

## **Amanda Palmer and the #LOFNOTC: How online fan participation is rewriting music labels**

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### **Summary**

Recent events in digital culture are changing the ways in which artists and fans are able to interact. By resisting traditional labels as a musician and performer, Amanda Palmer has set out to redefine the ways in which artists and their audiences connect. Through her early work as a street performer, Palmer understood the need for a bond between artist and audience. With an ability to embrace participatory culture, in her live performances, blog, and Twitter stream, Palmer's actions are unconventional and often provocative. In this article, I trace these interactions, arguing that Palmer and her participatory fans are rewriting traditional norms about recording artists and their audiences.

**Keywords:** Participation, fans, music, recording industry, social media, Amanda Palmer, Neil Gaiman.

### **Introduction**

In her 2010 blog post entitled 'Why I am Not Afraid to Take Your Money,' musician Amanda Palmer called for a radical move away from traditional recording industry strategies for production and distribution. In Palmer's manifesto, she describes how artists will be bypassing their labels and going to their audience: 'coming straight to you (yes, YOU, you who want their music, their films, their books) for their paychecks' (2010). Rather than keeping them at arm's length, Palmer works to include her fans in her work. Her fans have embraced this role, communicating with her through various online channels and participating in her work. Palmer's recent success in raising over \$1M on Kickstarter (Palmer, 2012a) is just one indication of how her fans are helping her reinvent funding models for artists. Uncovering the moves she makes, how her fans respond and interact with her, and how Palmer has rejected the traditional business model for being a musician is important because 'if it is true that the grid of "discipline" is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being

reduced to it' (de Certeau, 1984 p. xiv). Exploring that resistance is necessary to study how the music business is evolving and the impact of audience participation. It is even more imperative for helping to reveal how participatory fans are shaping that evolution through resistance to the cultural norms imposed on both the artist and the fan for years by the recording industry. In this article, I apply de Certeau's concept of strategies and tactics (1984), examining how artists are deploying tactics to resist the strategies of their recording labels and arguing that they are successful because of their interactions with their fans. Audience support is necessary for the success of most artists; participatory fans are vital to artists working outside of the big four recording labels (Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group, Universal Music Group, and EMI).

Palmer's fans are not passive; they are her contributors, co-conspirators, and supporters within a much larger do it yourself (DIY), participatory culture forming between artist and fan. In de Certeau's work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he states that 'Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority' (1984, p. xvii). In the case of Palmer's community, their 'marginality' is successfully supporting her. They are creating new kinds of effects for artists in an industry that is struggling woefully to come up with sustainable and viable business models. These shifts in how fans interact with musicians are creating new spaces for these roles to merge. Whether they are staying up late on Twitter to be part of the Losers of Friday Night on Their Computers (using the #LOFNOTC hashtag to communicate), forming flashmobs to help her produce music videos on a California beach, or supporting her successful fight against her label, Palmer and her participatory fans are working on re-tuning the music industry.

In one of her most recent activities, Palmer is finding successful ways for her fans to sponsor her as an artist. Connecting with fans while disconnecting from her label is helping her build and cultivate her community. Between the resourcefulness of these artists, the eager fan participants, and the various social tools online, new business models are being explored, fine-tuned, and deployed. In explaining the value of studying fan communities, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington explain that 'studying fan audiences allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities,' (2007, p. 10). Exploring the events and interactions between Palmer and her fans, researchers can pinpoint these key mechanisms and see how they are touching on that larger reality that Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington describe.

Examining Palmer's work as a performer and her fans as participants, this paper will address several specific moves that both are making in concert with each other. Palmer is not under contract with any of the big four recording labels, and she has severed her ties to her independent label (Roadrunner Records). While the big four may soon be consolidated into the big three (Reuters, 2012), independent labels are trying to innovate and artists are exploring new ways of connecting with fans that help them bypass these traditional models. What tactics are fringe artists using in order to build an audience? How are their audiences reacting to these attempts at connection? Within this space, it is critical to trace how

musicians are using new modes of access to their audiences in order to not only entertain, but to communicate and collaborate with their fans to create new modes of sustaining art. In doing so, many of these artists are finding that they can leverage these fan collaborations in order to confront, bypass, or even sever ties to their labels. By deploying tactics outside of these labels, they are able to make moves that connect them to their audiences. At the same time, these fans are becoming active participants in the careers of these artists, helping to cultivate, curate, and produce content with and for these artists.

Palmer's success in 2012 on Kickstarter can be seen as a culmination of many years work to engage with her fans. While labels have used the strategy of aggressively trying to control content, individual artists have found success in leveraging technology to remove these barriers between artists and their audiences. Today, there are many strong examples of positive fan response to this movement of participatory artistry, including Radiohead, Trent Reznor, and many others<sup>1</sup>. For indie artists such as Palmer, the ability to engage with a fan base, co-produce with them, and support each other is a major factor in finding this success.

## **Method**

In this article, I describe the ecosystem created by Amanda Palmer, her fans, and her former record label. Drawing from this ethnographic study, I then use de Certeau's framework of strategies and tactics to examine current movements within fan participation and artist support. Using this framework allows me to examine the ways in which fans are interacting, supporting, and co-producing content with artists. It also aids in examining the tensions between strategies of traditional recording labels and the tactics deployed by artists trying to work around these labels.

