

# The Art of Asking Everything

## Lenny Henry: Humor, Trauma, and Flipping the Cosmic Spatula

00:37 Amanda Palmer

This is: The Art of Asking Everything, I am Amanda Palmer. This week's guest is Lenny Henry on humor, trauma, and flipping the cosmic spatula.

Most of you Brits will know Lenny Henry, he is one of the most successful British stand up comedians of all time. The Americans might not have heard of him unless you are an anglophile, but Lenny Henry has been a mainstay of British TV, stage, and the comedy circuit, since the 70s when he started out his career at 17. Lenny also co-founded the charity event [Comic Relief](#) back in the 80s. I met Lenny through my husband, Neil Gaiman, the two of them have been UK side friends for a long time and actually if you want to hear more of Lenny's soothing and sonorous voice you can hear him narrating Neil's [audiobook](#) for the novel [Anansi Boys](#).

Lenny and I sat down in me and Neil's London apartment this last December during the chaos and the crazy to-and-fro of my European tour and I gotta say, you guys, I was not having a great time in London. Yes, it was cold and rainy, but also I had just seen some really terrible racist graffiti scrawled on the bus stop as I was waiting to take Ash to school one day, he was four at the time. I forget exactly what it said but something along the lines of, "All the Asians are taking away our way of British life." it was super dark, and Brexit politics were crushing the national psyche, and I had just finished reading this book, Lenny Henry's [brand new memoir](#). It was called *Who Am I, Again?* and it felt like a really apt time to sit down with this master of dark humor – and good humor – to talk about and ask everything. We discussed the paradoxes of celebrity and social media, Lenny told me about the incredibly uncomfortable history of minstrelsy in the UK. And we discussed what we are and are not allowed to write about, especially when it comes to our families – yikes – and most importantly, I think, how humor can be used as the ultimate armor against hatred and racism.

Everybody please make way for Lenny Henry... Hello, Sir.

03:12 Lenny Henry

Hello.

03:12 Amanda Palmer

You're a Sir?

03:13 Lenny Henry

I'm a Sir, yeah.

03:13 Amanda Palmer

Legit.

03:15 Lenny Henry

I was attacked by the Queen with a big sword. And at the end of it I did not get 100 men or a castle. I just got to be called Sir, which seems to affect older people more than younger people. The younger people just treat me like Uncle Len. And the older people do a lot of [forelock-tugging](#), which is really weird. I've never had a forelock-tugged before. I didn't even know it was a thing. But it's actually a thing!

03:38 Amanda Palmer

Do you think that that's because they're old now? Or do you think that any old people in the future would feel the same way just because you get that way when you're old?

03:44 Lenny Henry

I think older people sort of have this idea about the monarchy, that is sort of shinier and more mythical than people who are on social media and see them being trolled and stuff. If you see the way Meghan or Kate or anybody gets trolled on Twitter or whatever. There's been a real egalitarian thing going on with just bringing people down to size and I think there's good things and bad things about that. On the one side you go, "Well yeah, people should have access to celebrities, what's all this secret hiding, hiding away stuff?" And on the other hand, as a person who's been in public eye since I was 16 years old, there is a slight invasion of privacy issue which worries me about social media. That everybody's got a camera, that people know your business, that people can do three clicks to know all about your business, you know? With the older generation, there's still this kind of veneration of the royal family that is kind of legit thing, whatever the politics of it, whatever you think of the Empire, there's still a legit thing of, yeah, the queen, she's on my money. She's cool.

04:46 Amanda Palmer

In the old school of royalty pre information, access, social media everywhere, they had a lot more control over their boundaries.

04:56 Lenny Henry

Yeah, what you could and couldn't do, what you could and couldn't see.

04:59 Amanda Palmer

What people would and wouldn't find out.

05:00 Lenny Henry

Yeah, you were allowed into their [house at Christmas](#) and you saw them around a Christmas tree.

5:05 Amanda Palmer

“Hello”

5:05 Lenny Henry

“Hello Merry Christmas one and all”, but you never saw them do any other stuff. Or you kind of hear a whiff of something, but it was never, it wasn't your business. So, you – it's not for you to know really. Well, I mean, I, you know, for normal people, that was the norm, but now what's interesting is there's been this extraordinary elbowing out of boundaries. And now people can have access to know anything they want. And I don't know whether we should be scared of that or whether we should think it's cool and normal.

05:33 Amanda Palmer

That is actually the paradox of my life.

05:36 Lenny Henry

Yes. Because you're very much on the internet, aren't you, Amanda?

05:40 Amanda Palmer

Well, yeah, unless I'm not. But also—

05:43 Lenny Henry

You're having a rest at the moment?

05:43 Amanda Palmer

I'm having a little Twitter rest at the moment, but also, I have been on the receiving end of incredible generosity, connection, real, authentic, beautiful, communication. Like I have seen the good side of the internet. And I've also seen some of the ugliest darkness, and it's a real cost benefit tightrope walk that you do going like, well, is it really, really good? and especially, you know, 2009 is not like 2019 when we have seen what is actually possible with social media on the dark side.

06:20 Lenny Henry

Yes, I think you're right about that. I think it's very much a buffet.

06:24 Amanda Palmer

Read the ingredient list.

06:27 Lenny Henry

Well we should just look at it and choose exactly what we want rather than just going, I'm going to eat everything! All you can eat in Vegas. You know, we need to tune out.

06:37 Amanda Palmer

It should remind us how new it is. Like, it just all looks so delicious. It is like the first time you walk into, like, an incredible fancy hotel brunch buffet and you're like ahhh.

06:48 Lenny Henry

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

06:49 Amanda Palmer

Literally I could eat 12 eggs benedicts cause they're just right.

06:53 Lenny Henry

They're just there! I could eat everything!

06:55 Amanda Palmer

And they're free.

06:56 Lenny Henry

Yeah so there is that sense that the internet is growing and there's so much stuff to do. There's a guy doing 100 impressions in two minutes, there's a father talking to his baby and it's like, and the baby's talking baby talk but the dad's talking proper English, and it's really cute. And 'aww look at the otters holding hands'. You know, there's so much to enjoy.

07:12 Amanda Palmer

It's everything all at once.

07:13 Lenny Henry

It's everything all at once, and it's a barrage of information. And who's controlling that? Who's who's controlling the news on that? Who's – how do we know it's true? How do we know?

07:22 Amanda Palmer

Elon Musk.

07:23 Lenny Henry

Duh duh duh.

So we have to be careful.

07:25 Amanda Palmer

Yes, we don't have a lot of time and I desperately want to ask you 8 billion questions.

07:32 Lenny Henry

You started this -

07:35 Amanda Palmer

Sorry!

07:35 Lenny Henry

-about the Internet. Carry on.

07:37 Amanda Palmer

Actually, it started with the queen. I just finished reading your book. It's called *Who Am I, Again?*, it is an autobiography. I would argue it's a partial autobiography. Really deftly covers whole sections of your life.

