

BLADE INTERVIEW

Amanda Palmer

BY LANCE PERKINS

“Brechtian punk cabaret” fans have been anticipating the solo tour and CD release by Dresden Dolls lead singer, Amanda Palmer. The *Blade* caught up with the gifted artist, pianist, composer, vocalist and ukulele player to see what she’s been up to following the successful “True Colors” tour, which featured the Dresden Dolls and Cyndi Lauper. Palmer has released her debut album, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer*, and with a tour that includes a performance this month at the Henry Fonda Theatre, she shows no signs of slowing down.

You’re quite an icon. Do you find yourself striving to convey a particular meaning to people when you’re writing songs?

I think I try really hard not to do that. I think the best songs come when I’m not keeping anybody in mind when I’m trying to write. It gets harder, actually, because sometimes it can be useful to bear in mind — like the song will see the light of day. People out there know about my band. This will actually have an audience. There also can be a real danger in trying to please people.

What made you choose this career?

I think part of the reason I got into this



From Palmer’s solo debut, “Who Killed Amanda Palmer.”

PHOTO BY: BETH HOMMEL

job in the first place is that I really wanted people to like me. It seemed like a fantastic way of doing it. Not even like me — I love relating to people. I love connecting with people. I think that was an important driving force in why I wanted to perform and wanted to write. But it can't supersede the creative act itself. That can really get you in trouble.

How would you describe your way of composing songs?

When I get ideas for a song, they usually land: *thunk, thunk* — down together with words and music in a little embryonic form. It's like tuning into a radio frequency: You tune in and you can kind of catch part of it and the rest of it. Usually, when I'm writing a song, the rest of it is vaguely formed around what the idea is and I just have to sit down and translate how I feel the rest of the song, or this idea, is manifesting. That takes concentration and discipline that I usually don't have.

Some of your songs deal with heartbreak — which make them very relatable. Do you have any advice for people who can't seem to get over that kind of emotional pain?

It's a really fertile time to connect with yourself. Even though that may seem like it makes you incredibly lonely, it's a really good time to reboot and also to reassess what connections are important: with other people; with other projects; with other objects. I think, in any event like that, when you've had some sort of upheaval in your life — like a death or a loss, or a breakup — the most important thing is just to let yourself feel everything. It's going to take *whatever* it takes; you can't distract yourself away from the reality of what those feelings are going to be. I think people spend a lot of fucking time thinking that they're feeling the wrong things. It sounds insane. It actually sounds crazy. But we do a lot of "I wish I weren't feeling this" or "I wish it didn't make me feel this way" or "I wish I weren't so angry"; however, the reality is, as soon as you can own it — or live it — that's usually when it dissipates. That's

usually the fastest route to being with those feelings. Owning them completely and feeling them completely are usually what will indicate the beginning of the end.

That's kind of like in your song "Ampersand," in which you talk about "being flame retardant" in the lyrics?

I just realized there's a subtle double-entendre in there. I'm so not flame retardant. I'm a total flame magnet! There's a great



PHOTO BY: LANCE PERKINS

Dresden Dolls performing with the "True Colors Tour" in San Diego, CA.

song by Jenny Ellen Young — she's this great, sort of "folky" singer-songwriter — with a chorus that goes, "The skillet on the stove is such a temptation./ Maybe I'll be the lucky one that doesn't get burned./ What the fuck was I thinking?" It's the same kind of sentiment. I feel like I've careened through my life: always assuming I'd be magically protected by some force that never actually was there, thinking that I would constantly be the magical special one who wouldn't actually be affected by the circumstances of the world and wanting really badly to believe that one plus one didn't necessarily have to equal two. That can be a great way of living your life and exciting and extraordinary, magical things will happen to you; but, there's also a way in which being deluded about consequences and realities can really bite you in the ass. We all feel that as human beings, to a greater or lesser degree.

Do you feel that you get a lot of pushback when trying to make something happen a certain way, even when it's not meant to happen?

Absolutely. But, by the same token, there are times in your life where every fucking person around you will say, "This is not meant to be. Don't do it. All signs are pointing left." And yet you still have this gut reaction that — even though everyone around you is saying "go left" — you just want to go right. And there you are, standing at the crossroads, going, "There must be some right decision. Either left is right or right is right." If you've gone right, you've gone right. That's it. That's your life. That's the decision you've made; if you go left, you go left. I believe it all comes down to the confidence you have in your own random decisions. I mean, once you choose to go right, it's a mistake to say, "No — wait, I mean left" or "No, no — wait. I want to go right." Realizing that whatever the decision is later on is not the point; the point is that the decision *is* the decision. You need to focus not on whether you went left or right, but just on the path that you're taking, and find out if you are sure you won't fall on your face.

In the lyrics in your song “Runs in the Family” and in (Dresden Dolls’) “Night Reconnaissance,” you write about less-than-pleasant family life and childhood. Were you drawing from personal experience?