Using de Certeau's definitions, I describe a 'strategy' as something 'proper' in that it can 'serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it,' (1984, xix). For the purposes of this work, I am using a strategy to describe an official activity, much like the ones taken by recording labels, that occurs as 'a victory of space over time' such that it is a long-term activity (xix). In defining the counterpoint, I look to de Certeau's definition of a tactic as 'a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization)' (xix). Tactics are activities done by the 'weak' in a place that 'belongs to the other.' In her study on R.E.M. and their fans, Bennett (2011) found that the band deployed strategies while the fans responded with tactics; there, it is clearly a case of hierarchy and power. In the case of Amanda Palmer's fans, her audience is able to co-create and instigate projects, content, and materials both to support Palmer and their own fan community. What Jenkins (1992) referred to as 'poaching' for fan communities, is now emerging as co-creation and collaboration, allowing fans to participate at levels they had not experienced before. The question is whether this phenomenon is harkening a new era of fandom or if Palmer's success is due to her fan's passion for her music and values.

Specifically, I am examining various strategies and tactics of each, arguing that Palmer deploys tactics when she is trying to interact with fans to accomplish minor projects

and deploys strategies when trying to work on projects that are more robust. Such robust projects include supporting record production, while more minor projects include t-shirt sales and video production. Looking specifically at the acts of her fans, I work to show how these tactics can not only help fans become part of Palmer's participatory audience, but also become central actors in her long-term business plans. Or, as Jenkins states: 'if old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active' (2006a, 18). Often, the activities in these case studies blur the lines between strategies and tactics when these boundaries are crossed. I argue that this is precisely because of the participatory interactions between fans and artists.

In order to analyze movement in this ecosystem, I examined Amanda Palmer and her fans as they posted content across several social web tools including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Vimeo, and websites relevant to the community itself. Community-specific websites included Amanda Palmer's website, *The Shadowbox* fan forum run by Palmer and her moderators, and the fan driven website for *The Rebellyon*. Depending on the case study, different sites within the ecosystem were leveraged by Palmer and her fans – leading me to examine those sites more closely. When citing specific tweets, I do not obfuscate the names; direct quotes can easily be located via Google. Public tweets are also now being archived by the Library of Congress in the U.S. (Raymond, 2010). However, I find it important to be transparent in my scholarly work. Therefore, I did reach out to the participants whose tweets I am directly quoting in this article to let them know I would be including their tweets. Many of these fans were eager to participate and support Palmer in this way. That said, I do not include private tweets in my research; all of the tweets included in this study are publicly available as of this writing. The same is true for postings in *The Shadowbox* – these are publicly available postings.

While I go into these examples in more depth later in this article, it is useful to note how this ecosystem was traced across systems. The kind of work that Palmer's fans are doing does not exist exclusively on one type of website, social media tool, or forum. And, in fact, the use of any one system is completely predicated on the types of tactics that her fans are deploying. More often than not, these tactics are in support of Palmer's own strategies for long-term growth as an artist, or tactics for holding a successful gig.

In the case of *The Rebellyon*, fan participation was the focus of the data collection. Palmer's work was far more in the background publically, while her fan work was foregrounded. In this case, I was looking for key moments of tactic-making activity as a response to the strategies of Palmer's label as constructed by her fans. Across social web sites such as *The Shadowbox*, Flickr, and the fan generated site for *The Rebellyon*, her fans produced content in support of Palmer's rejection of her label's decisions.

In order to understand and analyze the Kickstarter campaign, I examined tweets sent around the time of Palmer's 2012 Kickstarter. While the Kickstarter itself lasted from 30 April to 31 May, I collected over 3k tweets from 18 April to 11 June in order to examine the phenomenon from Palmer's early public discussions through to her celebrations of the successful campaign. Of these tweets, random samples were taken during peak moments of

the Kickstarter. I focused specifically on Palmer's stream, with the goal of uncovering whether her focus was on strategies or tactics, wanting to know if she was as focused on celebrity management as described in Marwick and boyd's 2011 piece on celebrity and Twitter. Of course, fan culture is forever changing and adapting. Or, as Jenkins put it 'fandom originates in response to specific historical conditions...and remains constantly in flux' (1992, 3). It is with this in mind that this data was approached.

The findings of these case studies suggest that the lines are blurring between strategies and tactics. One goal of studying fans is to 'explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities' (Hills, 2007, p. 10). These examples show that either actor, regardless of any hierarchical power within the system, can deploy both activities through these interactions. Far more often, the deployment of strategies and tactics is based on the idea of empowerment through the use of social tools and access to the artist. There is an issue of scale with regards to popularity and audience that cannot be ignored, which will be discussed in the next section.

### **Brief Background on AFP and her Fans**

It is difficult to categorize Amanda Palmer into the traditional role of a musician, and certainly not a mega rock star. Both she and her fans refer to her as 'Amanda Fucking Palmer,' or AFP. On Vimeo, she describes herself as 'Piano-slayer, ukulele-freak, singer, blogger, lover' (Vimeo, undated). She began as a street performer, busking as the character *The Bride* in Harvard Square, Cambridge (Palmer, 2011b). She has since been part of two duos, *The Dresden Dolls* and *Evelyn Evelyn*, as well as writing and producing several performance acts, musicals, records, books, an iPhone app, and videos both with others and as a solo artist. While it is difficult to nail down the number of her fans, she has support across multiple systems including her own fan forum *The Shadowbox* with over 10,000 members, her twitter feed under the handle @amandapalmer with over 600,000 followers, and a YouTube account with over 27,000 subscribers and 9.5 million video views. Her most recent album was fan-funded by nearly 25,000 fans raising a sum of over \$1M for her 2012 Kickstarter project. All of which are indicators that Palmer has an established fan community.

While some people attribute her success to the name recognition of her husband, author Neil Gaiman, she was already an established artist before her relationship with the writer. Along with Brian Viglione, she formed the band *The Dresden Dolls* and was signed by Roadrunner Records in 2004 (Dresden Dolls, Undated B). The duo recorded several albums, performed original musical theater, and produced videos and books based on their work. Working in a genre they defined as 'Brechtian punk cabaret,' (Dresden Dolls, Undated B), their work was often provocative and experimental, questioning cultural norms, and redefining cabaret for a new generation.

