



CULTURE

After 17 Years of *Design Matters*, Debbie Millman is Just Getting Started

The renowned host of the longest-running design podcast in the world discusses her new book and her ultimate dream interview subjects.

by **Salomé Gómez-Upegui**
02.24.22



Courtesy of Debbie Millman



In an interview with the American artist Deborah Kass, Debbie Millman, the host of the podcast *Design Matters*, begins by asking whether it's true that Kass can't live without Bounty paper towels. Stunned, Kass confirms it is and asks Millman where she gets her information. "Oh, I have my sources, and I never give them away," she replies. They both laugh, and this seemingly innocuous question gives way to a riveting conversation about the famed artist's life.

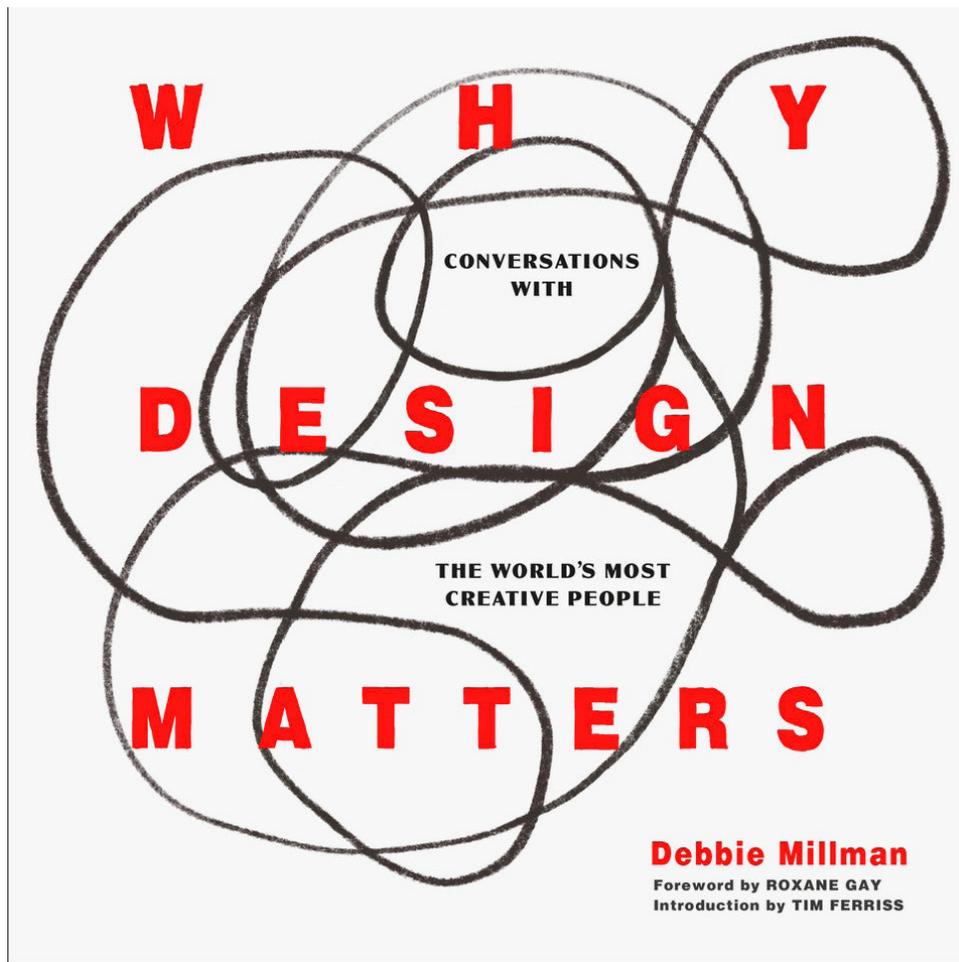
Most episodes of *Design Matters* begin this way. Millman brings up an unusual detail from her guest's life, signaling to interviewees and listeners alike that she's done her homework—and that the conversation to follow will be anything but ordinary. For an hour or so, Millman—who prepares up to fifty pages of research before each conversation—brings in her audience with the improbable life stories of legendary designers, musicians, public intellectuals, performers, chefs, writers, and artists.