07:49 Lenny Henry

Yeah. It goes from naught to 20, birth to Tis- I did a children's program called [Tiswas](#) where everybody got covered in custard pies. That's basically the show.

7:58 Amanda Palmer

Sounds great.

7:59 Lenny Henry

Whether you're Phil Collins or Annie Lennox, or The Pretenders, people got drenched in water and covered in custard pies by a guy dressed entirely in black, called the [Phantom Flan Flinger](#), he'd pop up from a desk and just shove a crusted pie in your face. And for two hours on a Saturday morning, that was it for me for six years. It was always very funny. We had people in the cage, they'd be students, doctors, lawyers, teachers in a cage holding on and then every so often, the host of the show would run across to the cage and throw 15 buckets of water at the people in the cage. And they'd be in there all morning. And we had a waiting list of people to be in the cage. There'd be like all these really posh and high falutin people who wanted to be in the cage to say 'I've been in the cage on Tiswas'. Tiswas, by the way, stood for "Today is Saturday, watch and smile'. And we had cartoons. We had Warner Brother cartoons. We had clips from shows. We had people coming on to plug their book or their movie or their TV show. But it was mainly a kid show. However, what they found out was, when they did the demographics, 52% of the audience were over 18. So it was sort of a grownups show, just on a Saturday morning, which is - we're all used to that now, but in the 70s and early 80s that was a really new, exciting place to be cause you couldn't be really rude, but you could be clever. And you could be cheeky, there was a line and you could dance up to the line and maybe even cross it a bit. But you knew where the line was. And it was really good fun. And I would argue that every Saturday morning show you watch on British television has an element of Tiswas in it in the way that people talk to the camera, in the way that they improvise or mess around, in the way that when there's a mistake people sort of riff around it, you know, but it's very Tiswas that stuff. People have slightly gone off the custard pies and the water and the cage is definitely a no no now, particularly when there's kids around.

09:52 Amanda Palmer

I felt so many things reading your book and one of the things that I found myself looking at is the immense number of things we have in common. As performers, especially there's this whole beautiful thread going through the whole book about your insecurities.

10:09 Lenny Henry

Yeah.

10:11 Amanda Palmer

Which I love because you're so honest about it, starting with your childhood years and then through your teens, it's not like you land at this place of ultimate security. You're 60 now, right? And you can still see you kind of picking up these things in these moments and in your career and in your life and examining them and going like, I'm not really sure about this.

10:34 Lenny Henry

I started when I was 15. And I was doing these working men's clubs, working men's club is attached to a factory and it sort of – It's a space for the factory workers to spend their money that they've just earned working for the factory. And there'll be about 300 people, there'll be a club secretary; there'll be entertainment on a Friday or Saturday night. And there'll be meat pies and potato chips and beer. And you could have a big show on a Saturday night and usually, they might have somebody that would be on television, who'd been on television, or had a whiff of celebrity and they're will be the top of the bill of the people you will be on, like a ventriloquist, there'll be a girl singer: 'I got the music me ain't got no trouble in my life' there'll be that and there'd be a comedian and there'd be a top of the bill. I was 16 years old, I'd won a talent competition, and suddenly I was the top of the bill in these places, I had no business being in these places. I was too young. I had no material. I had basically six minutes of material that I'd been doing on television, and I was trying to make that stretch over an hour and I couldn't do it. So I was in a real... there weren't tears every night, but I was on the road doing these clubs, feeling really sorry for myself. And just having an awful time because of the racism that was pervading everywhere you went there was this weird racism. This is Britain in the late 70s, early 80s. So you know...

11:54 Amanda Palmer

Your audiences are –

11:55 Lenny Henry

All white.

11:56 Amanda Palmer

– completely white.

11:57 Lenny Henry

Yeah, I'm a black person. The audience would be all white people. The white audience in Britain supported me, I would say for the first 20 years of my career, wasn't til I was really up to my waist in the waters of show business that black people started to go 'Oh we should go see Lenny Henry.' They were very hands off with me for quite a long time, the black audience, I've got no idea why. It could be because I was in a minstrel show for five years. Doing these clubs where it was mainly white people, there'd be no dressing room or toilet facilities backstage, so I'd have to walk through the audience and use the bathroom in the main auditorium and I'd sit there in the cubicle, and I just be running the show in my head 'Oh, come on and do that bit do Mohammed Ali then okay, go into that bit', and then I'll hear people say, 'What time is – what time is the wog coming on?', 'What time is the coon coming on?' Somebody would say, 'Oh, about nine o'clock.' 'He better be funny or we'll string him up in the car park.' I'd hear shit like that. And comedians would go on before me, and they'd be quite bitter that I was top of the bill so they'd tell the filthiest joke they could tell before I went on stage, just to screw up the audience for me. I was doing very, 'I walked into a bar. I said, "ouch." It was an iron bar' I was doing jokes like that. I was really terrible, 'A skeleton walks into a pub and said, "can I have a pint of bitter and a mop?"' You know, I was doing jokes like that. So I was a kid. But these guys were adults. And what I noticed with adult performers, is that they didn't like anybody being successful. And what they were trying to do is to pull you down. And I had that to deal with for a good five or six years it was awful. And I remember coming home and I was in tears once. And my mom said 'What's the matter with you?' (Crying) 'It was horrible and then they didn't laugh. It was awful.' Mom said, 'You wanted this life! This is your fault. You chose to do this. If you want to be funny go to Wolverhampton, find jokes', which was like, 'Go to Poughkeepsie, find jokes', you know, go to somewhere in the Midwest, and there're jokes just lying in the street and pick them up. And in a way, what she was saying was: This is the life you've chosen, when you were a kid, you just went out with your friends and you came back and you surprised me with all these jokes. You've got to start doing it again, keep doing your research. Because whatever you did to get into this career, is what you've got to do to keep it.

She was right. Keep going up, keep getting up. Don't just let them knock you down. Because I'd been bullied at school and all that kind of stuff. And it's very easy when you've been bullied, to just give up, to curl in a ball and wait for them to stop hitting you. But one day, you're going to have to get up and face up to it. I just learned both in life and in my career that just because you have one bad night, you gotta get up the next night and do it again.

14:39 Amanda Palmer

You have great passages in the book about humor as armor –

14:44 Lenny Henry

Yeah.

14:44 Amanda Palmer

– as a tool with which you could deal with family, deal with bullies, deal with racism. There's some really great passages in the book where you literally talk about figuring out the strategic

tactics of instead of having to get in a fistfight, you can actually use words and humor to twist things around.

15:05 Lenny Henry

I think that's a good thing for kids to know. I mean, you know, if people are beating down on you everyday you got to figure out some way of protecting yourself. Either learn to fight, learn Kung Fu, or figure out a way to get people on your side. It's a charm offensive, as much as just a normal offensive offensive. When this kid was beating me up and calling me names, one day, I had an epiphany. I just said something like, 'You must really fancy me because you're always wanted to get me on the floor and roll around with me. Why don't we just have dinner and a movie first and make the best of it? You know, you could buy me a ring, make it official.' I started to make jokes. And the people around me, who were white kids, who saw this, who used to go 'Fight, fight, fight!' Instead of doing that, they started to laugh. And eventually they said, 'Leave Lenny alone. Lenny's funny, leave Lenny alone. He's all right.' It's not a John Hughes film, by the way. I still got beat up. But it started to get less and less until by the time I was in the fifth year, we were the cool kids. And it was great.