It was within this space and with her fans that Palmer set out to reinvent the music business. In 2008, Palmer shifted to her solo career, beginning with the release of *Who*

*Killed Amanda Palmer*. Both an album and a book, this move would launch her wider net as a solo artist. It was also an homage to her own fandom, with the project's title being a remix of 'Who Killed Laura Palmer' of Twin Peaks fame. Her, Palmer is playing the fan, as she often does when someone she admires tweets to or about her on Twitter. The book written to accompany the album included photos of Palmer and content written by her future husband, Neil Gaiman.

On the 'Amanda Bio' page of the Dresden Dolls website, it states that Palmer 'can't remember a time when she *didn't* imagine being an artist, performer, and provocateur' (Perry, emphasis his). In that same article, Palmer goes on to explain that 'I don't really belong to any genre, and people have always had a tough time with that.' However, it is within her acts as a performer, provocateur, and fangirl that have endeared Palmer to her fan base. This level of endearment was most visible during her successful Kickstarter project, where she raised over \$1 million dollars to support her album, *Theatre is Evil*.

On Kickstarter, people can add a project, set a minimum amount they want to raise, add in rewards for different funding levels, and set a timeline by which the project must be funded. They can also add text, images, videos, and links to various sources as a way to connect with their potential backers. They can also send updates to their backers throughout the Kickstarter campaign, which Palmer did numerous times during hers. Palmer's project is the most successful music Kickstarter project to date. As one reporter recently stated with regards to this project, 'Palmer's fans aren't just in "like." They're in love — the kind of infatuation that's usually only possible when you believe you're among a limited, somewhat exclusive group of suitors — and they're willing to pay to prove it.' (Willman, 2012). It is within this space and with her fans that Palmer has set out to reinvent the music business.

### **Seeding a Rebellyon**

In order to illustrate the early movements of fan and musician, it is important to trace how fans can have an impact on artists and their labels by publicly participating within these conversations. In this way, artists can confront their labels with the full weight of their fan base, rather than simply trying to negotiate on their own. While this may not have worked even a few years ago, today we are seeing fans having a larger impact. Much like the experience of the earlier punk movements, when 'there was a general consensus about the exhaustion of mainstream rock music and the desire to create something different' (Moore, 2010, p. 7). In the case of the Rebellyon, it was the fans who started a movement across several web properties to defend the artist against her record label. While her label criticized the look of Palmer's body during a music video, her fans supported her. During this event, her audience reacted by photographing themselves, posting to forums, and building a website to organize their protest. Inspired by Palmer's openness and co-creativity, her fans reacted with a tactic that would allow them to support each other and Palmer. In this case, their focus was on body image and identity of the fans and Palmer. Their actions led them to push against the strategies of traditional recording labels.

For the *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* project released in 2008, several videos were produced and released, available online and elsewhere. In the video for *Leeds United*, the video's storyline involves bringing together people from various backgrounds to watch Palmer's show. With her on stage, joined by costumed cabaret girls, the camera pans to the audience, which is filled with a cast of provocative viewers, both in the ways in which they are dressed (or undressed) and the attitudes they present to the camera. Around minute 1:42 of the 5:13 video, sports fans race into the theater wearing the typical gear of English football supporters: branded t-shirts, scarves, flags, and soccer balls. The crowd mixes together, sometimes hostile, often cooperative in their love for the singer on stage. Throughout, Palmer is performing, singing, winking, and snarling into the microphone. With her drawn on eyebrows, Palmer plays the part of the rockstar dressed in a shiny coat, black pants, black-heeled boots, and an open white t-shirt that reveals her black bra.

It is that point about her clothing choice that her label, Roadrunner Records, wanted to halt the video. Feeling that she did not look the part, her label wanted to alter the shots of Palmer's belly, or remove them completely from the video. They wanted her to 'be more flattering' (Palmer, 2008). This is a well-known strategy for record labels to show their artists as fit, sexy, and unattainable. This event set-off a reaction both by Palmer (to her label) and by her fans (to her label, to Amanda, and to each other), culminating in her label leaving the video as-is. It is interesting to note that the fan activity gained the most traction on *The Shadowbox*, a forum located on the website that Palmer originally set up for the Dresden Dolls. Launched in May 2007, the forum currently has 10,1284 registered members who have collectively posted over 412,248 messages (*The Shadowbox*, 2012). *The Shadowbox* contains various sections for news, touring information, organizing information for her street team (*The Brigade*), and general discussion. The forums are focused on her band, *The Dresden Dolls*, and the two members of that band, Amanda Palmer and Brian Viglione. It also often includes some of Palmer's side projects, including *Evelyn Evelyn*. In describing this issue in the forums, one of her fans posts an excerpt from one of Palmer's mass emails she sends to her fan mail list (The Shadowbox, 2008):

the fine folks at roadrunner records wanted us to re-cut this video so that shots of my belly wouldn't be included.  
they basically told me that i looked too fat.  
i told them to fuck off.

The poster replies with equal anger towards the label and support of Palmer:

Amanda, firstly, is not fat.. but if she was, who gives a damn?!?!?  
after reading their above comment to amanda, this record label isn't worth shit in my mind... fuck them, i mean it, FUCK THEM!!!  
i hope to god, there is someone with me on this....

With over 101 pages of fan response, it was clear that her fans were united in their rejection of her label's labelling of Amanda as fat. Sending photos of their own bodies to support her against her label's demands that her belly was unfit for video, Palmer's fans worked across multiple websites. Amassing photos across *The Shadowbox*, people posted images of their bodies, fat, thin, or otherwise. Some of these bellies also had writing on them, either words of support for Palmer or vitriol for Roadrunner Records. The outpouring of support was fast, with the first images being posted within hours of the original discussion on *The Shadowbox*. While Rojek notes that 'celebrity status implies a split between a private self and a public self' (2001, 11), here Palmer and her fans have both erased this split.

