

INTERVIEW

Amanda PALMER

In June 2012, Amanda Palmer became the first musician to raise more than \$1 million on a Kickstarter solicitation. Having left her label, Roadrunner Records, she needed funding to release and promote her new solo album, *Theatre Is Evil*. She asked Kickstarter funders for \$100,000. They pledged nearly \$1.2 million. The scale of the response was a surprise, but the enthusiasm wasn't. Palmer has long been heavily engaged with her fan community. These days, she maintains a voluble presence on Twitter, where she solicits fans for ideas, lyrics, and local help with shows. But even in her early career, she was inviting fans to dress up in costumes and participate in and around her stage shows, and creating personal art packages for people who bought her albums. That commitment to fan interactivity has followed her through multiple collaborations (as half of The Dresden Dolls, with drummer Brian Viglione, and half of Evelyn Evelyn, with Jason Webley) and solo albums, plus an EP, *Amanda Palmer Performs The Popular Hits Of Radiohead On Her Magical Ukulele*.

Heavily influenced by cabaret in her past music and presentation, Palmer moves in a poppier direction with *Theatre Is Evil*, but it's still full of the alternating raw, screaming emotion and plaintive exhaustion that characterizes her previous music. She recently spoke with *The A.V. Club* about making the album and being a "social musician" in the crowd-sourcing era.

The A.V. Club: You said in an interview back in 2010 that the album was finished in your mind, but you weren't ready to record it, because you knew it would consume a year and a half of your life. What happens in your creative life when you focus on one thing for a long period to the exclusion of everything else? Can you do that?

Amanda Palmer: Well, yes, I can. And sometimes I have to. The largest example of that was going to the studio. I've been in a recording studio enough times to know that it is not the best place to multitask. Doing a couple of takes of a song and running out to check your email to talk to someone about video production really is not good. For the recording, I really thought about that strategically, and I was like, "Well, okay, where are we gonna record our record in order to actually have the most productive work environment?" And there was a part of me that would have been really excited to make my record in New York City, but I took the larger perspective and thought we'd be absolutely insane to do that. We'd be completely distracted. We would be around all of our other collaborators. We would be running a mile a minute to try and get other things done. We needed to go away. Usually what musicians do in that case is, they go out to the mountains. They go off to the country. They go to the desert island with the fancy recording studio. But I actually hate being in isolated places. Especially when I'm really trying to work creatively. That's exactly why we decided to make the album in Melbourne, because Melbourne was very, very far away from real life. But it had fantastic city energy, and we didn't feel like we were unplugging from society. We definitely focused. And a big part of that, funny enough, was just the time change. While we were working in the studio all day, everyone in America was asleep. We felt like we were working on another planet. [Laughs.]

AVC: When you left Roadrunner Records, did you foresee this future of crowd-funding your work? Did you have a plan? Or was it more about getting out of the abusive relationship than planning the

next relationship?

AP: It was more like, "Get out of the abusive relationship and don't worry about what's coming next." I knew whatever was coming next, I was going to be fine, because I had a direct line to the fan base. And the fan base was there, and ready and willing to support me. So whatever I was going to choose for the next step, be it another indie label, or crowd-funding, or pulling it back and releasing my music on sheet music only, I knew the fan base would be there to catch me whichever direction I decided to fall in. Really, my relationship with them and their unflagging support was what gave me the confidence to give Roadrunner the finger and walk out that door without even remotely glancing back.

AVC: You've gone to your fan base for ideas and lyrics as well as money—where did the crowd-sourcing process first start for you?

