

# The Art of Asking Everything

## Laura Jane Grace: Punk Guilt

### **Amanda Palmer 00:40**

This is The Art of Asking Everything. I am Amanda Palmer, and this week's guest is writer, musician and activist, Laura Jane Grace, starring in Punk Guilt. Do you feel it? I feel it. I am it!

Let's start with some music...

[\(Music break – Shelter In Place\)](#)

### **Amanda Palmer 01:21**

That's a new song called Shelter In Place, from her new album Stay Alive, recently out on Polyvinyl Records.

Laura Jane Grace is the founder, lead singer, songwriter and guitarist of the punk rock band Against Me!. The band put out their first album, Reinventing Axl Rose, in 2002, and then signed with a major label, quite controversially, in 2007. I remember that happening, because I was there, and people felt very weird about it. And then Laura came out very publicly as trans in Rolling Stone in 2012. I remember that too, I remember that issue coming out, I remember buying it in an airport on tour, and reading it. And when I read Laura's memoir, which is called *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sell-Out*, I related so profoundly to the things she was struggling with. Fame, and touring, and writing, and celebrity, and image, and punk, and authenticity. And her band, Against Me!, and my band, The Dresden Dolls, were kind of born, and toured, and signed with a major, at almost exactly the same time. Laura and I sort of went through identical identity crises. I don't have gender dysphoria, but we both had a kind of punk authenticity crisis psychosis, never really knowing how real we were in the eyes of other people, and on bad days, what real even fucking meant.

But I think our superpower is that Laura and I both transmuted all of this confusion into our songwriting. And we still do this. And we both understand now that our magic artistic ability is composting heaps of confusion, and growing songs from the blackness. And this conversation between us took place at SXSW in March of 2019. Do you remember

SXSW? I remember SXSW, this was like this thing where tens of thousands of people would converge in one place in Austin, Texas, for a giant music and everything festival, back in ye olde “before times.” And we sat in my manager Jordan’s hotel room, and we talked, and we talked, and we talked.

One big tragedy of this interview is that while I knew Laura and her band and her story and her songs, I hadn’t yet read her memoir. And that’s actually why I am more excited than ever to do this particular live follow-up chat with Laura, after the podcast drops. This was still a great talk, and we talk about punk and guilt and songwriting cycles, and so many other things, but I have so much more to ask her. Not just now that COVID has happened, but now that I’ve really, really dug into her book. And we’ll also be talking about her book in the Patreon podcast book club in about a month, so if this inspires you, pick up her book, get reading, and get ready to talk about all of these ideas with like-minded people.

Without further ado, my friends, the beautiful Laura Jane Grace.

**Amanda Palmer 04:52**

For anyone who has no idea who you are, what your background is, I know it’s really irritating. But can you summarize?

**Laura Jane Grace 05:00**

Sure, yeah. Well, I’m 38 years old, I’ve played in my band called Against Me! since I was 17 years old. I grew up in a military family, so I’ve kind of moved all over the place. I moved to Florida when I was like 12 years old, and lived there til I was like, 18. And then since then I’ve lived in LA, lived back in Florida again, lived in Chicago for like, the last seven years. And I’m transgender, I’m an activist, I wrote a memoir, I have a 9 year old.

**Amanda Palmer 05:28**

I thought that was interesting, you didn’t mention as much music. Do you feel like other things in your life, like the activism, or the parenting or whatever. Do you feel like any of that has created a need to compartmentalise music, is music not as big as it used to be in your brain’s landscape?

**Laura Jane Grace 05:43**

No, music is so all-encompassing in my landscape. My daily schedule is: wake up in the morning, take my daughter to school, and I have a studio space right by her school, I drop her off and I go into my studio space, and I sit there until 3 o’clock when it’s time to pick her up. And all day long, I just sit there and work on music, and then we go home

and do it all again the next day. And the only time I'm not doing that is when I'm on tour. So maybe not mentioning music as much is just because it's so all-encompassing...

**Amanda Palmer 06:07**

It's the water we drown in.

**Laura Jane Grace 06:10**

Yeah. Maybe it feels like it doesn't need to be mentioned.

(Music break – A Grand Theft Intermission)

**Amanda Palmer 06:21**

Are you on tour right now?

**Laura Jane Grace 06:22**

Yeah, this is the start of the tour. So it'll last til the end of April. But I haven't been on tour since October, so it's been a nice break, but yeah, this is the start of the tour here at SXSW. Which feels kind of almost like, not that I play sports or like sports, but like swinging a weighted bat before you go out and...

**Amanda Palmer 06:41**

Absolutely, yeah yeah yeah.

**Laura Jane 06:42**

Actually do the thing, you know?