While images were being posted to the forums, other fans also created a group on Flickr to collect more belly images. Another group of fans set up a website dedicated to what was by then called *The Rebellyon* (2008). Since taken down, this website held 160 images of fans and their bellies. An overwhelming number (124 of the 160) of the belly images had handwritten notes inscribed on them. Not only was this a clever way to send messages, it was also a nod to the video itself where an audience member writes on another's chest (Roadrunner Records, 2008, minute 3:29). While only two of the images mentioned *The Shadowbox* explicitly, there were many more that specifically called out various issues surrounding the event. Of them, thirty-eight images listed Amanda Palmer specifically, seventy-one mentioned body image, and thirty-two mentioned Roadrunner Records. Across all of these images, Palmer's fans were using their bodies as a grassroots tactic opposed to Roadrunner Records' strategy of simply halting the video.

Palmer reacted appreciatively and somewhat surprised by the multitude of her fans' response. Writing on her blog that over 300 photos of bellies across seventy pages had already been posted to *The Shadowbox*, Palmer expressed her thanks: 'this is why i fucking love you guys. i couldn't have thought this up in a million years. righteous' (2008). Here, Palmer is clearly in awe of her participatory fans, reflecting on their speed of organization and the personal way in which her fans responded. Reaction across several feminist blogs (McEwan, 2008; Woodhouse 2008) and an article in a mainstream media music blog (Saner, 2008) also helped in messaging a response to Roadrunner that was beyond whatever Palmer could have done on her own.

By sharing images of their bodies online, these fans are able to use the website as a space in which they can participate within conversations they were otherwise shut out from. In talking about how participants are becoming empowered by digital technology, Jenkins brings Dewy's 1993 work on DIY culture forward. While viewers have been granted 'greater control over media flows,' DIY media has also 'enabled activists to reshape and recirculate media content, lowered the costs of production, and paved the way for new grassroots networks,' (149). Turner posits that the intersections between DIY and participatory culture are not new, but 'has previously been most thoroughly connected with rock music and its associated mythologies of resistance, authenticity, and anti-commercialism' (2010, 144). In this case, fans are using the tools available to them, reacting tactically in a grassroots way to rebel against the traditional ideas of a rock star's body

image that Roadrunner Records is trying to force on Palmer. They are also coming together as a community to support each other as they have deal with their own struggles with body image.

While their interventions did not lead to Palmer being able to immediately sever ties with her label, her fans efforts did help her cause, both as a solo artist and as an independent creator. In April 2010, Palmer announced on her blog that she had severed ties with Roadrunner Records, ending their legal battle when she was finally released from her contract with the label (Palmer, 2010). Jenkins notes that corporations 'still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers' (2006a, 3). However, the impact of these active fans certainly buoyed Palmer. These seeds of Rebellon are part of the rolling snowball that leads up to her Kickstarter success. A success that would not be possible without the support, energy, and participation of her fans.

### **Tweeting a Community**

Palmer is known for her adoption of various internet-based tools for interacting with her fans (Price, 2012b; Lotta, 2010). In addition to her own blog, website, and forum, Palmer has a presence across numerous social sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, Instagram, and MySpace. An earlier adopter, she has quickly learned how to move across these spaces, communicating with her fans, distributing her materials to them, and sharing their work with a wider audience. Within these spaces, she is eager to engage with her fans, share information, showcase their art, and participate with them. Here, she is breaking down the aura between a rock star on stage and fan in the audience, and instead favoring a model of participatory fandom. Such participation is more indicative of the third or emerging fourth wave of fandom, rather than the first and second waves of fan studies that were focused on power and resistance (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 42). Instead, Palmer's fans are more focused on fandom as it relates to themselves and their fellow fans. It is within this space that Palmer is connecting with her audience.

In particular, Palmer has used Twitter as a space for communicating casually with her fans. She has cited her partner, Neil Gaiman, as the reason for her discovering Twitter (Fiasco!, 2009). Gaiman himself has a long history of using various internet technologies to communicate with his fanbase. Through Twitter, Palmer has been able to unite her community, help arrange her gigs, and reach out to her fans. As she stated on her blog, 'first of all, follow me on twitter. just do it. everything happening over there. i'm dead serious. if you hate twitter, get over it, or just follow me and don't do anything else' (2009e). Rather than focusing on controlling her message by enlisting third parties to help her tweet, Palmer focuses on sharing directly with her fans. For all that she has achieved some celebrity status, Palmer's tactics are in major opposition to the strategies deployed by the majority of record labels who are 'well aware of the damage that their efforts to regain the distribution control cause to their already injured reputation' (Wikström 2009, p. 155).

In his book *Understanding Celebrity*, Turner discusses various celebrity taxonomies that help define types of celebrity (2004). Of all of the different taxonomies discussed (from

Alberoni's socio-political elites (1972) to Monaco's hero / star / quasar concept (1978)), it seems that Rojek's categories might align closest to what Palmer has achieved. Rojek's taxonomy (2001) includes three categories of celebrity: ascribed, achieved, and attributed. Some critics have pointed to Palmer's relationship with Gaiman as the source of her fame, one that Rojek would term 'ascribed' because of that relationship. However, as discussed earlier, Palmer's career existed and was fully active before Gaiman and her began dating. However, Palmer has benefitted from the exposure to a new audience, as can be seen by the popularity of their early Kickstarter partnership. Clearly, her celebrity status is also 'achieved,' as seen by her winning the Kickstarter campaign where she competed and earned her status as having the top grossing Kickstarter projects for musicians. Her rise as the 'social media queen of rock and roll' (Price, 2012b) can be seen as 'attributed' by the media. However, Rojek and Turner both acknowledge the shortcomings of this model, explaining that it is more of a 'logic and rhythm of media production' (Turner, 22). Through participatory culture, that logic and rhythm has changed. Given what these case studies show of Palmer and her fan interactions, their co-production and interaction does not align clearly with any of these taxonomies.

