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AMANDA PALMER

On Getting Ready To Go Solo

By Meredith Turits; photos by James Hickey

Pitched directly on the edge of Manhattan's Pier 17 overlooking the Brooklyn Bridge, the red and blue bigtop of South Street Seaport's Spiegeltent looks like a film set. And as the crawl to the makeshift backstage area to meet Amanda Palmer commences, the circus imagery explodes, ushering in near-miss collisions with acrobatic performers who pepper the path to Palmer's pre-show trailer – a surprisingly lavish setting for someone who, for years, “wasn't ready” to perform her own music to an audience.

Besides her fame and experiences through her work with The Dresden Dolls, Palmer's music seed was ironically planted as a solo performer, writing songs when she was only 11.

“I didn't meet any musicians who I resonated with until I met Brian [Viglione of the Dresden Dolls], which was when I was 25,” Palmer says, now 32. Her first real solo shows took place during her time at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT. The performances – occurring only about three or four times over the course of her college career – happened in the school's campus center. “It was terrifying,” she recounts. “I'd set them up maybe twice a year and spend two or three months freaking out about it.”

When finally connecting with Palmer, known primarily as the voice of punk cabaret duo, it only seems fitting that an introduction to the vocalist would include a bit of an epic, theatrical journey. Perched tightly, almost at attention, in a brown leather armchair, everything from Palmer's presence to her eye makeup is built for the stage. And Palmer's debut solo effort, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer*, carries the dramatic torch in tandem. As a production that grew to be slightly larger-than-life, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* is the mark of a truly organic project that evolved into a serious, explosive effort through impeccable timing and even more serendipitous collaborations.

“I wasn't the type of person who was playing all of my songs for my friends and making tapes for them and really self-promoting myself. I just didn't do that because I knew I wasn't quite ready and, especially back then, the songs were so dark and personal and sort of over the top that it wasn't the type of music where you were like, ‘Hey check out my band.’”

Palmer constantly wrestled with how to start her music career once graduating.

“I had no doubt that [music] was what I wanted to do but I just didn't know how to go about doing it,” she explains, adding

that she began street performing in her home base of Boston to support herself. Palmer persisted writing and started booking solo shows in galleries and friends' lofts, but found it hard to motivate. “I felt constantly guilty that I wasn't doing more or pushing my career forward, but I just didn't quite know how to go about it.”

Meeting Viglione finally provided Palmer the incentive to ignite the flame. Palmer notes that as a solo artist, it's an entirely different experience trying to gain exposure than working with a band.

“It's really different when you hand someone a CD and say, ‘This is my band, we're called the Dresden Dolls’ versus ‘Here are my songs, my name is Amanda Palmer.’ You feel like you're representing a group and not just trying to feed your ego.” Despite not feeling accepted by the Boston rock scene – something that still resonates with Palmer on a personal and solo artist level even after her success with the Dolls – the duo found themselves ensconced in major label contracts and world tours. After the release of their second studio full-length, *Yes, Virginia...*, Palmer was put in a position to bring her vision of a solo record back onto the horizon.

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“Everyone in our circle around us was telling us to cool off and take a break because we [Brian and I] were going at it so intensely, and constantly hitting the same walls and working ourselves to the bone. And the timing was just right.”

Palmer's “break” from the Dolls turned into her debut record, which arrived in September after two years in the making.

“When I first conceived of the solo record it was supposed to be solo piano and voice and it was supposed to take a couple of weeks,” she says, laughing about the reality of the project's transformation. “I didn't think I'd be taking it this seriously.”



That sort of happened gradually." Upon meeting indie-pop staple Ben Folds in Australia and jelling instantly, Palmer's effort no longer looked like a quick blip in the Dolls' family canon. Folds took the front seat as producer, steering the project into his Nashville-based recording studio.

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"The collaboration with Ben Folds was like jumping blindfolded into cold water. I had really no idea what it was going to be like to work with him," Palmer imparts. "I just assumed it was going to be great and that he was a great guy and a cool producer and had a great studio and that would all just work out magically. And it actually just all worked out magically." Palmer titters, still in awe of the collaborative chemistry.