16:03 Amanda Palmer

Well there is also something about using humor, I think, that when someone's trying to kind of dehumanize you, it's almost a way of like reminding them and everyone in the environment that you're not dehumanizable if you can be funny.

16:17 Lenny Henry

Yeah, you're a human being and the minute they realized I was funny, my life changed. I did the cartoons, [Scooby-Doo Voice] "Oh Raggy, reh-he-he-he" I did Scooby-Doo and Top Cat and The Flintstones and all that kind of stuff. I hadn't been doing it cause I was, I knew I was being bullied, and I was shy. And the minute they discovered that I could do the stuff they used to see on TV, they loved that. Here was this black kid who can do all this stuff. Suddenly, I was a unicorn. I had this talent and they wanted to hang out with me. It wasn't like before, and I use that. I absolutely used everything every time I went to school, 'Did you see that on television the other night?', 'Did you see Kunta Kinte?' Did you see [Woody Strode](#) in [Spartacus](#)? I'd just come in and – 'Dude did you see Planet of the Apes?' I'd always have the voice or the attitude or did impersonations of the teachers I sang. I did Elvis, you know, whatever I could do to keep them entertained was the thing I would do because I knew that if I'm keeping them entertained, they're not picking on me. It was a whole thing.

17:19 Amanda Palmer

You know, working in the trenches of touring clubs, stand up everything and actually Neil and I had some really interesting chats about a lot of this background because I had to be educated. Can you explain to me any side of the black and white minstrel show because honestly looking through the book and knowing that you're writing this book now, looking at these pictures of you, in black face –



17:45 Lenny Henry

Yeah.

17:47 Amanda Palmer

– and also knowing that while you're sitting there writing this book, you're having to contend with the history and the weight of history and what it all means, can you explain it?

17:58 Lenny Henry

Like sort of 18th century into the 19th century, there's this thing called [minstrelsy](#). What it is, is a show where white people put black makeup on their face, shoe polish or “Negro Number Two”, until they – they have it on their hand – where they wear white gloves, and they have blackface and they exaggerate the features of a black person. So they'd have really big white lips and really big white eyes. And there was, a kind of, a show that you could do in a tent. And there were two characters called [Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones](#), and they were basically the compares of the show. And they would have doubled talk, and they would introduce the acts that were on and it'd be, kind of, there'd be tambourines and banjos and they'd sing these songs – [singing] ‘On the Mississippi on the Mississippi where their boats are rolling along.’ And there'd be these songs, written by Stephen Foster mostly, songs about the South. And these shows traveled all over the South and sometimes in the North, and they make quite a bit of money. But it was about white people imitating and exaggerating the features and the movement of, I guess you could call it late slavery. So they were emulating and making fun of slaves. And then there was a turning point in the 19th century beginning of the 20th century where black artists started to do it too, because it was a form of income. If you're a singer or dancer, you wanted to make money actually, a viable thing would be to be in a minstrel show. So there were black artists who did minstrel shows too, there was a guy called [Bert Williams](#), that Neil and I are crazy about, who WC Fields said, was the funniest man he'd ever seen and the saddest man he'd ever met. And Bert Williams wore blackface and white gloves to perform. Think about [Commedia dell'arte](#) or Charlie Chaplin, the bowler hat and the mustache or Laurel and Hardy, the two different hats. For him it was like a uniform of work. This is what, when I go to work to do my comedy, I wear the mask of blackface and the white gloves, because this is why I'm on stage. But everybody in the [NAACP](#) and his friends, when it became time to start saying, ‘We're not going to do this anymore’, said, ‘but you can't do that anymore.’ And he actually said, ‘No no this is who I am.’ And they just said, ‘You don't have to. You're a funny guy. You don't need it.’ And he insisted that he did need it. And he died in a very sad way.

Cut to Britain in the end of the 50s. And this guy called George Mitchell has a radio show called the [George Mitchell Minstrels](#), and on the radio, it's fine to have a minstrel show because you can't see it. But in the transition between radio and television, they decided that they were going to have people blacked up in the white gloves with the black face and the curly wigs that curly, little semi-Afro wigs and the sparkly hats, and they would do a minstrel show on television. Boom. It goes on television and it won a huge award, it won the [Golden Rose of Montreux](#). And then a couple of years later it won it again, and it became a staple of family entertainment on television. Nobody said, ‘Isn't it weird that they're all blacked up?’ Nobody said that, ‘They're not

real black people.' Nobody said that. It just became this show that was unlike The Lucy Show. It was on every Saturday and everybody watched it. As a black family, our family watched it. We had that Scooby-Doo [Scooby-Doo noise] look on our faces when we were watching it. But we did watch it because it was always on. Every Saturday night. And then sometime in the late 70s, after I'd won New Faces, which is a talent show that I was on, I was asked to be in it. And I did it. I did an appearance on it. And it was, I remember thinking, 'This is really weird, what am I doing in this show?' And I was also in the stage show and I did the stage show for five years, because the guy that managed me also ran the – he was an entrepreneur who had minstrel shows all over Britain. And he said to me, 'This is a place where you can learn your trade. Nobody's there to see you as a comedian. They're there just to see the nice costumes and to hear the pretty songs from the Great American Songbook.' And that was my life for five years. I hit this slough of depression for five years where I just thought, I've really messed up. Here I am 16 years old, and I've won this show. And I've been seen by 16 million people, all of whom think I'm talented and now I'm in a minstrel show and my own family won't come and see me. And it took a bit of getting out of, but in 1979 I was able to go to this guy and say, 'I don't want to do the show anymore. I think it's racist, and I shouldn't be in it.' And he said, 'Okay, I thought you were going to say this and let's say we're not gonna do any more.' And that was it. And it was like having a huge boulder released from my shoulders. It was a massive thing. I just thought, I wish I'd had – my brother Seymour is quite militant, just think Sly Stone, quite militant, and black power – I wish he'd come and rescued me, but he didn't. I think because as a working class family of Jamaicans. Everybody just thought, 'This is Len's career now, we're just going to be hands off. We're not gonna, we're not going to interfere.' But they absolutely could have interfered cause I was a child. I was 15, 16, 17.

22:48 Amanda Palmer

This is another one of the things that I see us having in common. When I look back at my early career, I mean, there was just no handbook, no rulebook and also back then like no Internet, and even if there had been, like, there's no place on the Internet that explains to you, in your early 20s, here's how to tour, here's how to get on a stage and to—

23:11 Lenny Henry

Here's how to avoid weird people. Here's how to not do that thing that they're telling you to do.