Instead, Palmer exists in this in-between space of celebrity that is still emerging and undefined. During a late-night session in 22 May 2009, Palmer and her fans started to create some structure around their interactions on Twitter. Called the *Losers of Friday Night on Their Computers* (known by their hashtag, #LOFNOTC), this group has met on and off since, sometimes with Palmer present, sometimes without. It has served as a collective rallying cry and an inside joke for her community, a space across which Palmer and her fans can make these exchanges. In discussing the birth of #LOFNOTC, Palmer recounted in an interview:

I'm often at home, on Friday night, on my computer. And so I just made this joke on Twitter: "I hereby call to order the Losers of Friday night at home on their computers." And so many people responded (Uncensored Interview, 2009).

Within an hour, #LOFNOTC was a top trending topic on Twitter (maw, 2009) illustrating how active this space was within her fan base. They were tweeting often enough to help this hashtag surge on Twitter. Joking back and forth, the group came up with a list of seventeen tongue-in-cheek demands for the government to 'help us on Friday night while we were home on our computers' (Uncensored Interview, 2009). Their list included free kittens, free cake, government-issued members-only sweatpants, and no tax on tea, wine, and vodka. This list was also published on the #LOFNOTC Facebook group (#LOFNOTC – Losers of Friday Night on Their Computers, 2009). This night was an excellent exercise in building common ground and sharing values across the community. Baym notes that online 'groups may develop names for themselves,' (2010, p. 88). In this case, the fans did so cooperatively with Palmer. While having a fan club might be seen as a strategy for a mainstream musician, the

building of that club was participatory – built on tactics initiated and deployed by Palmer and her fans.

This group was built in a matter of hours using social web tools. Palmer and her fans solidified their mutual respect based on being ‘losers’ not ‘winners,’ expressing their feelings about having nowhere to go on a Friday night. Propelled by Palmer’s often self-deprecating humor, she and her fans also decided on a motto that further established common ground for the indie artist’s community: ‘Don’t stand up for what’s right. Stay in for what’s wrong’ (The #LOFNOTC, 2009). During that night’s exchanges, Palmer sketched out a logo for the #LOFNOTC. Consisting of a glass of wine, a plate with a slice of pizza, and a laptop with a message on it, this image was posted to Twitter, Facebook, and various other sites (The #LOFNOTC, 2009). The message on the sketched laptop included the hashtag and the phrase ‘there is nothing for you out there.’ On the upper right corner of the drawing is an image of a window, with partygoers outside. Here, Palmer was tongue-in-check emphasizing how the ‘losers’ are inside while the ‘winners’ are outside (Uncensored Interview, 2009).

Within a few hours, her fans wanted to buy #LOFNOTC t-shirts. Palmer quickly put her assistants into action, and they were able to sell 200 t-shirts that night. The shirts included the logo and the motto on a black t-shirt (Party on the Internet, 2009). By the next day, 400 t-shirts were sold. Raising over \$19,000 between t-shirt sales, a live auction, and a donation-only gig, Palmer noted that ‘the irony that like I just made more money in one night making a joke on Twitter than I’ve made the entire year on record royalties says something about the state of the world’ (Uncensored Interview, 2009). The tactics taken by Palmer to engage with her fans were beginning to show that they could exceed the strategies deployed by Roadrunner Records. And some people in the music business were just starting to take notice (King, 2009).

Today, while *The Shadowbox* is still a very active community with posts being made daily, Twitter is key to her emerging business model, creating a space for interactions between Palmer and her fans, and increasing her brand awareness. That said, Palmer works to communicate across multiple internet channels. In her own words in an email sent to her fans, ‘ALL HAIL #LOFNOTC. the world is a better place for now because of our ability to randomly connect like this. love.’ (Palmer, 2009a). This sense of random connectedness is a tactic that Palmer takes often with her fan base, unlike many artists that have their Twitterfeeds managed by third parties, assistants, or their labels.

In order to explain further and continue her fan outreach, Palmer documented much of the night’s events on her blog (2009b). There, she listed various fan interactions, answered questions, and joked with her fans, building a multitude of catch-phrases that would be later shared across the group on Twitter. Examining these tweets, it is clear that her fans are unapologetic about their appreciation of Palmer and the #LOFNOTC community. In this way, participatory fans have moved past the ‘sense of cultural defensiveness’ and need to ‘justify fan attachments’ (Hills, 2002 p. xii) that was discussed in earlier waves of fan culture scholarship.

The tweets that Palmer tends to respond to are ones that she can engage with, rather than simply thanking her fans. She is interacting with them, pulling them to her rather than pushing them away. Palmer believes that ‘as an artist, you have to emotionally connect’ (Kimpel, 2012). In September 2012, Palmer engaged her fans in discussing the worst events that happened to them in their rooms. Using that hashtag, #inmyroom, Palmer’s fans flooded the stream with responses that many called ‘heartbreaking’ in their honesty and inspiring in their content. Palmer retweeted many of these tweets, sharing them further with her fans. One fan in particular used that moment to comment not just on the tweets, but on the fan community that she is a part of: ‘The @amandapalmer retweet extravaganza is breaking my heart. Yet, i don’t feel so alone in my hurt anymore’ (Chelsea~, 2012). In the ways in which Palmer and her participatory fans are interacting on Twitter, it becomes obvious that ‘fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational,’ (Jenkins 2006b, p. 150). These are participants – working with an artist to not only support her work, but to share their experiences and commiserate with each other.