"There was no moment when I thought, 'God, why on earth did I ask this total stranger to produce my record? Why did I think this was going to work?' It was like, 'Oh, of course that's great. Of course the record sounds great. Of course the songs sound great. Of course the engineer is great.' It felt like the hand of God was just guiding me from one great thing into another. I felt constantly really, really lucky." The result bore Palmer's 12-track record, a fluid, stunning gem of flawless composition. *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* ushers in the dark overtones and eerie candor familiar to Dolls fans, while also

exposing Palmer as versatile, accessible songwriter: a conductor of an ever-unfolding rhythmic symphony.

Flying solo, Palmer underwent reeducation while recording. "You keep learning how little you know, especially in the studio," she explains. "It's a slippery slope because you learn that your knowledge is very limited and that there are definitely a lot of people who can help you with decisions but then the minute you say, 'Oh, hey, everyone else can just decide,' you start losing what is making your music good. You need a certain degree of control to make it sound the way you want. You need to know when to stand up and override [the producer's] decision even if you've let them make every other decision that day. And that just comes down to trusting your gut."

Allowing Folds jurisdiction over the songs, the notion of control became an overtone of the entire experience. As the most novel struggle for Palmer, it's also her greatest paradox.

"I certainly had a lot of control in the Dolls as the main songwriter...but it wasn't until working on the album solo instead of working in the studio with Brian actually gave me the opportunity to *give up* control," she narrates. "Ben had a great aesthetic vision for a lot of the songs and said, 'Listen, Amanda, if you put faith in me and believe that I have a great vision for these songs, just track them and leave them here with me and I will do to them what I'm hearing in my head.' It took an enormous leap of faith for me to just walk out of the studio...It's something I never would have done with the Dolls. If I had gone into the studio with Brian...that control wouldn't have been mine to give up. It felt wonderfully liberating."

While the idea of working with full control and accountability as a solo performer certainly manifested itself in the studio, it continues to be a seriously influential factor even after the record's release. Though Palmer says that she hasn't changed the actual songwriting processes, it's rather the aftermath of recording that has changed going forward on her own.

"One of the wonderful things about being in a band is when things get fucked up, you all get fucked up together. You get to commiserate about how fucked up things got. It's much more fun to toast champagne with a bunch of people and more comfortable to be able to both cry together when some show is terrible. I've been thinking about this on this tour," Palmer says.

"I'm really the end of the line and so there are moments [where I find myself] looking around and being like 'Holy shit, this decision is completely up to me. Shouldn't there be someone else around helping me out with this or telling me what to do? Or that I'm making a mistake?'" Palmer still has an inclination to bounce ideas off of others both because her professional career has been bred in a collaborative setting and also because of her inherent disposition; she says, "It's essential. Period."

Though the project was intended to land as a stripped down, piano-focused incarnation, Folds' involvement and Palmer's itch to keep the project engaging wouldn't allow her to usher out the idea of collaboration.

"In order for things to stay interesting I need to involve other people," she says. "When you collide with the right people, you shouldn't postpone collaboration." Just a few names out of an all-star cast, appearing alongside her on the record is Folds himself, Annie Clark of St. Vincent and the Dead Kennedys' East Bay Ray. Their additions helped amp up the intensity of the effort, and provided Palmer with an environment that, though she initially imagined she'd had enough of, was just what she needed.

Moving forward, even with Palmer's experience and expansive fanbase, she is still feeling the effects of surprise and constantly learning how to play the cards correctly in a solo atmosphere. In terms of receiving new fans versus existing Dolls supporters, she heeds some caveats.

"It's such an incredibly personal decision," she says. "It's like saying, 'When do you fire your bass player?' I believe firmly that if I just do what comes naturally, things will sort themselves out."

"It's going to be an interesting combination," Palmer hypothesizes. "Certainly the hardcore Dresden Dolls fans are going to check out the record and are probably going to like it because it's not a wild departure from the sound of the Dresden Dolls at all. I think I'm also going to find a lot of new fans because...of people I've worked with on the record...And maybe new people who just want to check me out as a solo artist and hopefully won't bring all of the [Dresden Dolls stereotype] baggage along with them."

Amanda Palmer has reached the goal for which what many musicians strive. It's taken a lot of time and even more learning about herself for the project to settle into place and come to fruition. And despite having been the product of the process, as far as Palmer is concerned, there's no formula for the ominous question of when to embark on a solo project, or how to field the issues around the choice.

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