Nobody’s parents are perfect. And, you’re a product of your parents; you’re a product of your environment; you’re a product of your biological makeup. You’ve got to be able to accept those things and come to terms with them before you can fully take the next step. You’ve got to own where you come from before you can figure out where you’re going. You’d think, with a song like [“Runs in the Family”], that my parents were terrible and I got a bum deal. I actually had pretty wonderful parents — and really supportive, especially compared to a lot of things I see and hear about other families. Even with such a supportive household, though, it didn’t stop me from going mad when I got into my twenties. I mean, how much of “me” belongs to them? How much of “me” is dictated right now by the blood that’s running in my veins and the information that’s being carried around in my brain, and how much of “me” is real? I think about every teenager or 20-something that’s going through a crisis in which he or she starts wondering about motivation, fundamentally, as a human being. Where did that come from? I wrote that song 10 years ago, and 10 years ago I was going through a lot of that. Learning how to sympathize with my parents as human beings and deeply feel into their own stories, their own dramas and their own pain — that was the beginning of figuring shit out.

What was your parents reaction to your bisexuality?

I think they thought it was cute: “Oh, Amanda’s in college and she’s acting like a

lesbian. It’s cute. Manda, when are you going to bring home a boyfriend?” I definitely got the feeling there was “patronizing” going on. I even remember how I felt. Because I had been fooling around with girls in high school, but I hadn’t had a girlfriend or anything; so it wasn’t something I felt I had to share with my parents. Then, when I got to college, I started seeing a couple of girls and thought, “Maybe I should tell my parents about this.” I definitely wanted to — whether they brought it up or I brought it up, I remember there was this kind of

them as I get older. They’re really wonderful people and typically liberal folks who were brought up in the ’50s. So, they have that strange, kind of schizophrenic, intellectual acceptance of just about anything. That doesn’t mean they’re going to celebrate the fact that their daughter lives an alternative lifestyle.

In light of the 2008 general election, as an artist, do you think you somehow need to be political?

I think there’s a fine line that every artist kind of has to walk. And everyone chooses to do it differently. I’m generally of the opinion that, as an artist, you can make the strongest statement and exert the most powerful influence by displaying your own integrity and living by example and showing people that there is a choice. There’s always a choice. You can choose to live a boring fucking life and keep your crappy job and not follow through with any of your passions, or you can make a different choice. I think — and [Dresden Dolls drummer] Brian Viglione and I used to talk about this all the time, in terms of our fans and the message that we had (if we actually had one) — was that nothing should ever hold you back from being who you are and from doing what you passionately need, want to do. One of the things we saw resonating with people through the band was



From the “Ampersand” video.

PHOTO BY: BETH HOMMEL

“you must be going through another one of your experimental phases because you’re in college” reaction. I think they felt the same way about me being a vegetarian. Fourteen years later and they’ve finally accepted that it’s not a phase.

Your parents sound quite open minded about your sexuality and career.

They’re really supportive. They’re wonderful. And I love them. I get closer to

that these kids would look up to us and say, “It really looks to us like the Dresden Dolls are just doing what they want to do.” And we would go back to them and say, “Exactly.” That doesn’t mean that you should do like the Dresden Dolls. It doesn’t mean that you should dress like us. It doesn’t mean you even need to be in a rock band. It doesn’t even mean you need to be an artist. It means you always have the choice to listen to your inner

voice and not to someone else's bullshit. I think, politically, that's just as true. You can definitely use the platform to educate people, to inform people.

Was that part of the theme behind the "True Colors Tour" with Lauper?

Yeah, but if you don't also provide people with the inspiration and the tools to have the strength to make their own decisions, you're not giving them anything lasting. That's why I don't think it's important for me to be so super-specific about what to do, who you have to vote for, what you've got to be educated about. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. I think the strongest influence I have is that I'm Amanda Fucking Palmer, I've made certain choices and it's worked out for me and maybe it'll work out for you, too. You can decide if you want to quit your job and pursue a certain career and you want to leave your relationship and go it on your own, or if you want to have the strength to stay in your relationship — you're a much more powerful person than



PHOTO BY: LANCE PERKINS

Palmer rocks the stage during the "True Colors Tour" in San Diego, CA.

you may think. Having people come up to me night after night and say they found what I do inspirational, to me, means a whole lot

more than hearing someone say, "Because of you, I voted for Barack Obama." These last few changes are a lot more important than getting someone elected.

What do you think about gay marriage and Proposition 8?

I feel complicated about gay marriage, because I'm not really a huge marriage fan in general. So I felt like, in a way, it's perpetuating a kind of an antiquated way to trying to go about doing things. But, to progress as a whole group of people, there's certainly something in that. If we were to live in a utopian society, we wouldn't even be talking about this. Every relationship would be sacred.

Amanda Palmer performs on Dec. 16 at the Henry Fonda Theatre, located at 6126 Hollywood Blvd. in Los Angeles. The show starts at 8 p.m., and ticket cost \$24. For more info, go to www.AmandaPalmer.net or www.myspace.com/whokilledamandapalmer.



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