### **Throwing a Ninja Beach Party**

In describing how the media industry’s perceptions of fan communities have evolved, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington state that ‘rather than ridiculed, fan audiences are now wooed and championed by cultural industries, at least as long as their activities do not divert from principles of capitalistic exchange and recognize industries’ legal ownership of the object of fandom’ (2007, p. 4). It is that last part in particular where we see Palmer’s moves directly opposed to the media industry. She strives to own her brand, share that brand with her fans, and have them help co-create that brand. She is a champion of her fans, and her fans are her champions.

An interesting example of this co-championing, participatory fandom is Palmer’s penchant for hosting flash mob gigs. She typically announces these events on Twitter and follows-up on her blog, encouraging her fans to show up in various locations to hear live music and hang out. Encouraging these moments of physical engagement is one way in which Palmer works to connect with her fan base.

In the summer of 2009, Palmer held multiple impromptu gigs, several of which were collectively referred to as the ‘Ninja Beach Party’ (Palmer, 2009d; Palmer, 2009e). These events are a major culmination of her DIY tactics. Bringing her ukulele and encouraging her fans to dress up, Palmer invited them to become part of her club (Palmer, 2009e; russianmermaid, undated). Throughout many of these ninja gigs, fans were able to engage with and record Palmer, uploading those recordings to various media sharing sites and spreading her message (LynnAnn163, 2009; Katie, 2009). During one of these Ninja Beach Parties, Palmer engaged her fans in co-producing video content. A typical strategy for promoting an album is to make a music video. This can help generate interest in the musician, aiming them at a specific demographic to whom they can sell their music. While Palmer is certainly thinking of building this kind of content, this event also contained tactics

of resistance to this kind of machinery. Rather than simply make her own video, Palmer set out to not only include her fans as audience members, but as content makers: Her fans helped film, direct, and act in the video.

To initiate this event, Palmer encouraged her fans to attend through Twitter and her blog. Her audience participated as active contributors with the musician, deploying the tactics they had to participate. Some brought cameras, whereas others brought their skills. One even showed up in an actual ninja costume (Otterfreak, 2009). Her fans decided on the song she would play, and she learnt it that morning. A cinematographer showed up with a camera, and Palmer and her fans decided to shoot a video (Palmer, 2009e, 4:07). One of her fans, an actress, aided Palmer in directing the video. Throughout the video, her fans can be seen acting, posing, and participating in the video-making. Posted to Youtube, (Palmer, 2009e), this event was free-flowing and energetic. Rather than being rigid and controlling, Palmer was flexible and allowed her fans to often lead.

Here, participatory fans are not only producing DIY content with the consent of the artist, they are producing content *with* the artist. It was not too long ago that such acts were thought improbable if not impossible. In 1992, Fiske wrote about the semiotic production of fans, ones that 'circulate among – and thus help define – the fan community,' (p. 30). Baym had also discussed early instances of music fan making through archives, wikis, and blogs (2007). Palmer has created a space in which her fans are no longer relegated to creating a 'shadow economy' that lies outside that of the culture industries' (Fiske, 1992, p. 30). In the video, Palmer acknowledged this space in which participation was stretched across herself and her fans, with both as content makers, producers, and stars. The first 3:35 are of Palmer playing the ukulele, and the final 1:25 are of Cat Stevens' original recording with credits and her messages appearing on the screen. At the end of the video, she states 'FACT: TWITTER EMPOWERS ARTISTS & AUDIENCES BY CUTTING OUT THE MIDDLEMAN' (Palmer, 2009e).

This experience between Palmer and her fans does, in a sense, redefine the word *fan*. Instead, these are *participants* – active players within Palmer's career. As Jenkins states, 'as fandom becomes part of the normal way that the creative industries operate, then fandom may cease to function as a meaningful category of cultural analysis,' (2007, p. 364). Of course, in this case – the cultural industries are not driving the conversation; the artist and her participatory fans are taking the lead.

### **Kickstarting a Revolution**

For indie artists, finding new ways to reach fans and sell their art is paramount to finding success without a record contract. Without the machinery of the big four labels, musicians must figure out tactics to sell directly to their fans. Palmer's Kickstarter is an attempt to bypass the labels, employing the tactic of funding with a longer-term strategy of survival. This event is a major moment for Palmer. Having finally ended her relationship with Roadrunner Records, Palmer was free to produce her own records, promote her own work, and lead her own career. Jenkins defines convergence as 'a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-drive process' (2006, 18). In the case of this Kickstarter, is Palmer

playing at being the corporation? Or is this an example of a post-*convergence* moment where these boundaries are lost?

Although she did not set out to shatter the record for most funds raised for a music Kickstarter, Palmer's 2012 campaign to support her new record garnered her mainstream attention for her efforts as well as a write-up on the Kickstarter blog, analyzing her success and providing tips for others looking to raise funds through the website (Strickler, 2012). How was she able to raise these funds? Much of her success can be attributed to cultivating and engaging with her longtail fan base. As Jenkins states, such a model 'assumes an increasingly savvy media consumer, one who will actively seek out content of interest and who will take pride in being able to recommend that content to friends' (2006a, p. 252). Again, these are not corporate strategies for a recording industry. Instead, Palmer is outlining a long-term strategy for musicians. This is an important distinction as we consider how strategies and tactics play out. In a controversial blog posting titled 'WHY I AM NOT AFRAID TO TAKE YOUR MONEY, BY AMANDA FUCKING PALMER,' Palmer discusses this strategy (2009f):

artists need to make money to eat and to continue to make art.  
artists used to rely on middlemen to collect their money on their behalf,  
thereby rendering themselves innocent of cash-handling in the public eye.  
artists will now be coming straight to you (yes YOU, you who want their music,  
their films, their books) for their paychecks.  
please welcome them. please help them. please do not make them feel badly  
about asking you directly for money.  
dead serious: this is the way shit is going to work from now on and it will work  
best if we all embrace it and don't fight it.