**Amanda Palmer 06:43**

I've been using that metaphor for the last couple of days, because, especially when people see you in this kind of motion, and they're standing still, and they're asking, what's that like? I'm like, the best thing I can come up with is it is like being an athlete. It's a physical job, to get up in the morning and do this set of activities, and use your body this emotionally, and then collapse and get up and do it again. It's still a physical job.

**Laura Jane Grace 07:10**

I find I train like an athlete too. I go running every day, I really watch my diet, make sure hydration, vitamins, all that stuff, leading up to a tour, but it never feels like enough.

**Amanda Palmer 07:20**

It's never enough.

**Laura Jane Grace 07:21**

I always say, maybe if you practiced in a sauna it would be comparative to what you'd need, but otherwise it's just like, you can't recreate, maybe it's the mix of adrenaline too, stuff like that, but you can't get that on your own.

**Amanda Palmer 07:34**

Yeah well, and neither can athletes. But it's so interesting that they have, there's so much more structure to get ready for a thing, and in music you're just totally on your fucking own to figure this stuff out.

**Laura Jane Grace 07:48**

Right, well that's what it is too, is that you're on your own, it's not as much of a team effort, and if you had teammates, maybe you'd be more motivated. But I don't even live in the same city as any of my bandmates, so it's not like I can have a weekly practice or anything like that, it's all just like, you have to be self-motivated.

**Amanda Palmer 08:02**

Well, we could both go back to early days of touring in cars and vans. You did have teammates, right? But everyone was fucking clueless, and drinking, and probably not doing a single healthy thing all day, which was...

**Laura Jane Grace 08:17**

You're young though, you can do that a lot more easily.

**Amanda Palmer 08:20**

Oh, I mean, I couldn't. And I did, and I couldn't. It never feels like enough, and one of the things that's been occurring to me a lot, in the conversations that I've been having since I got here to SXSW, especially with other musicians, especially with other female musicians, is not just what no one teaches you, but what you have no idea is getting in your way, until you've kind of accidentally run through all these gauntlets of the recording studio, of how it is to tour, of how it is to be around all these people, especially if you're an emotional songwriter, performer, and what you do is really emotionally legit. No one tells you how to do that. You get up one day, thinking, hooray I'm in a band, or I finally have a gig or whatever, and you just, sometimes you fail spectacularly. But you're just making fucking everything up, and you're doing it in a really, often really hostile environment.

**Laura Jane Grace 09:18**

Right. And also the time allotment is totally flipped, where at first, I don't know about you, but first record I ever made was recorded and mixed in a day. Whereas more recent records, maybe you spend a month or something like that.

**Amanda Palmer 09:31**

And you don't need as much time now, because you're way better at it.

**Laura Jane Grace 09:34**

Right. And so you walk into the studio and you're like, so intimidated, because I don't know what any of these things do, and I have a sound in my head, but I don't know how to get that out of this equipment. And same thing with shows or tours, where you go on tour and you've got this one shot, get it right, as opposed to later on in your career, where you've got time, soundcheck is yours...

**Amanda Palmer 09:50**

And control.

**Laura Jane 09:51**

Yeah, you can choose the venue, you know what you're doing more. So it's really luck in a lot of ways like that.

**Amanda Palmer 09:58**

So, just because this is my current obsession, do you remember those early studio sessions, or those early gigs? Because also, your music is not unemotional, and you're up there, transmitting a lot of confusion, pain, hardcore real emotion. Do you remember what it felt like to be at soundcheck, in the studio, with these random people populating your environment, while you stood there and tried to do that?

**Laura Jane Grace 10:28**

Of course, yeah. I remember all those first experiences. I remember vividly the first time in a studio, going for a vocal take, young punk, just screaming my head off, and also not doing it properly, even in the sense of not even holding a guitar, so you're not singing in the same way. And then getting through the take, and the engineer being like, alright, I think I've got the level set, let's do it for real.

**Amanda Palmer 10:53**

Yes! I've been there! I've been there! And weeping!

**Laura Jane Grace 10:56**

And you're like, that was it.

**Amanda Palmer 10:57**

And I'm like, and I did it! And I did it, and I got my take, and I'm so proud of myself, and I bet everyone in the studio is weeping with me, and then you look out, and they're all just like, yeah. Yeah. Can you do that again?

**Laura Jane Grace 11:10**

That was it!

**Amanda Palmer 11:12**

But that's also why I don't think it's silly that there is a difference between the idea of engineering, and the idea of producing. And also just having had a baby, there is a great analogue for this in childbirth. The midwife has this job, to just get the baby out of the birth canal, that's the midwife's primary function. And the midwife's job is not to give a shit about you, and your needs.

**Laura Jane Grace 11:40**

So would you say the midwife is more like the producer?

