Canaan, Connecticut and one was from a small village in Kenya and they were both so similar.

What's interesting in New York to me is that there are so many different kinds of lives being led all within one block. Sometimes I'll get two finds from the same block or even three blocks away. I'll get them a week apart and they'll be so different.

Can you share your favorite "only in New York" story from all of your visits here? I woke up on in Lower Manhattan completely naked on a park bench at nine in the morning once. I was staying at 13th Street and 1st Avenue for a couple months about five years ago. It was my birthday and me and my friends were playing basketball at some park in lower, lower Manhattan—not sure exactly where. I got really drunk and it was kind of a warm night. And I got pissed cause I lost so I took off my shoes and threw them at my friends.

So when I woke up, I was like, 'What the f*ck, dude? Shit!' I was so hung over, I couldn't think straight and I was trying to piece together the night before. I had my socks on still, but *that was it*.

No drawers? I might have thrown my drawers at my friends. You know your best friends how you can throw your underwear at them just to gross them out? You're really mad at them, but you're trying to be funny.

And the challenge was how to get clothes, how to do anything. Nobody would talk to me. I actually think that if I had been weirder, I could have found help more easily. The only thing I could find to wrap around me was a large pizza box. I folded it and wrapped it around my midsection. I remember just asking people—cops and shop owners—if they had a blanket, if they just had anything they could give me. I didn't have my phone or a Metrocard or any money. And I was two or three miles from my friend's house in the East Village.

I would just talk completely sanely to people, completely rational. "Can I just talk to you for one second? Listen, I was really drunk last night. I'm naked now. Do you have two dollars so I can ride the subway?" And I think the fact that I sounded normal, but was completely naked weirded people out even more. People would just totally ignore me. They'd say into their phone 'I can't hear you right now. There's some weird, naked guy trying to talk to me.'

I eventually ended up walking back all the way. At some point, I dropped the pizza box and was just like, 'Fuck it.'

I think so much weird stuff happens in New York that it wasn't a big deal for anybody. You filter out a lot. You have to in order to live there. Yet there's some part of their brain that knows, 'Whoa, that guy isn't wearing any clothes. All right.' And they're onto the next thought, the next weird person.

I discovered you gotta go to black neighborhoods. I used to have these giant blue sunglasses that were like Kurt Cobain meets Charles Nelson Reilly. And visiting my buddy up by Fordham was the only part of the city where people would be like, "Oh my God!" or "No he didn't!" People acknowledge that crazy shit is happening in a way they don't in the rest of New York. It's funny, when I play basketball, you often take your shirt off if it's a street game. And I have psoriasis. So I have these bright brown circles on my chest and on my back. And if you're playing with white people, everyone's kind of looking at you, not sure what it is and not sure what to do.

And if you play on a black court, people are like, "What the fuck happened to you? Did you get hurt?" "What happened? What's wrong with you, man?" But they don't mean it in a mean way. They're just curious and they're more open about their curiosity. There's less fear offending. And it's really appreciated. Cause you'd rather just tell people, "Oh, it's this genetic skin thing."

So with the shows you have coming up in town, you're doing stuff with everyone from Jonathan Ames to Will Sheff (of Okkervil River) to Post Secret's Frank Warren. Then in the latest Found, I saw Miranda July contributed a piece. How much have you reached out to other people and how much have people found you and the magazine? Well I've done a lot of reaching out in the last year or two because this book that I put together coming out in May, I asked a lot of my favorite writers and artists to contribute something for it. But I kept finding that more people knew about than I expected. Maybe cause in Michigan, people around here don't really know about Found. But they do in New York or San Francisco or LA.

And then people will come up to me tell me, "Yeah man, I went to a concert and Kimya Dawson was wearing a Found t-shirt." How the hell does Kimya Dawson know about Found? So in the last year, I reached out to about fifty or so of my favorite people (Chuck D, Jim Carroll) and asked them to write something about something they found or one of the notes in the magazine. Some of them knew about Found, a lot of them didn't. So I'd check my Inbox and there'd be something from Susan Orlean followed by Seth Rogen.

That's a good one-two punch. I think they're an item now, heh. Other times people would reach out to me. A couple years ago, a woman who worked for Drew Barrymore got in touch with me saying, 'Hey, I work for this actress. She loves Found and wants to get a bunch of magazines to give to her staff for the holidays.' I guess there's this Found note that started the whole thing that ends with 'P.S. Page me later.' And the woman who worked for her told me that Drew Barrymore always signs that to her friends, like it was a line to a movie or something.

And I heard that they're gonna turn your book of short stories into a movie now? Yeah, Steve Buscemi wrote a screenplay based on three of the stories in the book and is trying to get it made. I don't know what'll happen with it, but it'll be exciting just to see it.

Is there any new writing you're working on now? Yeah, this year I'm trying to write a book of first-person essays. I've been writing some humorous little things for *The Believer* and *GQ*. I found I really like writing fiction, but I also like writing true first-person little pieces and am trying to write a book of those this year.

Any favorite authors in that style? Well, Jim Carroll is my writing hero. *The Basketball Diaries* is the book I knew when I was a kid. But his book *Forced Entries* is all first-person stories about living in New York. He's so funny, but so reflective. I think of that book as a predecessor to Jonathan Ames and David Sedaris.

I feel like I need to write more fiction so that I can stop getting in trouble writing and performing stories about people I know. Yeah, that can be dicey. That can be tricky.

Girls especially. I've gotten in trouble just for mentioning onstage that I was going through a breakup. Why didn't she want you to mention you guys had broken up?

Oh, cause she didn't want me to get sympathy from it. Why didn't she want you to get sympathy, cause you were the one who was wrong?