23:16 Amanda Palmer

It's so confusing and especially when you come from a family who has no idea what the actual job entails, and no idea what anything means. They're just sort of dumbfounded by the fact that you've gone off to this other planet.

23:30 Lenny Henry

Yeah and remember, rock'n'roll and television was a thing that happened over there with those guys. It didn't happen to you. So the minute I was in it, they just took a step back and went, 'Well, this is what you wanted, we're going to just let you explore.' So every situation I was in, it was like I was being thrown into the deep end with big weights on my ankles. There wasn't, in

the first 10 years, there wasn't a moment where I thought, 'Oh, I can handle this.' It was all the thing of 'I'm not handling this. I'm not handling this at all.'

You know, that was my whole experience of being in show business. And so everything, every laugh gained, was a triumph. Every moment where the audience went, 'Actually, that's quite good,' was a triumph for me.

24:07 Amanda Palmer

And relief.

24:07 Lenny Henry

I didn't take it any, I didn't underestimate any of it. There's a place in Britain called the North East: Newcastle, Sunderland, Gateshead, the audiences here were tough. tough, tough. If you got a laugh out of these people, you are doing okay. And I literally barely escaped with my life. Every time I went up to the North East, I barely escaped with my life, because I just didn't cut it. I wasn't good enough. I didn't have the thing. It wasn't until the early 80s when I was doing a bit more television that they started to understand. 'Oh, he's that guy who does the characters.' And when I went back and started to do characters, and I was doing the impressions and the music and everything, they got it and suddenly I was getting ovations. 'He's the guy that does the impressions like Eddie Murphy. He's that kid. He's the British kid who does the thing.' You know, suddenly I was that guy, because they've seen it on TV. TV is a big thing. If you have anything on television where the audience can get you, and there's a consensus that you're good, certainly that's, that's that's a thing. Whereas if you're just out there doing stuff with no television support, that's tough.

25:15 Amanda Palmer

By total coincidence I also just finished reading another entertainer, performer, memoir because it floated into my life and I knew nothing about her and it was [Demi Moore's memoir](#).

25:27 Lenny Henry

Really?

25:28 Amanda Palmer

Which also came out right when yours did.

25:30 Lenny Henry

Is it good?

25:31 Amanda Palmer

Eh. It's not bad but it's also, especially reading your books back-to-back, it was remarkable to me when I read her memoir and then even more remarkable when I read yours right on the back of it. She doesn't really talk at all about the craft. Like she talks a lot about this happened,

this happened, this relationship, this, and she talks about her upbringing and her family and an addiction and stuff, but you're 300 pages in and you're like, wait a second, you've been in a lot of films and movies -

26:07 Lenny Henry

Quite a good actor.

26:08 Amanda Palmer

And you haven't really talked about that, what it - what you do, how you have to be, how you have to prepare, what it's like, what you do when you fuck up. It's a job you've spent, like, thousands and thousands and thousands of hours doing this job, like, what's your job like? And if anything, like, your book goes in the other direction, you talk a lot about, like, the job and what the places where you do the job.

26:28 Lenny Henry

Well that's the distraction. Remember, remember this plate spinning going on here? I had to go through a lot of heart searching. And you're very honest, I've seen you on stage and stuff and you put it all out there. It's taken me a long time to go, 'Len you can talk about these things. It's all right. Nobody's gonna kill you if you express an opinion.'

26:46 Amanda Palmer

They might stop talking to you though.

26:48 Lenny Henry

Well you know, it's tricky. You know you get slagged off in the press if you come out with an opinion, but when I was writing the book, I had a really great editor called Walter. He used to be a commissioning editor at Channel Four who just said, 'You got to leave something on the page here. You can't just do a shallow "Hey, here's a how to be comedy guy," book guy Lenny's Guide To Life with lots of jokes and stuff.' He just said, 'This is a serious thing. If you want to be taken seriously, you better stare at the typewriter and bleed.' And so I decided to do that. And the thing about work is to me, the work is the structure that gets you through this. You know, you can get through emotional hang ups, you can get through your mom dying, your dad dying, you know you can get through moments of not being able to have a kid, suddenly having a kid. Because what happens is the work balances it out and for us, the work is structure. So I, I venerate the work probably too much. And the real-life is the problem. The real-life of all of those things I just talked about; having depressions, having moments where you - you're not confident, having moments where you're being bullied in the press or whatever. That's the stuff that I find tough and I have to be very strong to deal with. Because it's hard to be out here with your head above the parapet, especially if you're black and you care about things like diversity, and you speak up about it. People don't like it if you speak up. You know, why are you speaking up? Who gave you the right to speak up?' You gotta go, well, I'm speaking up because nobody else is. And that's...that's the thing.

28:17 Amanda Palmer

I had this really interesting conversation with Neil last night who, it's important to point out, has also read your book, twice. First he, he read an early draft –

28:26 Lenny Henry

Yes he did.

28:26 Amanda Palmer

– and then he read it when we, after we went to your book launch, I wanted to ask, especially having written my own memoir, which is interesting because Neil hasn't. Neil has remained cloaked in fantasy and his—

28:40 Lenny Henry

[Laughing] Has he got some bombshells to come?

28:42 Amanda Palmer

Oh my god, dude. Elizabeth Gilbert, I saw her talking about writing a memoir once and she said this great thing, which is 'Anyone writing memoir, nonfiction, autobiography, is waiting for someone to die.'

And it's funny, except that it's fucking not, because it's true. I couldn't read your book without thinking about what it was that you needed to not talk about. Reading through, like, the list of this sibling, and this sibling. You really do go deep into your family. Like, I found myself sitting there with you like shaking and holding your hand going, like—

29:22 Lenny Henry

But I don't wanna. My big thing with my sibs is that I had to send them all a manuscript and say, 'Look, you guys got to read this and if there's anything that upsets you'—

29:32 Amanda Palmer

You gave them, to give them a chance?

29:34 Lenny Henry

Oh yeah. Fair warning. You need to. People had a problem, you know, with things. Particularly about mom's story. My mom's story: She came here in the 50s you know, she was walking the streets with signs that said ["No blacks. No Irish. No dogs."](#)

She was being racially abused as she walked down the street. It's an eyeblink away, 1957, it's not very long ago. 'Keep Britain white' graffiti on the walls everywhere she went. It was tough for her when she came here. And she was on her own. And she fell in love with somebody. And I'm the result of that. And it was a big family secret. Nobody talked about it. And I didn't find out about my biological father being different from my father that raised me till I was about 12. Suddenly, it was this thing that my mom thought, 'Oh, you should meet this guy and you should

know him.' I tell this story in the book, my sister Bev was uncomfortable with it. She's my older sister. And she said, 'This is mom's story. And I think if mom was here, she wouldn't want it to be out there.' And I said, 'Actually, mom is not here anymore. And I'm 60. And I want to tell the story, because it's important that there's nothing salacious or lascivious attached to it. It's just, it's an immigrant story. It's not just a kind of, she fell in love when she got to Britain. It's an immigrant story. This happens to lots of people. And so I wanted to put it out there that my mom didn't do anything wrong, because I grew up feeling that there was some kind of wrongdoing around me. And I felt guilty about that. And I couldn't talk to people about it. My younger brother and sister, Paul and Sharon, were also fathered by this guy, Bertie. And we grew up in a household where to have any conversation about it when we were kids was off limits, we couldn't talk about it. We just have to accept that our dad, Winston, who was raising us, was being quite stoic and quite close mouthed about it. And we weren't allowed to say, what's it like, you know, we weren't allowed to have that conversation with him. And literally, I got to be 16 I just thought, I'm going to tell this story. It's time for the story to be out there and to stop feeling guilty about it, to stop feeling the burden of carrying it. And it's been a relief. It's hard to do. Are there songs that you sing that are so intimate and personal that it affects your throat? It affects your instrument.