**Amanda Palmer 11:43**

No, the midwife is the engineer. Get the sounds, get the correct sounds, make sure the mic is working, just make sure the sound is gonna get from A to B. And then the doula, the doula's job is to be like, and do you need water? And are you remembering to breathe? This is about you, your feelings, you're real, the mother also exists. And it's actually really good to have a team of two people, or one person who actually knows how to do both of those jobs, which is what I got on my last record. John Congleton was an amazing midwife/doula. He was like, sounds, sounds, mics, mics, feelings? And I was like, thank you! Thank you, sounds and feelings!

**Laura Jane Grace 12:23**

Continuing with that metaphor, I would say that the actual hospital staff when my daughter were born, were more like the major label A&R people, coming in and being like, alright, we're out of time, we're gonna have to actually circumvent this process and do it our way now.

**Amanda Palmer 12:36**

Do not get me started about western medicine and birth, and their evil alliance with the major label system. It feels real. Not unsurprisingly, driven by the same system. They're both profit-driven systems, and not actually put in place to take care of what they're supposed to take care of. Which is just human beings making soulful art.

**Laura Jane Grace 12:59**

A hundred percent.

**Amanda Palmer 13:01**

It makes everything not work.

**Laura Jane Grace 13:03**

My daughter was born in LA too.

**Amanda Palmer 13:06**

Did she come out with sunglasses and a jewel?

**Laura Jane Grace 13:10**

Totally, iPhone in hand, yeah.

**Amanda Palmer 13:13**

These are the sorts of things that have sort of been rattling around in my brain, that I actually have never really analytically looked at. What was happening when I was 27, and I was in the studio, knowing very little? One of the things that I keep coming up against is like, oh right, I mean I didn't know what I was doing, and I was blowing my voice out, and I was like, there's my one take, and I just didn't know how it worked. But I also didn't know that I could ask for things. I actually thought that my job was to just go in there, do it right, and that everything was very cut and dry. All of my engineers were men. I didn't have a single female engineer. I don't think I've ever had a female engineer on any of my records.

**Laura Jane Grace 13:57**

I can't say I've ever, yeah.

**Amanda Palmer 13:58**

And we know the statistics, the music industry is 95% male. So there is this really weird thing of performing this emotional music for an audience sometimes of one, or two, or three. Sometimes the least emotionally invested in the music. They're invested

technically, they're getting paid, they're doing their jobs, they kind of care. You're at your most vulnerable, with all the wrong people.

**Laura Jane Grace 14:25**

There is a valuable tool though, that I find in that, and that it's something that I use to this day, where when I'm finishing something, I really do like to test it on an audience, because I know immediately when I play something, or share something with somebody, how I feel, where if I feel uncomfortable, then I know oh, well this lyric needs to be changed, or this is what's wrong with this, something's wrong with this and I need to address it. I think it's from that process of being like, no one is giving me any feedback here, and I'm bleeding my heart out, so I need to be really confident in what I'm doing.

**Amanda Palmer 14:56**

I toured all of these songs on my new record before I took them into the studio, and actually, a couple of the songs, one of the songs in particular, which was just sort of this long stream of consciousness rambling about motherhood, I never, ever would have thought was gonna make it past just the point of this song is kind of a novelty joke. But then I started playing it for people. The one time that I thought I would play it live, as its novelty joke, and I watched people really respond, and respond emotionally. I really had to admit that the material that I found possibly kind of hokey, and embarrassing, if it worked and it resonated, I was like well, I guess my fucking opinion doesn't matter.

I've never really understood how, as a songwriter, you could make a bunch of songs, never play them for anyone, and then put them on a record and deliver it. That just seems terrifying to me.

**Laura Jane Grace 15:54**

It's often times disastrous, because songs need to age in that way. But I've found that there is sometimes too far of ageing a song, where it kind of spoils.

**Amanda Palmer 16:04**

It's too late.

**Laura Jane Grace 16:05**

Yeah. And the record that I just did, that was the theme behind it, the idea of Bought to Rot. And this may sound cheesy or whatever, but it really came from buying fruits and vegetables. Cos I will go to the grocery store, and I flip out if there's really good produce, and good fruits, and I buy it, and...



**Amanda Palmer 16:21**

It will rot.

**Laura Jane Grace 16:22**

Yeah, and then you're like, oh, that went to waste, and it was good, it was perfectly useable. So sometimes you do need to really take something and just get it out there, and use it.

**Amanda Palmer 16:31**

So I do this all the time too. And I actually just thought of a really great name for it. Aspirational produce shopping. Cos you're standing there, in the market, and you're so aspirational. You're like, all of the things I will make, with all this kale. I'm gonna be this person.

**Laura Jane Grace 16:51**

And it's coming from the best place of, this will be so good for me, this will be so good for us.

**Amanda Palmer 16:56**

And then it rots.

**Laura Jane Grace 16:57**

And you wasted your money, and you wasted something that grew.