"I have spent sixteen years consumed by the question of how to conduct a good interview, how to get interesting people to reveal the depths of who they are, how to earn their trust so that our conversation can go to unexpected places," Millman writes in the introduction of her new book, *Why Design Matters: Conversations with the World's Most Creative People*, released on February 22nd after numerous Covid-related delays. After conducting close to 500 interviews since 2005, Millman culled fifty-five interview excerpts for the anthology, alongside soulful photographs of some of her most iconic guests, including Cheryl Strayed, Esther Perel, Isaac Mizrahi, Brené Brown, and Christina Tosi.

Although Millman was born in New York City and lived there for most of her life, when we speak over Zoom, she's at home in Los Angeles. I begin by telling her she once said, "The only thing I've ever been 100 percent sure of is that New York City is where I want to live." (She now splits her time between coasts with her wife, the author Roxane Gay). Millman laughs and replies, "That's what falling in love does to you, I guess: makes a fool of you!" As a longtime fan of the podcast, I'm delighted to see that she's as lovely as she sounds on the show.

My connection to *Design Matters* is fairly personal. I began listening years ago, during a period of deep uncertainty in my own life. At that time, I wanted to abandon my legal career to become a writer, but didn't know where to begin. Hearing hundreds of renowned creatives share the minutiae of their unorthodox career paths gave me hope. It was (and it still is) liberating to hear that I, too, could push past my comfort zone and design an extraordinary life.

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Courtesy of Debbie Millman

In our interview, Millman tells me she started Design Matters after receiving a cold call from a salesperson at Voice America (an online radio network of the early aughts), offering the opportunity for her to host her own show. In the book, she explains that what she initially considered a job offer was actually an “opportunity” to hire Voice America producers—but by the time she realized this fact, her excitement at the prospect of having her own platform was too strong. “At that moment, I realized it was nothing more than a vanity project...[and] I absolutely leaned into my vanity,” she writes.

Long before launching the podcast, Millman had already built an incredibly successful career. She is a designer by trade and president of the design division at the New York City design agency Sterling Brands for 20 years. She is currently the president emeritus of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, co-owner and editorial director at Print magazine, and cofounder and chair of the world’s first graduate program in branding at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, where she currently teaches. She’s also written six books prior to Design Matters. Having turned 60 in October, it’s clear that Millman is just getting started.



Over time, Design Matters has evolved into a podcast about so much more than design. Yet Millman never imagined it would become one of the longest-running podcasts in the world, let alone be selected as one of the best shows on Apple Podcasts or win a Cooper Hewitt National Design Award. “But I’m really glad I am still doing it and hope to be doing it sort of forever,” she says.

Despite her impressive trajectory, Millman is quick to accept that she still gets nervous from time to time. “When I interviewed Rickie Lee Jones [last year] I was so nervous; I was frantically shaking,” she recalls. Before Covid, the talented host recorded Design Matters at the School of Visual Arts in front of her graduate students, whom she speaks about often and fondly. “For my students, I try to imbue the idea that they don’t have to buy into their insecurity. They don’t have to wait for confidence to magically appear. The courage to take the first step is what helps. That’s the birthplace of confidence,” she says.

With her 18th season in the works—chef Alice Waters and poet Jason Reynolds will join her next—Millman seems as passionate as ever, while still dreaming about the many guests she’d like to interview in the future. “I’d almost give my left arm to interview Joni Mitchell or Stevie Nicks, or Michelle Obama or, I mean, there are just so many people... Kara Walker, Julie Mehretu,” she says, leaning into the screen with excitement. “Anybody from Radiohead. Lin Manuel Miranda. Oh, Andrew Garfield. And J.J. Abrams.”

I ask if she still sees Design Matters as somewhat of a vanity project after nearly two decades. “Definitely,” she says. “I feel like I do this as much for me as for sending it out into the world. I never in a million years thought that I’d get to interview Marina Abramovi or Ira Glass, or Michael Stipe, or any of these extraordinary thinkers.

“I remember in 1984 playing [Stipe’s] music over and over again,” she adds. “If anybody had told me back then that in 2021 I was going to get to talk to him about the lyrics I was obsessed with, I would have thought they were hallucinating somebody else’s life—not mine.”

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