31:46 Amanda Palmer

Do you know the show that I'm touring right now and what I do in it?

31:49 Lenny Henry

Is this about abortion?

31:50 Amanda Palmer

Yeah.

31:51 Lenny Henry

Damn!

31:51 Amanda Palmer

So I get on stage every night and I tell the story of having three different abortions.

31:55 Lenny Henry

Oh my God.

31:56 Amanda Palmer

And a miscarriage. It's really funny.

32:00 Lenny Henry

Can I see that show?

32:01 Amanda Palmer

You'll have to come to Australia or I'll have to come back to London or you'll see it in New York.

32:04 Lenny Henry

We'll talk

32:05 Amanda Palmer

We'll talk

32:06 Lenny Henry

But it's real difficult to put those things out there.

32:08 Amanda Palmer

I made this record with these songs on it and then saw what was happening politically in America, and felt this really painful and annoying calling to actually go tell these stories on stage. And I didn't realize when I started this tour, that it was going to be funny, that I just knew that I wanted to get up and cushion these songs in the truth of the experience, which is I'm also going to get on stage and tell you what it feels like to go through an abortion and get through a miscarriage. And I and I actually found that it was impossible to talk about this stuff without heaping doses of humor. I just couldn't.

32:46 Lenny Henry

But that's, that's proper storytelling, though. Because if you're going to deal with the darkest, saddest moments of your life, you've got to leaven it with something. Otherwise people are just thinking, who is this miserable person depressing me? I didn't pay 10 pounds for this or whatever it is. People want to know that you have a perspective. They want to know that they're going to enjoy it. And they also want to learn something, they want to come out of it and go, 'Wow, what a night. I've been entertained, but I've also learned a great deal about this person. And I've cried too, it's made me sad.' And what I've noticed with this show, about my parents and their screw ups, and about being part of that screw up, I've learned that the - the abandoning of guilt and shame is something that people need. And people have been crying and leaning forward and really listening. And they've been laughing and crying and smiling at me and willing me to tell the story because they too, whoever they are, want to feel that they've been lightened, their load has been lightened.

33:53 Amanda Palmer

The thing that I have found really important about this tour, but also this tour in this moment of history, is that things have changed. People will now talk about shit in a way that they wouldn't even 10, 20 years ago. It seems like it is more acceptable to explore the human dark themes in your work without freaking people out.

34:18 Lenny Henry

Yeah, I think I felt that I felt that if you're prepared to empty yourself out onto the page or onto the mic, and you make a body of work where you feel like you've dealt honestly with the situation, when you go out in front of people with the work, they are ready. They are ready to listen. And they may not have had this from you before. But what I found is because the book is like the basis of the tour, when you go out to tell the stories, they sit there and they're... you can see them bracing themselves. This isn't going to be the normal Lenny Henry show. This is going to be this new show where he talks about this and same with you or this is the show so which talks about that stuff. Suddenly you're in a place where there's a crucible of allowing. They're going to allow you, and they're going to be with you on the journey, and you're not on your own. There's 500 or 1000 or 2000 people they're going, 'We're with you and don't worry.' When you're when your mouth goes dry or when your throat starts to seize up, because you're the terrible thing that happened to you - I'm talking about Bertie, who's my birth father, suddenly, I could feel my throat tensing. But I'd looked at the audience and you'd see they're just leaning with these wide open eyes, willing me to tell the story. And when you've got that, that's something. That's something. And they'd come and say afterwards, 'You know, that's my story.' And that's what I've been hearing a lot. 'That's my story. You're talking about me.' It's some guy, it's some white guy saying 'That's my mom.' That's - I didn't know who my father was and suddenly they know. Suddenly they feel something. And that's all we want, isn't it? We just want them to feel what we feel. And with the book, it was a hard thing to write and Neil - I would send drafts of chapters to Neil and he would just go, 'Just pour it out. Just let it all out. Let it all hang out.' And my editor said the same thing. So at least two people saying 60s axioms to me. 'Let it all hang out, kid.' Basically it was like I was being made to vomit this stuff out.

36:17 Amanda Palmer

You also made a really interesting creative decision and a few points, really difficult and emotional points, in the book. The story is told through comic form.

36:28 Lenny Henry

Yes. Well, because I've been reading comics since I was nine. The first time I read Marvel Comics, full color comics, was when my Auntie Pearl. I was going on a long journey, which is like nine miles. To us now that's not very far, but when you're a kid that's like Homer's Odyssey and my Auntie Pearl gave me Thor, The Fantastic Four, Spider Man, Iron Man, there were comics called Smash Pow, Wham, Fantastic and Terrific. And I read them on the entire journey in the back of the car. Bear in mind, in the back of a Jamaican car, both adults in the front seats are smoking continuously and you're not allowed to have the windows down in case somebody catches a chill. So basically, these children are sitting in this car –

37:05 Amanda Palmer

Dying.

37:06 Lenny Henry

– beneath a pall of secondary smoke. And you couldn't say anything. You just basically be, you know, I'm black, but I'm being green. I'm CeeLo Green in the back of a car, choking on your



parents smoke. And the only thing that saved me on this journey was reading these comics. And I was fascinated by this idea of storytelling through pictures and I thought, yeah, this is, this is a good thing. Too many words is too confusing. I don't feel this now. But actually, when you put the words and the pictures together, it's a glorious meld of story delivery. And I loved it. And so I'm 60 and I still read comics. I'm still reading, you know, Watchmen, Sandman, I still read all of those things. I'm a fan of Brian Michael Bendis now, Mark Miller, all those guys. And for me, there was always going to be graphic storytelling in this book, always. Because it's another way of looking at things. And you know, when you've been reading 15 pages of prose, suddenly to flip it, and have [Mark Buckingham's](#) brilliant cartoons of my mom and me when I was a little kid.

38:03 Amanda Palmer

The combination is amazing, because you're reading everything from your perspective. And then all of a sudden, you see your face, and like your terrified face.

38:12 Lenny Henry

Yeah. So you get all of those things.

38:15 Amanda Palmer

Your crying face.