**Amanda Palmer 17:00**

And you destroyed the world, basically.

**Laura Jane Grace 17:02**

Yeah, it's all your fault.

**Amanda Palmer 17:03**

And then you're holding it, about to compost.

(Music break – A Mother's Confession)

**Amanda Palmer 18:01**

Do you go back and re-use old stuff? Do you ever find old bits and pieces and think, maybe you've fomented enough, that I could use you?

**Laura Jane Grace 18:12**

If I've hit a block, creatively, then sometimes I'll get in the mentality of, I should go back and I should finish these loose end ideas. But it's rare that I will do that, and then one of those ideas will feel like, oh, that was totally way awesome and way worth it, it's just like, I'm glad I did it, I'm glad I've finished it, but it's still a B-side.

**Amanda Palmer 18:34**

Yeah, I feel the same way, before I had a child, I used to have this really dark metaphor which I still really believe in, which is if you had a foetal song idea, and it doesn't matter how good it is, it has this half life. It is sort of like giving birth to a baby, you can't just put it in the closet for six months, and expect to come back and it's still alive. You have to actually tend to it.

**Laura Jane Grace 18:59**

Sure.

**Amanda Palmer 19:00**

Part of the problem is that if certain inspiration hits you, it's almost alchemical. It's the you of that moment that captures that song, that metaphor, whatever, that you can contain. And once you've moved around, all the light has changed. That moment will never be recapturable, even if the idea survived.

**Laura Jane Grace 19:20**

Right, sure. And specifically lyrically, I find that. I have trouble reconnecting to the emotion behind the lyric with that. And there's something too, to be said for having ideas, and especially if I start to get a couple songs together, where I won't wanna share them with people too early, because it'll spoil it if I share it with too many people early. And I've gotten more and more paranoid in this day and age, specifically with cell phones. Where the idea of, you're talking about something and then the next minute you pick up your phone and there's an advertisement in Facebook related to that. I've started thinking, what happens when they start listening in on your cell phone?

**Amanda Palmer 19:57**

To your voice notes?

**Laura Jane Grace 19:58**

Yeah, and to your song ideas, and to your melodies, and then they start picking up your melodies and just using your melodies, and all of a sudden...

**Amanda Palmer 20:03**

Micro-cassette. Back to micro-cassette and 4-track.

**Laura Jane Grace 20:09**

Seriously, yeah.

**Amanda Palmer 20:09**

That's the only solution.

**Laura Jane Grace 20:11**

I have my little cassette player recording device or whatever that I still lean on and use.

**Amanda Palmer 20:18**

Yeah, I kind of wanna go back to mine.

Do you write faster than you used to? Do you have anything you can say about your growing relationship with art and speed? And the speed at which you like to do things, versus, or what works, what doesn't work?

**Laura Jane Grace 20:33**

Yes and no. After I came out, it was such a like, breakdown of an emotional wall, that I felt so able to do and talk about anything, and to write freely. But I'll go through phases where I'll complete a body of work, and then I'll feel kind of dry, and it's almost like I need to reset. Right now, I feel very much in the spirit of I need to reset, and re-build, and also just like, figure out where the plot is now. Maybe that accurately describes it. I don't know. But I'm at that phase now where I'm like, fuck, I'm never gonna write again, and I'm shit, totally broke down.

**Amanda Palmer 21:06**

I know that phase. I was just talking about that with Ben Folds, and how like, once you've been through that phase fifteen times, it doesn't hurt any less, but it feels like a familiar pain. And you're like oh, you again. I'm just gonna have to wait.

Before we started the podcast, we were talking about ear exhaustion. I read a study where your ears get literally, physically exhausted when you make really loud music all night, and you spend your life doing that. So it didn't surprise me when I learned that, that when I started The Dresden Dolls, I stopped listening to music for pleasure. And I thought that that was maybe just emotional exhaustion, but it was actual, physical exhaustion. My ears were just telling me, stop. Rest. Silence. I need to rebuild my cilia.

And I think it's the same way, when you expend an enormous amount of emotional and physical effort, to make an offering, in the form of an album and a tour, we could easily look to the natural world, and be like, you have to rotate crops, you can't just keep pulling, and harvesting. There has to be this fallow period, in order for the whole fucking thing to continue to work.

**Laura Jane Grace 22:21**

Right, which is the natural part of musicians working in cycles. It's separate from the business idea of it, of record a record, put out a record, go on tour. I need that touring period to move on as a person, and to become someone new, and to have new life experiences. And I think there's also something really to be said for, I'm the type of person where if I write a song on a subject, I did it, that's how I feel about it. I don't need to tell you again, or say it in a different way, which is why it's always so frustrating doing interviews when someone's like, can you summarise this for me? I know you spent months...

**Amanda Palmer 22:52**

Why did you write this song?