She is well-aware of how this might place her into a similar status as her label, but she spends an entire update to her Kickstarter outlining how the money will be spent. Entitled 'all you ever wanted to know about all this kickstarter money & where it's going,' Palmer outlines the costs and issues associated with producing an album. Further in that blog post, Palmer makes this message very plain. In describing the ways in which she sees this new economy working, Palmer blogs (2009f):

accept a new system.  
feel ok about giving your money directly to paul mccartney. he may be rich, but  
he still rocks. show you care.  
feel ok about giving it to fucking lady gaga if you've been guiltily downloading  
her dance tracks for free.  
rejoice in the fact that you are directly responsible for several threads in her  
new spandex spacesuit.  
it shouldn't matter.

it's about empowerment and it's about SIMPLICITY: fan loves art, artist needs money, fan gives artist money, artist says thank you.

This blog post was written after several discussions with other artists, her own fundraising, and various dealings with her label. Reaction to this blog entry varied, as can be seen in the 1000+ comments posted to it (Palmer, 2009g). Across other social blogs and news articles, she was either heralded as insightful (Doctorow, 2009) or questioned as to whether her idea would even work (Fischer, 2009). What Palmer was attempting to do was explain how artists and fans must come to an agreement on how to support art directly, without any middlemen. Her ideas would come to fruition during her Kickstarter campaign. And even while she is basking in the success of the Kickstarter, she is also addressing those who believe she is somehow becoming rich off of the Kickstater. In outlining how the money will be spent, Palmer lists the costs and issues associated with the project in the Kickstarter update #5 titled 'all you ever wanted to know about all this kickstarter money & where it's going.' Palmer is attempting to make herself accountable to her fans and her critics.

Prior to setting the record for music funding on Kickstarter (Strickler, 2012), Palmer had found other ways to raise funds to continue her work. Since 2009, Palmer has raised funds through Twitter many times, selling t-shirts, auctioning items, and a donation-only gig at recording studio (Uncensored Interview, 2009; King, 2009). Throughout her career, she has sold more traditional items such as records and t-shirts, and held less conventional sales of art and even the contents of her apartment. Palmer creates packages to sell to her fans, including stickers, buttons, CDs, t-shirts, and other limited edition items. All of which are brand-building strategies. She also initiated an earlier Kickstarter project titled 'An Evening with Neil Gaiman & Amanda Palmer.' With pledges totaling \$133,341 made by 3,873 backers to support the event (Palmer & Gaiman, 2011), that Kickstarter was considered a major success for exceeding the meager \$20,000 goal. It also provided them with positive press (Gaston, 2012; McDonnell, 2012), 162 comments on the Kickstarter page (Palmer, 2011a), and over 7,500 Facebook Likes for this event. (Palmer & Gaiman, 2011) It was to be an early pilot study for what would later become a game-changing funding model for Palmer.

In the case of her 2012 Kickstarter project, it became clear that fan funding not only would work for Palmer, but would be incredibly successful. Kickstarter is a website that bills itself as the 'funding platform for creative projects' (2012). While many projects are successful, 40% are never funded because they do not raise enough money by the end of the Kickstarter (Murphy, 2012). However, for independent artists it can be one way to secure funding for their work, and more than 7,000 music projects have been funded on Kickstarter (Strickler, 2012). As Gaiman states on his blog 'as a business model, having people buy things ahead of time with Kickstarter is terrific' (2011). Buying things ahead of time means funding the start-up of these projects. In Palmer's case, it also meant an ability to pay people back the money they lent her to even start the project (Palmer, 2012b).

With an original goal of \$100,000, Palmer raised over \$1M (Palmer, 2012a). Supported by 24,883 backers, Palmer exceeded the amount of money she asked for, but the amount of money that her former label would have given her to record her new album, *Theatre is Evil* (Palmer, 2012a; Palmer, 2012b). Her fans responded, some giving what they could while acknowledging the tactics that fans could deploy in support of Palmer's strategy: 'I donated \$1 to the kickstarter. #powerofthepeople' (Dail, 2012). Palmer was able to route around the traditional business model for the recording industry by deploying her own tactics. She was hoping to connect with her fans to create the project she wanted to create and to 'actually see a profit from my music' (Palmer, 2012a). She also was a fangirl herself, retweeting a post by the band Tegan & Sara (2012). In ending her video plea promoting her Kickstarter, Palmer makes appeals to her fans to join her as she aims to harness a new model for artists. The signs she holds up during the closing part of the video state (Palmer 2012a):

I hope you will join our rock and roll cause.  
This is the future of music  
This is how we fucking do it  
We are the media

This idea of all of us being the media is a clear nod at the tension between corporations and artists, of strategies and tactics. If we are indeed the media, then that would blur the lines between both sides, or eliminate one side in favor of the other. Regardless, Palmer's fans tweeted out their support for her project. One fan addressed the music industry directly when she tweeted her support to Palmer: 'There's so much heart in this Kickstarter project, I get all choked up. Help @amandapalmer change the industry forever!' (Erin, 2012). Expressing emotion and calling on others to support Palmer's work, this fan is deploying a tactic to support Palmer's work. Another expressed similar sentiments and excitement over the Kickstarter, stating 'I just backed @amandapalmer on @Kickstarter <http://kck.st/JliwH9> THIS IS FUCKING FUN and the FUTURE of MUSIC!' (amerhsu/hsu.bi.li., 2012). Including the link to the Kickstarter project, this fan is encouraging others to learn more about Palmer's project and work.