38:16 Lenny Henry

Yeah.

38:16 Amanda Palmer

And it's really powerful

38:18 Lenny Henry

And you get those reactions. And it's not just description. You see it. I tell the whole story about Bertie being my birth father is told in graphic novel form, and I wanted it because it was too hard to write in prose. I didn't want to sit down and go, 'And then I did this and then I... I wanted to have a lighter load in telling that story 'cause it was too difficult. And so Bucky just said, 'Let me do, let me do that.' So I wrote a script for him. And he wrote the whole thing and it's lovely. We did more, but we couldn't get it all in the book. We did more storytelling like that, but it was, the editor deemed it inappropriate. It might come out in another form.

38:54 Amanda Palmer

It was a really beautiful choice.

38:56 Lenny Henry

Thank you.

38:57 Amanda Palmer

I got to the end of that story, because you don't tell the story about Bertie in order. You wait till you're a ways into the book to reverse course and tell that story.

39:08 Lenny Henry

Yeah.

39:08 Amanda Palmer

And I found myself getting to the end of the comic bit and thinking, 'What's he gonna say? Is he gonna tell me how he feels?' Your narrator in the comic is saying 'It felt like my life was flipped by a cosmic spatula.'

39:20 Lenny Henry

I say that, but it was I was trying to describe what it felt like. But I just thought Bucky can draw this. So I don't have to go into detail about the inner workings. I didn't want to bleed onto the page.

39:31 Amanda Palmer

Why didn't want to bleed onto the page?

39:33 Lenny Henry

Well, because it was so painful. And also I'm remembering stuff, when you're writing stuff, well you know this, when you're writing stuff, and it hits you that hard, you got to find a way to navigate through otherwise, you'll sink, and I didn't want to sink because I had more book to write. So I just thought I don't want to get trapped here on this island, rewriting my childhood, I've got to find a way to get through this so I can get to the next bit. And interestingly, I was able to say more things as a one-man show performer on stage than I was in the book. And having done the tour now, there are elements of the book that I'd rewrite because I'm brave enough to say it now.

40:09 Amanda Palmer

What are they? That was one of my questions.

40:11 Lenny Henry

Well, I talk about my feelings with regard to Bertie, because when you're performing it, it's different to when you're writing it. I was on stage – when I'm acting it out – I'm very, very angry as a young boy, because the grownups kept it a secret from us. And they could have told us, it would have been so easy. If from the minute I was born, my mom had said, 'Oh, by the way, Winston isn't your birth dad, he's the dad that's raising you. And your biological dad lives down the road and you'll meet him one day, and he's a nice guy.' If only they'd said that stuff. When you adopt a kid, there's a choice to make of whether you tell the kid they're adopted. And we were advised to say straight away that your child is adopted.

40:50 Amanda Palmer

Because you've adopted a child.

40:51 Lenny Henry

Because we've adopted a kid. I wish... I don't have many regrets, but that's one thing that I do regret is that they didn't tell me straight away.

40:58 Amanda Palmer

There's so much they don't tell you.

41:00 Lenny Henry

Well parents are weird anyway. I'm 60 I've and I've tried not to be anything like my parents and maybe that's the thing you know, parents are kryptonite. You don't want to be like them, you don't want them to be raised the way you were.

Parents are kryptonite. You know they didn't hug. They didn't kiss. They didn't say I love you. I saw my mom and dad arguing for the minute I was born. One of my first things I remember in my cot is watching my mom fight with Winston. I mean fistfights, arguing. I just thought that's what normal life was like. Big rows, big shouting, and then suddenly cooking and everything's all right. And then more rows, more arguing. And when I was when I was growing up, I would get hit. I got hit a lot. So I write about that in the book for the first time because I used to do jokes about it. And any black or third world comedian that doesn't talk about their parents hitting them. Think about Richard Pryor [Richard Pryor voice] 'Been beaten by one of them ole douchebag pipes. My grandmother used to hit me with a douchebag.' You know that kind of stuff.

'Go get go get him in that tree so I can beat your ass with it.' You know any black comedian that doesn't do that stuff is not worth their salt. And so I did stuff about my mom hitting me with a frying pan. She hit me so hard the frying pan retained the shape of my face for six months. People would come around to the house, 'Mrs. Henry I didn't know you collected art that looks just like Len.' You know my mom hitting me with a shoe. My mom threw a chair at me once and I run around the corner upstairs and the chair followed me around the corner. I had all these weird magic realism jokes about being hit. But in the real world, my mom hit me and my mom was bigger than me. She was like six foot. She weighed 200 pounds and when she hit you it hurt. One time she hit me with a belt and the book of the belt caught my -- I've still got scars -- the book of the belt hit me above my eye and I bled for a really long time. And Uncle Clifton came round, [child's voice, crying] 'Uncle Clifton! Momma hit me,' and he said 'Good, you won't do that again, will you?' No sympathy, no hug, no nothing. Just that and so this was my life growing up. And I have been criticized for it. I had a black journalist write a big article in the paper, criticize me for perpetuating this, the stereotype of the Third World parent and the Jamaican discipline, 'Not all Jamaican parents are like that.' But you know what you have to tell your truth. And in my world, I grew up in a house with a bitch licks and claddings and beatings. And if I didn't say that in the book, I would be doing a disservice to all those people who grew up with the same story. These stories are very true to me. And yeah, I would rewrite them a bit, but you know, next time.

43:31 Amanda Palmer

If you could, you could either reverse course and write the book again, now that you've toured it and connected with so many people or—

43:37 Lenny Henry

This is the bravest I've ever been, as far as writing is concerned, Neil said, 'Oh you've been very brave.' It didn't feel brave, but now that I've reread it, and I've been on tour, I realized that it was almost tantamount to just go [Screaming], like Platoon, you know when the guy kneels down and goes 'Whyyyyyy', and everything blows up behind him, it was kind of like that. And it wasn't necessarily burning all the bridges, but it could have been seen as a thing of 'oh okay, you don't care anymore.' And my sister Sharon did say 'Why don't you just be really honest and just tell the story properly?'

Neil said, when I was doing [Danny and the Human Zoo](#), which is basically my story in a parallel universe. In the first iteration of the story, my character, Danny, was a musician. He was a talented musician. And everything that happened to Danny was basically stuff that happened to me. But seen through the prism of this other Lenny, who wasn't a comedian, and Neil's note was, 'Why isn't he a comedian and impressionist? Why didn't he win [New Faces](#)? Why isn't he more like you?' The producer said the same thing. So after three years of working on the scripts, I had to then go back and make it more like me. But in that first draft of the story, I really didn't want to tell the real stories about my family, which is a shame. I shouldered and buffered the story. I made it kind of real but not too real. Danny didn't really know who his birth father was. So that was in the story. I changed the way it happened. I changed lots of things. And when it came out, it got nominated for an award and all that kind of thing, but my sister Shannon said, 'You should have just told the story.'