**Laura Jane Grace 22:54**

But can you take something you worked really hard on, and tell it to me in a really shitty way?

**Amanda Palmer 23:01**

Yeah, it's funny, I'm just starting the press right now for this record, and this is that skillset, where I figure out the clever things that I'm going to say in summary. And it's gonna take me until my fifteenth interview to have economised that thing that I'm gonna say, and deliver it to you kind, nice journalist, who has no idea how annoying it is to do this for the nineteenth time.

**Laura Jane Grace 23:25**

It becomes a soundbite, but at the same time, it's true!

**Amanda Palmer 23:28**

It's true!

**Laura Jane Grace 23:28**

Then there's no other way to say it, yeah.

**Amanda Palmer 23:29**

It's a cliché for a reason.

**Laura Jane Grace 23:30**

You're not gonna make up a new answer to it. Once you've got the answer, that's the answer.

**Amanda Palmer 23:35**

So actually, I have had to confront lately, the myth that I think I've carried around, and that I know a lot of other rock musicians and singer-songwriters carry around, that everything you say on stage has to appear as if you're just thinking it up in the moment. And when you tour, even though you know that the majority of the people seeing the show tonight didn't see it last night, didn't see it the night before, for your own sick pride, you have to phrase it differently. And what's ironic is we don't feel like we have to play the songs differently every night. Those are allowed to be delivered the way they work, but when it comes to our in-between song banter, we think we need to be very original and authentic and clever. And I thought about going to Hannah Gadbsy's show, and watching her just throw down a scripted offering, night after night after night, of what it is like to be her, and what it is like to be raped. And I went and saw Bruce Springsteen do two and a half hours of scripted storytelling.

**Laura Jane Grace 24:46**

On the Broadway...

**Amanda Palmer 24:48**

The Broadway show. And I was like, why do we all think we're not allowed to do this? Why am I not allowed to actually really decide what it is that I wanna say, and actually, almost do the audience a kindness, by summarising it, and really thinking about it, planning it, saying it, instead of just rambling slightly differently every night for sixteen minutes, and using about... tonight, my thoughts about abortion. I could save us sixteen minutes, script something really precise, and tell you in two, and not waste your time. But that's very scary, because that feels like it flies in the face of being an authentic rock and roll stage performer.

**Laura Jane Grace 25:26**

I think a lot of that comes from the punk rock mentality, of that's not very punk.

**Amanda Palmer 25:31**

Boooooo!

**Laura Jane Grace 25:31**

Getting up on stage and saying that every night. But that's the punk guilt that I carried with me, and it was something that I took into real consideration as we toured with bigger bands, and it's like, doing arena tours, and realising that this is a production. But it also gets into it being different crafts. There's your craft as a recording artist, as a songwriter, and your craft as a performer. And I do want consistency in performance every night, because I think that people deserve that. And frankly, there's some nights where I don't feel good. I don't feel good physically. And I'm gonna do the song the same, but I don't want that to mean, and now I'm gonna be sullen and withdrawn between songs, and I'm gonna say nothing to you. Cos I used to do that, like go on tour and say nothing in between songs.

**Amanda Palmer 26:14**

So did I! And be grumpy at everybody. There's a word for this in most other areas, and we're allowed to use it too, it's called professionalism. You don't think about professionalism when you think about punk rock. But they actually can exist together. Those were really interesting lessons to learn, and it's also like when you're a teenager, and you love punk because you believe in complete and fucking utter authenticity. Unless you're in the total Henry Rollins school of thought, you're not really taught that professionalism and authenticity can go hand in hand. You're sort of taught that professionalism is the antithesis of authenticity, because it means you're showing up for work, and you're disciplined, and you're a grown up. And if you are in more of the sloppy, make it up as we go along, fucking DIY, fuck everything, fuck rules, anarchic school of punk rock, that can be scary. And I definitely felt like that in the early days of The Dresden Dolls.

And when I look back, it's a real paradox, and I'm sure that you've probably battled those things too, which is I was living in a paradox. I had to be disciplined, we had to be disciplined if we wanted to do the job of playing these massive shows every night, getting from place to place, and not sucking. I, and I can't speak for Brian, and Brian would probably actually have a lot to say about this, and had a different point of view, and probably still does, but I didn't wanna seem disciplined. I wanted to seem real, and raw, and fucked up, and amazing, and all the things that I wanted to appear when I was 25.

**Laura Jane Grace 27:48**

Right. But how long were your setlists then?

**Amanda Palmer 27:51**

Long.

**Laura Jane Grace 27:51**

Really?

**Amanda Palmer 27:52**

And ever-changing.

**Laura Jane Grace 27:53**

Cos we would do like, half hour, you know?

**Amanda Palmer 27:55**

Fuck you! We would play three hour shows, and then we would sign for three hours!