As the Kickstarter's success rose, some people were critical of the monies being raised, wanting to know more about where all of the money would go. Palmer used blog posts and Kickstarter updates to address these critics and her fan community. Listing through how the money will be spent in a blog posted as they neared \$1M in funding, Palmer shares with her fans how the music business works, where the money will go, and the decisions she has made to get herself there (Palmer, 2012b). Such transparency is part of her long-term strategy. She points out how Kickstarter and Amazon will also get a cut, leaving her with a starting pool around \$925,000. She catalogs the costs of the book production, gear, costumes, high-end CDs, thank you cards, turntable packages, as well as

paying staff, website designers, other expenses. By the end of it, she explains that she would not have it any other way because (Palmer, 2012b):

we are committed to doing amazing things for all of you who pledged. sure, it's going to cost more to make things extra fancy (and for us to ship things for FREE all over the world), but making this stuff amazing IS THE POINT. if i skimped on making the packaging and actual products INCREDIBLE, i'd be an idiot.

As the countdown for funding her Kickstarter neared, Palmer held a party for her fans in Brooklyn, NY with live music, snacks, and entertainers. One group of fans arrived ready to continue co-creating with Palmer and her fans: '@amandapalmer we're bringing notebooks and making a zine about the party, at the party, with the party! #6zine I guess we'll call it?' (twenty-four magazine, 2012). This activity is another example of the blurring between strategies and tactics, this time focused on co-producing a magazine. Palmer brought in a 'giant fish-tank-like enclosure' that they filled up with all 24,000 names of her supporters (Palmer, 2012c). The names, written on phone book pages and torn off throughout the party, filled the fish tank such that Palmer said they were 'literally bathing in the names of the thousands of people who were supporting us' (2012c). The event was webcast live to her fans, and went on for hours. In reflecting on the Kickstarter, Palmer acknowledges her new fame in the mainstream media and uses it as a moment to reinforce her new model for funding (Palmer, 2012c):

to review the people-who've-called list:  
rolling stone called, the new york times called, time magazine called, the new Yorker called, the wall street journal called, billboard called, and the economist called.  
they want their media back

The success of her Kickstarter project is further evidence of how Palmer is practicing a form of participatory design, creating content, even naming her tour by consensus (Palmer, 2012c). In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006b), Jenkins discusses participatory design in relation to how gaming companies react to user requests, wondering if larger media organizations will be able or even interested in reacting to fans/consumers. Palmer as an artist has by-passed the need for a large media company to interact with her fans, instead finding ways to fund her work directly by participating with her fans. Are these tactics or strategies? Palmer is certainly up front about what she is doing and why (i.e., creating a new business model for artists). It is unclear whether the binaries of strategies/tactics will continue to keep their tension when artists are inviting this kind of participation and content creation with their fans.

## Conclusion

Palmer and her fans' participatory, engaged, and flexible interactions are supporting her work as an artist as well as supporting her fan community. Palmer's ability to reach out to her fans and their willingness to support her emerging business models are enabling Palmer to go farther than she could have gone with her label. She has taken up new strategies to build a long-term business by deploying tactics to support her work. And her fans are responding by participating with Palmer and each other to circumvent the strategies of the traditional recording industry. As Palmer sees it, she is part of a larger movement for musicians to move away from labels: 'I believe there are thousands of musicians like me working underground, connecting with their fans, signing after shows, hugging everybody and keeping it real. The music business has never been interested in that.' (Kimpel, 2012). Based solely on her successful Kickstarter project, Palmer is clearly creating a new pathway to building a successful career in an industry woefully in need of an innovative turn. Palmer's work reaffirms Cavicchi's notion that 'music loving suggests that fandom's origins may have less to do with diffuse and private consumption through modern electronic media than with shared modes of participation' (2007, p. 236). These shared modes of participation are sustaining her fan community, empowering them to also create content, engage with the artist, and engage with each other.

But will this participation be enough to sustain Palmer? As Jenkins notes, 'some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others' (2006a, 3). It is unclear if these fans are better equipped to support Palmer than the average music fan, but these indie fans are certainly active in participating with artists as discussed earlier in this article. In reflecting on Benjamin's ideas about aura, Moore discusses youth culture and music. He talks about how authenticity is eroded whenever corporations try to rebrand authentic events created by legendary performances. He states: 'the halo surrounding these moments and idols is profaned with each successive act of reproduction and simulation' (Moore, 2010, p. 207). It is possible that Palmer's ability to stay independent of her corporate labels, through the support of her fans, will ensure her authenticity. And yet, this could be the 'Future of Music' as she stated in her Kickstarter video (2012). As one journalist recently put it, Palmer 'is now her own brand, living and breathing the new paradigm of the music industry' (Price, 2012a).

Whether Palmer's methods will sustain her work or benefit other artists remains to be seen. She is unique in her ability to connect, and her fans are welcoming and active in these ecosystems. The entertainment industry in general is taking notice. With Palmer's engagement with her fans, she has created a space in which exchanges between artist and fan has become a domain for participation. In the afterword to a recently edited collection on fandom, Jenkins states '*fandom* is the future,' (2007, p. 361). He emphasizes the word *fandom* to show that he is not simply talking about the fans themselves, but the social dimensions of a fan culture that is pervasive in people's everyday lives. This is a fandom that is a 'central part of the everyday lives of consumers operating within a networked society,' (2007, p. 361). And, as discussed earlier, Jenkins admits that we might not be too far off

from when fandom does not even have a future because it will be normalized. However, this fan participation that we are seeing is clearly important, both to the artists' sustainability and to the future of the creative industries. Or, in the words of Amanda Palmer: 'Punk cabaret is freedom. Don't fear the Twitter' (amandapalmer, 2009).

### **Biographical note:**

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## Note:

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<sup>1</sup> Various artists who have pursued new business models with their album releases, including Radiohead in 2007, Nine Inch Nails in 2008, How to Destroy Angels in 2010, Saul Williams in 2008, Ben Folds 2012, and others.