45:12 Amanda Palmer

Neil and I have a word for this. We call it the blender setting. Like, you've got a whole spectrum setting zero, setting 10. Neil's work is way more on level 9, 10 spectrum. Like, you put all of the garbage in there, like fingers, eyeballs, mothers, fathers, life –

45:30 Lenny Henry

Spiders.

45:32 Amanda Palmer

– children and like, like, [Whishing noises] and then you get a soup and you have no I mean, it tastes good, but you have no idea what's in there. And in my work, it's just like, you look in and you see a whole hand like it's just I barely blend.

45:45 Lenny Henry

I've been discovering the last 10 years that the best art is the most truthful and the most painful things to put out there and to put on the page or to record, those are the things that are going to

stick with people. They're not interested in you showing off. They don't care about how good your voice is –

46:00 Amanda Palmer  
No!

46:00 Lenny Henry  
– Or how good you are doing an impression of Scooby-Doo. What they want to know is what's real.

46:04 Amanda Palmer  
“Give me some truth.”

46:06 Lenny Henry  
“Give me some truth”, yeah.

46:07 Amanda Palmer  
Being with Neil has been really interesting for me because I have had to overcome my own prejudice around fictionalization of truth because my work has gotten more and more and more true, and I've sort of like my, my career trajectory has been like, gotta get like, take this mask off, take this costume off. I don't want to fucking wear this hat or these heels. I just like, me me me, you know, but that's, that's one choice and one trajectory. There's another trajectory where you're like, I know how powerful this mask is, and I know what I can do with you.

46:40 Lenny Henry  
There's a reason why masked storytelling is so potent. Everybody projects themselves onto the mask. There's no Derek Jacobi saying 'Ooh, and then I felt like this.' You're just watching some guys in a mask turn this epic story which is ripping your guts out and you're crying and you don't even know why. But they're wearing masks. So there's no facial expressions. There's nothing to inflict, or infer or anything. You're just going. [crying noises] and then she turned him into a swan. You're just watching the story. And I think that there's a there's a, there's a real choice because sometimes being really truthful, and putting it out there can mean that you're just wanting to burn everything down. And actually, it might be that you have to protect yourself, because you got to live with this. This is a piece of work. Was it David Crosby said to Joni Mitchell, 'Joni leave something, leave something behind? Do you have to tell everything?'

47:30 Amanda Palmer  
Yeah.

47:32 Lenny Henry  
Yeah, but who's that for though?

47:33 Amanda Palmer

Right.

47:34 Lenny Henry

The question is who's that for?

47:35 Amanda Palmer

The answer is yes to everything. You just have to understand that this is - the spectrum is real. And on this side, you've got moments where you look at someone and you say, this is what happened. This is really what it was. And then there's moments where it's opera flying, which is costumes. You've got to be able to accept that it's all true.

47:58 Lenny Henry

Very much true. But I think it's difficult if you've got family. If you want to be able to talk to your family and your friends ever again, there has to be some kind of—

48:07 Amanda Palmer

Go get the witch costume quick, your family's coming!

48:11 Lenny Henry

That's why fiction is so great.

48:13 Amanda Palmer

For a lot of people, it's the only way through.

48:14 Lenny Henry

If you can tell a story in a fictional way, you could talk about anything. You might get 'That story you told about the guy having the affair with this, isn't that you?' 'No no no, it's just fiction, nothing to see here. I'm just telling a story. That's not me at all.'

48:31 Amanda Palmer

I live with that guy.

48:32 Lenny Henry

Yeah fiction's great.

48:34 Amanda Palmer

It's pretty sexy, though. I mean when you can do it well.

If you're looking for the Lenny Henry mantra, there's this great line somewhere towards the beginning of the book where you're talking about being bullied. And you said, 'I don't want to get hurt, and I don't want to hurt anybody. I want to find the safe space where, like, I'm just not going to have to fight.'

48:59 Lenny Henry

Because it's boring. Fighting is boring, and it's tiring. If every day is a fight, what's every day for?

49:05 Amanda Palmer

You also at the end of the book, talk about wondering if you fought enough.

49:10 Lenny Henry

I think that's a question. If I had to walk across a bridge at Selma and I'd seen the dogs I'm not sure I'd have been there very long. I think I would have been running in the opposite direction. I've only become braver later on in my life. As a kid growing up, I was just trying not to upset or hurt anybody. You know, this is a show business, we're always taught by grownups, there's no politics on stage, lad. If you want to do political stuff, you keep that to yourself, you know, your politics is your politics, you're on stage to entertain. And what I've learned recently is that everything is a political act. The act of not doing politics on stage is a political act. You know, because when you're sitting there watching somebody just doing a brilliant thing with with the linking rings or whatever, that's, they've made a choice to do that. What are they thinking? What's the what's the real story? And I just thought, as I was growing up, you know I couldn't physically fight because I didn't have, I didn't have a father figure saying 'Come on, Chip. Let's go in the yard and put on the gloves and I'll teach you how to do an uppercut and the right cross.' Nobody did that for me. I literally had to wait until I was 40 before I learned karate or learned boxing or something. I'm crazy because I remember that at the airport in Glasgow, paparazzi were trying to take a picture of my daughter and I went 'Rrrrrroar' like a lion and came at them and said how dare you and blah, blah. I knew that I had to protect her. So I've got that in me. I just haven't got that violent kick ass badassery thing that other people have, like you have. Like you have. I haven't got that.

50:35 Amanda Palmer

I don't fight. I—

50:37 Lenny Henry

Really, Amanda?

50:38 Amanda Palmer

Not in that way! I mean, this is what has been getting me in trouble lately. I am getting... I have a Kumbaya reputation, forgiveness and compassion, radical compassion for everybody that makes a lot of sense to me, but is not very popular nowadays.

50:54 Lenny Henry

I don't like confrontation at all. My sister Kay is a badass. She would show up at school and if I was being bullied, she went, when she was around, she would step in and tell everybody to back off because that's my brother and if anybody touches him, they've got to deal with me! My sister Kay was like Supergirl, but without the cape, and with Afro puffs. She was fantastic. And I owe a great deal to her because she stopped people kicking my butt when I was at school, but when you're on your own and you're being picked on, that stuff is real. You know when a

skinhead is having a go at you and calling you names, you got to find a way to get out of that and my way was humor. Humor was my shield and my sword. And once I knew I could deploy jokes and impressions and characters, I might get hit, but it started to get less and less because people just knew me as the funny guy. 'Oh, he's the funny guy.' And I'm still being chased out of clubs. I was still being picked on. If you dance with the wrong girl in a club, you could still get beaten up, but generally, I had a smart mouth, people had to learn to deal with that.

51:54 Amanda Palmer

I reached out to my patrons to ask if they had anything to put forth to you in this interview and a few people asked what your take on cancel culture is. The idea that when somebody does something wrong there is now a button we've seen it with like this entertainer, this person, whatever, that someone can just be canceled. Like, you are done.

52:22 Lenny Henry

Wow! That's harsh.