**Laura Jane Grace 27:59**

No, no, no, no. See, it's a lot easier to do that when you're doing like, nine songs in a setlist, and then it's just an explosion of energy, and you're done, but you realise, when you're like...

**Amanda Palmer 28:07**

Oh no, we ran a marathon every night from the beginning of The Dresden Dolls. The only time we would ever play a 30-minute set is if we were forced to at a festival, and we would be angry, cos we would be just getting our boner up at that 30 minute mark, and then the plug would get pulled, and it was like, well... there goes that.

My touring show right now is three hours.

**Laura Jane Grace 28:31**

Respect.

**Amanda Palmer 28:31**

I would prefer it to be four, because I wish I could add a Q&A.

**Laura Jane Grace 28:35**

That's crazy. How many songs is that?

**Amanda Palmer 28:37**

I don't know. It's a lot of talking. Like, fifteen? Twelve, fifteen? Something like that.

**Laura Jane Grace 28:43**

We kind of reached this point where no matter how many songs we play, it's an hour and a half. It could be 20, it could be 35. It's an hour and a half, that's just what happens.

**Amanda Palmer 28:54**

I'm jealous. I played a three hour show last night here, and I was like, why am I doing this?

**Laura Jane Grace 29:01**

I don't understand where you get your energy from. I see it from a distance, and I'm impressed by it. I'm envious, I wish I had that kind of energy. It's like zest.

**Amanda Palmer 29:14**

I get energy from doing a three hour show, and I think it's because I get energy from being seen and heard. That's the simplest way I could put it. It doesn't exhaust me, it feeds me.

**Laura Jane Grace 29:29**

Is that only in a musical context, or is that in other contexts?

**Amanda Palmer 29:32**

Are you fucking kidding me? Period. I need to be seen and heard in line at the coffee shop. I wish you'd been at my show last night. It didn't feel exhausting in the way that people might think, because it felt like there was an actual communion and conversation going on with the audience. You know, it's work, and you're doing your professionalism and you're holding the space, and you're dealing with all of the many things that you're dealing with, and you're performing your songs. But to be able to look out at the audience, and see them receiving, that's vital juice for my soul. It's why, I don't think I could ever handle just being a recording artist, and never having the gratification of doing this thing, which feels so life-giving, and so life-affirming, and so relieving to me, to be in mutual recognition with other human beings.

I leave a show like that feeling tired, but also much happier. Much more relieved. Much less alone. And I have to say, having just done the gamut of SXSW for the last five day, and just being on, on, on, and talking one to one with a lot of people, and doing this and doing that, those three hours last night were almost the most relaxing.



**Laura Jane Grace 30:55**

I can see that in the SXSW context, sure, yeah.

**Amanda Palmer 30:59**

Yeah, because I was like, finally! Finally, the fucking point. This. Not talking about it, not selling it, not explaining it. Doing it. This, I like. The rest of it... feels like the dark side of professionalism.

**Laura Jane Grace 31:18**

Right. I have trouble with that in the SXSW context of the not getting the connection with the audience, because I'm not sure who the audience is, or why they're there, or if they're actually receiving it or anything like that.

**Amanda Palmer 31:30**

And that's frightening. And the more personal your music is, the more frightening that is. I've been thinking about my record, and also Nick Cave's record, his last record, Skeleton Tree is kind of a template of what is possible when an artist fully goes there emotionally. I keep thinking about context. I don't think Nick Cave could have made that record without the understanding and the knowledge that he had a community out there ready to receive it. I don't think I could have made this record that I just made, that deals with the most visceral, personal death, grief, cancer, abortion, miscarriage. The reason why I could make a record that vulnerable is because I knew who was out there.

**Laura Jane Grace 32:18**

Do you mean that in a conscious or subconscious way? I think when I'm successful in those situations, it's because it's subconscious. Any time I start to think about what I'm doing, I find that it's usually not good results. I think with talking about Nick Cave and stuff like that, for me, and I don't know Nick Cave or anything like that, but looking at that, and looking at that process, it really speaks to the importance of practice, knowing that he's someone who goes to a room, sits there and writes, and to have something happen traumatic that you then go through, to lean then on your practice, and to be able to go through your process, I think is definitely healing, and that's what I use art for personally. But I don't know if it's something that I can do thought out, consciously, you know?

**Amanda Palmer 32:59**

But I'm not saying it's conscious. I think it is totally subconscious. But that's why it works. I don't sit down writing a song, going like, I know what I'm gonna deliver to

everyone, to all of my lovely fans, I don't think about that at all. Because then it becomes a job.

**Laura Jane Grace 33:16**

And it's second guessing.