AP: It's funny, you know... I think looking back, The Dresden Dolls always did some form of crowd-funding in the way I'm doing it now. Because there's a difference between crowd-funding on Kickstarter and saying, "My goal is \$50,000, and if I don't reach it, I'm not going to make an album." I'm going to make music no matter what. I'm basically using Kickstarter as a giant pre-order mechanism. The number of pre-orders just determines the scale of the project. But I was going to make this album, obviously, come hell or high water. The fans were just going to determine whether I had money for publicists and really simple nuts-and-bolts stuff like that. Because if we had budget X, we were going to be able to do *this* number of music videos, and if we had budget Y, it was going to be less. The Dresden Dolls, our hands were tied because of Roadrunner, but we could always buy albums from Roadrunner and repackage them ourselves. [Laughs.] We did that. I remember one Christmas, we did a giant crowd-fund, and we said, "Okay, we want to put together a Christmas package. Here's the pre-order. We will go out and buy all of the supplies and see how many people want it." We

put the call out on our website, which was a forum. This was all, like, way pre-Facebook and pre-everything. This would have been way back in 2003 or 2004. We just simply did it through our website and through our mailing list, which we were diligent about keeping up-to-date at our live shows.

And we got a few thousand orders and Brian [Viglione] and I sat in my fucking kitchen. [Laughs.] We ordered a bunch of CDs from Roadrunner, and we packaged them along with really cool cards and really cool wrapping, and we did it to order. Musicians have been doing that since day one. The moment I left Roadrunner, and I really could see the power of my direct connection with the fans, I just started selling music to them directly. I put out my Radiohead record, and I basically did it with kind of an internal version of Kickstarter by putting the album up with five different packages, starting at a download for a dollar and going up to a really fancy package with vinyl and painted ukuleles for \$500. I watched as the orders came in, and then we went into production after the orders came in. It was identical to what I just did through Kickstarter, I was just doing it off the back of my website. But then when Kickstarter came along, it was a logical next step, because artists were doing this all over the place. And Kickstarter just gave us this legitimized marketplace to do what we were already doing, but with a name and a system everybody can understand. There is some psychological jump that people have to make to go to an artist's website and directly give him their credit card and spend money. The most hardcore fans will do it, but the casual fans won't. Kickstarter, I think, just serves as a really benevolent middleman for those who might be slightly suspicious about whether this is a genuine transaction.

AVC: One of the things you've done a lot with your premium packages is give fans direct access to you, through personal phone calls or doughnut meetings or private concerts. Have any particularly memorable experiences come out of those donation-related fan meetings?

AP: The one cool thing to point out is that it's a snowball effect. You can sell cool, weird, creative access to your fans, and poetically, those moments of connection actually bring them closer to you, and make things even bigger and beautiful for the next time around. When I do a house party for \$5,000 in

Melbourne for a crazy loft filled with 50 kids who worked really hard to put the party together and pooled their money to buy it, the experience that I have with those 50 kids in that loft and hanging out with them from 6 p.m. until the early hours of the morning when I have to crawl into a taxi and go home—that's an experience I never forget, and they never forget, and it really serves to feed the relationship in a way that it doesn't get fed when it's just me and 2,000 people in a theater.

This brings up this other weird discussion, which is like, "What does that have to do with songwriting and being a musician?" And this is where things are getting really interesting right now. And really blurry. Because the critics and the naysayers out there are kind of looking at this and scratching their heads, saying, "Why should you have to go out and prostitute yourself doing all these things that you musicians shouldn't have to be doing?" I look at that and just find it hilarious, because this is the part of the job I like. I love hanging out with the fan base. I love being social. I love trying crazy parties. To me, the music is almost an excuse to get to that part. This is not true of all musicians, and I think that's what people have to remember. There are social musicians, there are antisocial musicians. There are musicians who love doing business and running their business, and there are musicians who can't stand it. You cannot make a blanket statement about that. What's been really fascinating to watch is, there's a new paradigm and a new marketplace, and musicians and artists are having to now approach it from a new angle. There's a new

set of skills. Putting together a cool, artistic Kickstarter with a bunch of backer levels that are actually cool and creative and worthwhile and not cheesy is a skill in itself. Some people have that skill and some people don't, and some people hate doing it, and some people love it. It's like anything else. It's truly the next step in music. You look at rock 'n' roll, it's like those who wanted to plug in and play and make a lot of noise, hooray for them when it happened. [Laughs.] And those who wanted to continue singing quietly around a campfire, they had to find another path. —Tasha Robinson



► In a much longer version of this interview, Amanda Palmer talks about keeping up with her many projects and how her marriage to Neil Gaiman works for them both.

It's online at avclub.com/interviews.