

## **SOCIAL NETWORKING COMES WITH A HEAVY ENERGY TAX**

Article in "THE TICKET" (5/7/2013), Irish Times, by Una Mullally

Web-savvy musician Amanda Palmer has become an oracle for a frantic music business treasure-hunting for answers. She says - "Every artist has to forge their own tasks in this giant messy stew that nobody can define."

It's hard to avoid two words when the future of the music industry is being discussed. As labels, artists, distributors, agents, A&R, promoters, commentators, tech gurus, and everyone else with a finger in a pie that nobody knows the flavour of, never mind the recipe for, debate, one name surfaces again and again: Amanda Palmer. The American musician has almost become the oracle for a frantic music business treasure-hunting for answers in the matrix, with the industry as Neo, sitting in a kitchen asking the lady-who-knows-all where this fractured, rotten thing is going. "I always feel conflicted about it because, you know, I don't think I have it all figured out," Palmer says. "I don't think anybody does. It can feel like a lot of pressure. I mean it is a lot of pressure, especially when everybody is arguing about you as a concept."

Palmer is spilling her guts over the phone from New York, before getting on a flight to play a gig with an orchestra in Denver. "I always preferred to identify as an artist, so it does get a little taxing. What people seem to collectively forget is the reason I'm doing all this fucking shit in the first place is to connect to fans and make music... It's a really fascinating time, and I'm just as fascinated about the movements of the industry as every other person."

Born in New York and raised in Massachusetts, Palmer attended Wesleyan University, before decamping to Harvard Square in Cambridge where she busked as an eight-foot-bridge, one of those street performance artists who only move when you give them a coin. It's a gig that taught her skills. "I've thought a lot about that. I learned an incredible amount of patience. It was a totally reactive job. Also some really interesting things happened, like my peripheral vision got incredibly keen. I could see someone's body language when they were 25 feet away." Perhaps it's that keen perceptiveness ("because I acted as a mirror for so many people and had to observe," she says) that helped her figure out how to use technology so astutely.

Her ubiquitous online presence has consequences. The ink is still drying on a book deal she has signed about such themes, but she admits being online so much has also had an impact on her creativity: "If I look at the patterns of my life over the past 10 years, I would be absolutely pulling the wool over everyone's eyes if I said social networking doesn't come with a heavy energy tax. "At any given moment where does your brain go? And if at any given moment your brain is going to Twitter or Instagram or Facebook or Tumblr and not to the song lyrics you're working on? That's just a question of how the pie chart of your brain is divided. I think a lot of musicians really struggle with this. And I think that's a lot of the reason people are pissed off with me. It's so difficult to carry the entire burden of your business and your artistry, and when

people wave the flag ‘Amanda Palmer has it all figured out! She’s a social networking genius!’, it’s really a red herring. Because it works for me, but it works for me because I’m fucking weird. I like spending so much time online. I love the constant personal connections I make. And I love wearing my heart on my sleeve. But that’s me and doesn’t necessarily apply to every artist. One has to be really careful not to make general off-the-shelf blanket rules about what works for an artist. The thing that makes you a fucking artist is that you’re absolutely unique. We’re looking at all these new tools and people are trying to find out what the solution is. Kickstarter? Spotify? There is no answer. Every artist has to forge their own tasks in this giant messy stew that nobody can define.”

She expands on the theme, referencing a Jonathan Safran Foer university commencement speech where he mused deeply about the impact of the internet on the very experience of being human. “I’m in a café right now and there are two couples sitting at tables both at their iPhones. Am I grouchy old person – ‘back in the day, we all used to sit around and talk’? But I worry that what we’re chasing is elusive. In our race for connections we’re not dealing with real life, which is actually what we’re chasing when we comment on Facebook, and answer every text. When you’re finding it easier to text instead of call because you don’t have to deal with the messiness of being a human being, that’s fucked up. The only solution is to be aware of it, and not fear checking in with a person, and having a meal without phones, remembering the pot of gold at the end of this elusive rainbow of connections has to be the moment the cloud of internet vanishes and you can look in someone’s eyes and hold their hands and get the actual goods.” Her articulate monologue about one of the seething questions of our time – the impact of technology on human emotion – makes you want that book to hurry up.

At Palmer’s South by Southwest panel in March, numbers of Twitter followers, Kickstarter delivery costs (Palmer raised over one million dollars to finance a new album last year on Kickstarter, yet also spent a chunk of change fulfilling the reward incentives promised to fans), Palmer as a “cottage industry”, and her DIY ethic were all explored and dissected. It was fascinating, yet the most captivating segment was when she rose to play The Ukulele Anthem. “See what happens when you muzzle a person’s creativity?” she sang, “and do not let them sing and scream? / And nowadays it’s worse ’cause kids have automatic handguns. It takes about an hour to learn how to play the ukulele...” the song went on, as a sanitised conference room was forced to contemplate creativity and society, not spreadsheets of social media metrics, “... about the same to teach someone to build a standard pipe bomb – you do the math.”

It’s that joyful darkness, also exhibited in the work of her husband, author and artist Neil Gaiman, that has endeared Palmer to one of the most eclectic fan bases around; musos, misfits, gays, straights, feminists, boys, girls, Bono, artists, writers, techies, jazzers, folkies, goths, theatre heads, drags, lesbians and everything in between. Yeah, Bono. They hung out recently. “I thought back to my 13-year-old self,” she laughs, “and if you told that 13-year-old girl she would be sitting in an Irish pub in California with Bono drinking Guinness discussing aspects of the music industry, and also going to him for counsel?” Her incredulousness hangs in the air. “We actually have a lot in common. Everyone is constantly giving him shit – his music gets lost in the mix as well. I asked him, ‘How do you deal with this?’ Because who the fuck can I ask?”

‘What do you do? You’re Bono!’ Being the kind guy that he is he actually told me some really useful things about the perspective he’s gained, how he deals with being hated, and with the slings and arrows of being a person in the public eye and all that.”

Counsel is something Palmer herself also gives: “The road giveth and the road taketh away, and one of thing things the road gives you is access to the people who can arm you with the tools you need to survive the army of self. And I try to do the same for the younger artists I meet who are falling on the path behind me.”

It’s that process that is sharpening her picture of what it’s all about: “To feel I’m part of the lineage no matter what people say. That feels like the point of life itself. To feel part of a cycle.” A futurism that is conscious of the past? Now that’s an idea worth kickstarting.

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