**Amanda Palmer 33:17**

I don't wanna write shit for people, really. Then I'll feel like I'm manufacturing something instead of making something. But now that we are being conscious, cos we're just sitting here talking about it, when you look back at you 20, you 30, you now, do you see a difference in what you thought you were able to say then, versus later?

**Laura Jane Grace 33:39**

The negative reaction to me has always been as equally rewarding as the positive reaction.

**Amanda Palmer 33:43**

Yeah! Word.

**Laura Jane Grace 33:47**

So, you know, for better or worse, whatever. But knowing you're doing something that's gonna get a reaction, or is gonna connect in some way, I think that that just is there if you're connecting with yourself, and you're creating something that speaks to yourself and works on the one on one, just you alone, basis. But it's being in touch with that feeling, and knowing when you're on that path, is something that's taken me a long time to come into. And maybe that's just emotionally being able to be in touch with myself, you know? And talking about going into a studio and not really knowing what's going on, being surrounded by people who aren't giving you any feedback, being in a band with people who aren't in touch with their emotions, and don't wanna talk about their emotions, and you're like, here, I wrote songs about my emotions, and now I want to talk about my emotions, it's...

**Amanda Palmer 34:30**

I've been there.

**Laura Jane Grace 34:31**

Yeah, it's tough, you know?

(Music break – Congratulations)

**Amanda Palmer 34:38**

When you look out at your audience now, which is like, an audience that's either aged up with you, or just found you, do you think you feel differently, looking at that audience? I mean, clearly you're different, but has the tone of that relationship changed from what you can remember from whatever, 10 years?

**Laura Jane Grace 34:58**

Sure. Yeah, I mean it used to be more of unfocusing my eyes when I was on stage, so I didn't actually see anybody. Whereas last night playing, I looked for the one person singing, and I just made eye contact with them.

**Amanda Palmer 35:10**

It's all you.

**Laura Jane Grace 35:11**

And it was like, this is me and you, you're dancing, you're singing, we're gonna have this moment, even if no one else is, you know? And in the past, that would not have been me.

**Amanda Palmer 35:19**

That's your professionalism.

**Laura Jane Grace 35:22**

But that's rewarding.

**Amanda Palmer 35:25**

Yeah. I think that's also one of the things that you learn, the more you make music. At least I've gotten way better at understanding that it's definitely not gonna work for everyone, on everyone. But when you find the connective threads to that person, to that listener, you get a lot better at just focusing on that, and ignoring the rest of the noise around you.

**Laura Jane Grace 35:48**

I was talking about this a little yesterday, where I didn't really think about this until recently, of how much I don't actually like the live music experience. I don't like going to shows. I have social anxieties, I don't like being surrounded by a bunch of people.

**Amanda Palmer 36:02**

You mean being in the audience.

**Laura Jane Grace 36:03**

Yeah. I love playing shows, but I don't like going to shows as a spectator, and that was never what drew me to music initially. I like the individual experience of listening to music on my own, and connecting to it in that way. And talking about ear fatigue and stuff like that, how is it even possible to absorb music in the same way in a live context when it's coming at you at such a volume that you are missing all the...

**Amanda Palmer 36:26**

Subtlety.

**Laura Jane Grace 36:27**

Yeah, and the nuance of it. It's a totally different experience, and it's separate, and I'm just very much more of the personal experience of listening to a record. That's...

**Amanda Palmer 36:36**

You should join the non-profit that I'm starting with Zoe Keating, called Musicians For Less Music.

**Laura Jane Grace 36:45**

I'm in! You have me.

**Amanda Palmer 36:48**

We have all of these ideas. There's just gonna be no music anywhere. Our big undertaking is to strip the whole world down to just one hundred songs. No other songs allowed. We're just gonna pick a hundred, and that's all we're gonna have.

**Laura Jane Grace 37:03**

Do you need that many, even?

**Amanda Palmer 37:04**

Maybe ten. Maybe ten. Like, a Beatles song.

**Laura Jane Grace 37:08**

There's only so many chords.

**Amanda Palmer 37:09**

A Beatles song, a Beethoven, a folk song. We just don't need so much music! There's so much. Why? Why bother?

Do you have anything else you wanna say, talk about, share, pontificate upon?

**Laura Jane Grace 37:24**

No, it's really nice to meet you, and it's really nice to talk with you. I've listened to you literally every day for like, the past year and a half, my daughter is absolutely obsessed with you, it's cool. She's really jealous that I'm here right now.

**Amanda Palmer 37:36**

Oh, I hope that I get to hang out with both of you at the same time, and I hope that she gets to meet Ash, who's now getting to a more social age, where he can hang with others, and be interesting.

**Laura Jane Grace 37:47**

It's interesting though, seeing your kid absorb music, especially when they reach an age that you can remember being, and the way you felt listening to music, like for me, 7, 8, 9 years old was when I really started connecting with music emotionally.

