Daniel Levitin’s at Changing Hands Bookstore in Phoenix this week.

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Daniel Levitin was in his 30s when he went back to college and got a degree in cognitive psychology, launching the career that has made him a best-selling author. His first book, *This Is Your Brain on Music: Understanding a Human Obsession* (2006), spent more than a year on *The New York Times* Bestseller List.

Not that Levitin was a slacker before that. He'd racked up more than a dozen gold and platinum records as a music producer and consultant, working with Steely Dan, Blue Oyster Cult, and Stevie Wonder. He also did pretty well as a stand-up comedian and joke writer, performing at the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco with Robin Williams and at comedy clubs in California. And he played bass in a San Francisco punk rock band.
band that opened for Bad Religion.

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But when he figured out there was a profession that would allow him to spend his time looking at how the human brain works, whether it's processing music or humor or something else, everything clicked.

"I was always interested in our mental life," Levitin says. "I was interested in why we remember the things we do, how we use language sometimes literally and sometimes figuratively. I found out that cognitive neuroscience is the field in which one can ask these questions and get paid for it."

His new book, *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*, out this month, looks at what happens to our brains when we consume the kind of random informational crack that most of us do every day, thanks to the miracle of the Internets.

According to Levitin, this information overload means that "being organized is a far more important trait than ever before." Unfortunately, it's also much more difficult to be organized -- because we're busy drowning in the information we don't know how to arrange.

Levitin's book is a well organized life raft that aims to help the overwhelmed feel less alone and more prepared. As he makes clear, we're all up against a formidable onslaught.

Levitin has been trying to help the organizationally challenged since childhood. He remembers staying after school one day in third grade and being asked by his teacher to go back to the supply closet to get some tape.

"While I was back there, I noticed that everything was higgledypiggledy, and I offered to stay after school and rearrange the closet."

The teacher gratefully accepted, and that, says Levitin, is when he realized that "I really liked doing that, and that people appreciate that."

As together as he is, he does procrastinate sometimes -- he says everybody does -- although it's hard to imagine that his version of procrastination involves countless hours spent scrolling through any form of social media. He says life has trained him to procrastinate less, because he just doesn't have the time, between teaching at McGill, doing research, writing books, and working on a staggering number of other projects at the same time.

"The key is that you want to procrastinate the things that don't matter as much and not the things that do," he advises. "You don't want to procrastinate the annual physical and you don't want to procrastinate the thing that will get you fired."

He also admits to using the "piles and piles and piles" method of organizing some things in his life, but adds that he know exactly where things are in those piles "because they're kind of like geological bands of time." In fact, he says, the "piles" system actually exploits the human brain's "exquisite place memory."

So how much can we really train our brains, and how do we help the next generation cope with information overload? In the chapter "What to teach our children," Levitin looks at how much the world has changed for school-age kids in the last 15 years and how different the acquisition of
information is today. He offers some strategies that he says "can be applied to all children, with various degrees of success."

Sometimes, he notes, the things you learn in childhood that you rebel against in adolescence and as a young adult "come back to you in your 30s and 40s, and you're really grateful."

For Levitin, the lesson was one his mother taught him when he was a boy: After you go to someone's house, you send a hand-written thank you note. "When I got to be about 13, I thought, 'That's lame. It's so old-fashioned and prissy.' But I started doing it again about 15 years ago, and wow. It feels good, and people are delighted to get a note."

Levitin treasures the hand-written notes that people send him. He keeps his favorites in a file folder -- of course -- and goes back to look at them every once in a while. One favorite is from Neil Young, thanking Levitin for the gift of a cassette tape.

The two met several times in the '80s, when Levitin was in the music business, and on one occasion, Levitin brought along a recording of someone doing a Neil Young parody.

"I had it, thinking I would play it for him, and he asked for it. I didn't know it at the time, but he collects recordings of people doing parodies of him. He thinks they're funny."

**Daniel Levitin will appear at** [Changing Hands Bookstore in Phoenix](http://changinghands.com) **on Saturday, August 23, at 7 p.m. Visit [www.changinghands.com](http://www.changinghands.com) or call tktktktkt for more.**

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