Yeah, I was the goat. (*playing out the scene*) 'Bitch, get the fuck out of my fuckin pad right the fuck now!' And then an hour later, (*sheepishly*) 'I've been dealing with this breakup. It's really hard.'

Hey, is there any hip-hop you're listening to these days that you're excited about? My friend in Philly emails me every week with the newest, dopest shit to check out. And I do occasionally. But mostly I listen to the shit that I've always listened to—EPMD or some old-school shit.

Actually I've been writing this screenplay about the late eighties and so I've been YouTubing—I don't know how to do the whole LimeWire thing—so I use YouTube to listen to old songs. Do you remember the song by Candyman, "Knockin' Boots"?

I know the name. How does it go? The chorus is like "Ooh boy, I love you so. Never-ever-ever gonna let you go. Once I get my hands on youuu."

Girl, it's true. Like only the Candyman can!

So that's at the centerpiece of this screenplay? Yeah, it is actually. It's critical.

But I've been listening to this rapper from North Carolina, Petey Pablo. He had a couple of big hits like, "Wave it in the air...Spin it like a helicopter...Take your shirt off." But the album that's all on is really deep. It's really rugged North Carolina—I like rappers that come out of part of the country that aren't on the coasts.

Do you like Three 6 Mafia? Yeah, exactly—from Memphis. The whole Hustle and Flow soundtrack actually is fuckin' awesome. My brother Peter and I did a Found Europe tour last year. And there's nothing like pulling up into Oslo, it's seven and rainy and you're pumping that soundtrack.

My favorite songs on that album are by Al Kapone. On the DVD extras, they explain that Al Kapone was just this really local Memphis rapper who when he heard that they were working this movie, he just came up and was like, 'Hey man, how can I be involved?' And they didn't really have the main songs like "Whoop That Trick" and "It's Hard out Here for a Pimp." So he talked to Terence Howard for a couple of hours and then went home and wrote two or three of the songs that they used in the movie.

So he was the success story of the movie's story, only if it had worked out. Exactly! Cause he really was some dude just selling tapes out of his trunk, but he was, you know, brilliant. So a couple of the songs are like Terence Howard singing his songs like "Whoop That Trick," which I still like. But then there's a couple others that are just like Al Kapone songs. There's this one that's like, 'Southside ho! Northside ho! Westside ho!' I think it's track 19.

Oh you *think*, huh? It might be.

Do you have any spots you have to hit when you come to town? Any restaurants? I like to get Jamaican patties at a place by Washington Square. I go to Joya, you know that Thai place in Brooklyn?

That's not the one in Woodside, is it? No, it's in Boerum Hill/Cobble Hill area.

Oh yeah! I've been there. I took a date there once. Well, I thought it was a date. It wasn't?

Well, a lot of times I don't realize that it wasn't a date until I discover that the next one isn't a date. Oh, I've been there, many times. Too many times.

Now you came into town soon after 9/11, right? Yeah, after September 11th, I was living in Chicago at that time and was doing a little bit of public radio recording. So this guy asked me to go to New York and cover it, record whatever I wanted to. I took a bus, a Greyhound on September 12th, which was its own interesting adventure. There were a lot of New Yorkers just trying to get home.

I got down there and everything was closed down past Canal, but you could kind of walk past it at two in the morning. I was like six blocks away from the pile. It was burning still and it was really an intense thing. Cause I had been there a lot as a kid when I would visit New York and my dad would take me up there. There's something just so powerful just looking at it, ya know? And it was weird to just to see New York as a ghost town. Normally there's all sorts of action and cabs all around, no matter what. But it was all just emptied out except for firefighters charging in and out. And I was just sitting there watching it. There were these giant trucks that could just carry like one beam. I was thinking about how heavy those must be if it could only carry just one beam.

I kind of walked off to this side street for a minute and there were just these three homeless dudes just hanging out. Nobody was down there, it was completely empty except these guys. And one of these guys was singing. As a radio person, I was like, 'This is almost too perfect.' He had this gravelly, gravelly old voice and he was just singing all kinds of different songs. So I asked him 'if I could just record you doing what you're doing.' And he kept singing—not for me, but just because they were hanging out. Then he started singing 'New York, New York, I wanna be a part of it.' And in the background you can hear the trucks rolling past carrying all the debris as you hear him singing the song. It's really beautiful and kind of crazy and fucked up.

So how come you haven't moved to New York yet? I've come pretty close. It's hard to say. I think I'm closer now than I've been. I travel a lot and there's something nice about having a home base. It's just easy and comfortable here. I live in this nice, old house with five roommates. A lot of my close friends live in New York (and LA and San Francisco). It's really appealing. And it's a different kind of energy obviously. It's a different kind of creative community.

Here it's all college students and people generally move away after they get out of school. Money is one part of it probably. It's really cheap here. So I can do the stuff that I wanna do and not worry about income or paying expensive rent. I also get a lot of work done here. I go out, travel around the country and have fun. When I'm here, I'm pretty focused. I rarely leave my house—or even my basement. It's like being in a lab. I think I'm prone to distraction in New York or LA.

I don't know, there really is no good reason. I have a lot of great, old school homies here. I like the feeling of holding it down in Michigan. I like that there's a group of guys I hang out with here and I don't even know what some of 'em do with their job. They live here and that's enough to be friends. But I like going to New York or LA cause there's more people doing the kinds of things that I'm doing. I really miss that being there.

Maybe it is Michigan pride. Cause everyone moves out of here. I kind of like the idea of "holding it down," but actually holding it down isn't that awesome. And I kind of would love to live in New York