**Amanda Palmer 38:01**

Yeah, me too.

**Laura Jane Grace 38:02**

And you're that artist for my daughter, you are the first artist that my daughter has connected to on an emotional level.

**Amanda Palmer 38:08**

Oh, I'm gonna cry!

**Laura Jane Grace 38:09**

To be driving down the road, and look in the rearview mirror, and see her singing along to your songs is like, really touching and special to me.

**Amanda Palmer 38:16**

Which songs does she like?

**Laura Jane Grace 38:17**

My friend has problems with winter and autumn, they give him prescriptions, they shine bright lights on him... Ukulele song, every day for like, the past nine months, I swear to god.

**Amanda Palmer 38:25**

Wow. That's awesome. That is about as rewarding as it gets for me.

**Laura Jane Grace 38:30**

Drowning In The Sound, I'm like, I'm going to SXSW right now, I don't think she really understands what SXSW is, but like, she loves that song.

**Amanda Palmer 38:39**

I think I figured out what those brainiac lyrics were actually about on stage last night, explaining to SXSW this song, and I was like, I'm in that place that I'm singing about, I'm gonna have to sort of explain it to these people in a way that makes sense, and then I explained it to the audience, and it's like, thanks, audience!

**Laura Jane Grace 38:57**

See, that's such an immediate song though, that doesn't seem like a song that's veiled in metaphor in any way. It's such a direct message, and it's interesting cos I have a song like that, called I Hate Chicago, living in Chicago, that you play that for an audience in Chicago, and it's rare to have a song where you're kind of frightened, like I may piss off everyone in the room here. That's a really...

**Amanda Palmer 39:18**

Or that you might be expressing their deepest feelings.

**Laura Jane Grace 39:21**

Right. Well that's what I find, with playing I Hate Chicago, is that people in Chicago are like, yeah, I get it.

**Amanda Palmer 39:27**

I have a seed of a song in me, called I Hate Boston, that is just such, gonna be so brutal if I write it, and I'm like, I don't really wanna write it. I'm gonna get in trouble, people will hate me. But if I wrote it right, it would be amazing, it would be a song that people in Boston would understand, and have to love, and have to contend with, but I'm also just like, oh yeah, that's just gonna be exhausting. Stay there. But you will eat me from the inside like a tumour!

**Laura Jane Grace 40:01**

You have to get it out.

**Amanda Palmer 40:02**

I have to get it out, I have to surgically remove it like the malignant tumour that it is.

Well, I hope we get to talk again and again and again. Actually, what I'm realising just in the last 48 hours, is that the reason I'm doing a podcast is 'cause I want reasons to get together with people that I like, and immediately cut through all superficial chit chat and bullshit and just talk about the things I wanna talk about.

**Laura Jane Grace 40:24**

That's a good reason to do a podcast.

**Amanda Palmer 40:26**

I think it's working. It's working, no chit chat and superficial needed, we get to skip that three hours of our relationship and just go right to the interesting shit.

**Laura Jane Grace 40:35**

Yeah.

**Amanda Palmer 40:36**

Hooray! Thanks so much for doing this.

**Laura Jane Grace 40:39**

My pleasure.

**Amanda Palmer 40:40**

Let's go play a show.

**Laura Jane Grace 40:40**

Cool.

(Music break – Have You Seen My Sister Evelyn?)

**Amanda Palmer 43:17**

This has been The Art of Asking Everything podcast. Thanks, of course, to my guest Laura Jane Grace for doing this wonderful interview with me. It was recorded by Jessica

Gardener, who was also filming a documentary on my entire SXSW experience. You can actually watch that documentary online.

The theme song that you are listening to right now is Bottomfeeder, from my 2012 crowdfunded album Theatre Is Evil. For all the music that you heard in this episode, you can go to the new and improved [amandapalmer.net/podcast](http://amandapalmer.net/podcast)

Many, many thanks to my podcast assistant, social media helper, and additional engineer Xanthea O'Connor. This podcast was produced by FannieCo. Many, many thanks to my team at AFP worldwide: Hayley, Michael, Jordan, and Alex, I love you guys. Special thanks to Nick Rizzuto, Brittney Bomberger, Allie Cohen, and Braxton Carter.

This whole podcast would not be possible without patronage. I have about 15,000 people supporting me and my team so that we can do this podcast without ads, sponsors, or censorship, so that we can just do what we want, and say what we mean. And on that note, I would like to give very special thanks to some of my highest level patrons. Bernhard Reebok, Simon Oliver, Saint Alexander, Birdie Black, Ruth Ann Harnisch, and Leela Cosgrove. Please, go to Patreon, become a supporting member, and that will also give you access to the live follow-up chats that we have been doing with almost every podcast guest.

Signing off, I am Amanda Fucking Palmer. Keep on asking everything.