52:23 Amanda Palmer

You're done. We're not going to give you anymore airtime ever because you've just crossed the line and you have been deemed completely bad. And I have to say one of the fascinating things about reading your book and like flipping back to the beginning and looking at the exact publishing date is like all of the stuff about Bill Cosby, who's, like, clearly an influence on you, gazillions of other comedians affected everybody's life.

Lenny Henry

What's interesting about all of this is separating art from the person. Gauguin was, you know, to all intents and purposes, [grooming young girls to lose the trick](#). Hanging out at, what was it, with prostitutes. Bill Cosby. Lots of people I know, who I really admire, have had dark nights of the soul, where they've been in a place where, you know, we're talking about somebody the other day, my partner and I about somebody who was a crack addict and was caught on camera doing it. And yet, eight, nine years later they got their career back. Cancel culture is a reaction that corporations feel they have to do to deal with the problem in the now, but that doesn't mean that person just disappears. That person still has a life, that person is still that person. And what are they going to do? Will they just give up? Will they just throw themselves off a high building, or will they wait? Very interesting that Harvey Weinstein is trying to fight back with money. 'If I make \$25 million dollars available, maybe they'll go away.' Well, maybe they won't know Harvey. Bill Cosby is still maintaining his innocence and fighting in jail, fighting back. 'It's all bullshit. It's not true.' That's his prerogative because he's been found to be guilty and he's in jail. My point about cancel culture is it only works if the person agrees to be cancelled. If you don't agree to be cancelled, then you can carry on to some extent. If you're a monster, if you're a murderer or something, maybe not. If you run your mouth off, or you did something that you shouldn't have done 20 years ago, people have to figure out what the statute of limitations on those things are.



54:23 Amanda Palmer

I won't agree to be canceled. You shouldn't either. If anyone comes canceling you.

54:28 Lenny Henry

Just don't agree.

54:28 Amanda Palmer

I just won't agree

54:29 Lenny Henry

Well the minstrels thing was a big thing. There was a period in my life where I thought, well, they're never going to let me work again because I was in a minstrel show. And they're just not gonna let me do it. And black people particularly will not want me around them because I was in this show. And what's been fantastic is that by the end of the 80s it was almost like there was a blanket forgiveness from the black community. I'd done the Lenny Henry Show and Delbert and Live and Unleashed. And suddenly there was this platform wherein I could speak to the black audience and say, 'I'm a repository of our stories, come check it out.' And suddenly there were, there was this, there was this new audience that I'd never had before coming to see my shows. And it was like the sun coming out for me. It was great.

55:21 Amanda Palmer

Do you think that any and everybody, I mean, entertainer, performer or otherwise, is worthy of forgiveness and compassion, even if they completely fuck up?

55:32 Lenny Henry

Forgiveness is a thing you know? I think the thing to do is to forgive yourself, because you're the worst critic of yourself. And it's got to start with nobody can forgive you, depending on what you did, nobody can forgive you the way you need to forgive yourself. And that's work. That means going away and being on a mountain and really thinking hard and deep about the way you've lived your life and the things you've done.

55:54 Amanda Palmer

Did you have to go through your own process, like, untangling and untying everything that happened in the 70s, regardless of what critics were saying, journalists were saying, public was saying?

56:07 Lenny Henry

The first thing you do is you experience it. And then the second time you visit it, you are revisiting it through the eyes of other people and with some distance. And I've only really started to think about it properly, with some distance of where were my mentors? Where were the guardians of my childhood? Where were these people and all this crap was going down? And you know me? I'm not letting a 16 year old kid go into a minstrel show. I'm not letting a 16 year

old kid do the working men's clubs where they're being called racist names. I'm not going to be. On my watch, that's not gonna happen.

56:42 Amanda Palmer

You finish the book with a section called notes to a young comic and it's an, it is literally, you know, it's like, an extra 20 pages.

56:51 Lenny Henry

[The Guardian](#) didn't like it. They thought it was—

56:52 Amanda Palmer

I just I fucking love it and you know why I fucking love it, first of all, you're just breaking the rules of writing a memoir, which and everyone should fucking break the rules because fuck rules, but also it speaks to the fact that you are doing this memoir as a gift and as generous act.

57:09 Lenny Henry

Yeah, because why are you doing it otherwise?

57:12 Amanda Palmer

Because you needed it.

57:13 Lenny Henry

Yeah. Yeah. And I never had it.

57:15 Amanda Palmer

And you never had it and if you understand anything looking through this like you keep seeing that you do untangle it, like you get into your 30s, 40s, 50s and now your 60s and you look back and you're like, like, there was no one here to tell me that. I was just like flailing in the fucking deep end. And then you turn around and you do it.

57:35 Lenny Henry

Yeah take this

57:35 Amanda Palmer

And you give it

57:36 Lenny Henry

Make sure somebody reads a contract. Even if you don't know a lawyer, get a lawyer.

57:39 Amanda Palmer

And even like, mic technique. I'm like, literally, like we're on the last five pages of the book. And he's going into mic technique? Like, this is awesome. I don't care what the Guardian says you fucking win.

57:50 Lenny Henry

Thank you.

57:50 Amanda Palmer

And this book is beautiful.

57:52 Lenny Henry

Thank you very much. I really appreciate that.

57:55 Amanda Palmer

And you're incredible.

57:56 Lenny Henry

Thank you. And thank you for being so honest about your show and about your, your life. Because unless we're honest, people don't get it. That thing about being a truthful artist. It's only just occurring to me in the last 10 years of my life, how valuable that is. How, much we must value the people that choose to do that. Because if we don't value them, then they're doing it for nothing. So thank you.

58:18 Amanda Palmer

Thank you for everything you're doing.

This has been The Art of Asking Everything podcast. Many, many thanks to my guest Lenny Henry, Sir Lenny Henry. The engineer for this interview was Christo Squier. The theme song you heard at the beginning is a song called [Bottomfeeder](#), from my 2012 crowdfunded album, [Theatre is Evil](#). I would like to give a shout out to Jherek Bischoff, my soul-brother who arranged the in-betweeny orchestral music you heard in this podcast, those are all little snippets from my latest album, [There Will Be No Intermission](#), which you should listen to if you like really sad songs. For all the music you heard in this episode you can go to the new and improved [amandapalmer.net/podcast](#). A million thanks to my podcast assistant, social media helper and additional engineer Xanthea O'Connor. This podcast was produced by FannieCo. A lot of thanks are due to team AFP: Hayley, Michael, Jordan and Alex, I love you guys so much. Special thanks to Nick Rizzuto, Brittney Bomberger, Allie Cohen, and Braxton Carter.

And most importantly this podcast would not be possible without all of my patrons, about 15,000 of them, so that we can have this space with no ads, no sponsors, no censorship. We are the media. Please go to my [Patreon](#), become a member, you can get extra stuff and also tune into the follow up live conversations that I'm doing with almost every guest of this podcast and also there are pictures, transcripts, notes, links and lots of other things. Those are my chickens by the way - can you hear them?

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