

The Art of Asking Everything

KT Tunstall: The Land of I Don't Give A Fuck

Amanda

Welcome to The Art of Asking Everything with Amanda Palmer. Greetings from a backyard garden and an Airbnb, in Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand, where my life continues to get stranger. And while we're on that topic, let's talk about not giving a single fuck, and yet giving all the fucks. It's a paradox. Let's talk about it.

I went into this conversation with the musician KT Tunstall as a fan of her music from afar and I came out of this conversation as a huge fan of her entire being. This is a woman who is not afraid to cut straight to the heart of emotions, and change, and growth and oh my god, she was a fantastic person to talk to, given what's going on right now in the world. And as we put it in the conversation, "the road to the land of no fucks given" is a bumpy one, but it is glorious. Poetically, you can give all the fucks and no fucks simultaneously. So, it was so good actually to sit down with someone who was so like me. Someone who was so hungry to just get very honest about the ugly sides and our craving for validation as women, and artists, and our tangled, mangled relationships with ourselves.

KT and I recorded this conversation in a weird little hotel in London in mid-October 2019, after doing a charity video together in that hotel room, and we just tacked this on. I was in the middle of the European leg of my *There Will Be No Intermission* tour and I could have kept talking to KT for 10,000 hours, I would have been a KT expert. That's just how comforting I found her presence and this conversation.

And if you don't know her work, I will catch you up real quick. KT is a Scottish singer, songwriter and musician. Her award winning debut album, [Eye To The Telescope](#), was released in 2004. And she's probably most well known for a hit song called, "[Suddenly I See](#)." Which I did not know until I was just researching it and read it on Wikipedia. Did you know that that song was inspired by looking at a picture of Patti Smith? No wonder it's so good. KT has released six albums. She's toured the world multiple times over, and she composes music for film and TV, including the movie *Bad Moms* and her latest album [WAX](#) was released in 2018. Let's do this. Ladies and gentlemen of all genders, KT Tunstall.

KT

My father passed away who I was quite close to, and his passing was not that awful actually, his passing was twinned with relief. He was not well, he'd had Parkinson's for quite a long time, and he'd also meant to have died about 10 times and hadn't, so he was just a beleaguered human being physically, and was not enjoying being old and in pain and having problems. He was a doctor of physics, he was a pretty extraordinary guy, and very physical, and so he was having a hard time.

But someone said to me, not long after he passed, it was a guy from the CBS morning show actually, one of the guys who run that show, he said, your parents give birth to you twice: once when you're born, and once when they die. And never had a saying resonate more strongly, because I think my dad passing made me reflect on my life in an extremely profound way, and I realized that I had all the things I ever wanted, and I was fucking miserable.

Amanda

Why?

KT

And I'd married the wrong person, and I had somehow, whilst pursuing a completely unconventional life, had ended up in the most conventional situation, and it didn't feel like my life.

Amanda

Conventional situation as in like white picket fence house, domestic prison?

KT

Yeah, basically, my Wikipedia page basically said girl from Scotland, tries hard, does well, gets married, buys big house, the end.

Amanda

You were living a Liz Gilbert pre-Eat Pray Love adventure life.

KT

Oh my god. It was so boring. I was so unstimulated, and I knew that things were really wrong, because I had always absolutely loved drinking, and I always drank a bit too much, but I had started medicating with booze, and I was starting to have like two to three hour blackouts when I was drinking. And I was becoming a bit of a more morose substance abuser, basically, with alcohol. And that was a sign.

And also the other thing that I knew at the time was a desperate problem was I lost my conviction completely. I stopped knowing what to do. And I'd never ever had that problem before.

Amanda

How much of that do you think was the relationship and how much of it was other stuff?

KT

I think all of it was me. I don't think it was the relationship. I chose the relationship. What made me choose the relationship. I think from the age of, really, 16, when I decided that I didn't want to be an actress, I wanted to be a musician, because I didn't want a director telling me what to do, and I wanted to write my own words, and now I really love the idea of acting, because I'd love to be someone else sometimes. Just, my identity became completely swallowed by being a musician.

Amanda

Because I can actually really relate to this. I mean, when I look at all the career paths that I decided not to go down, I think the reason I wound up doing this one, is because it was the closest thing I could find to making a living without being told what to do.

KT

Yeah, that was basically my main driver.

Amanda

High five!

KT

Apart from showing a bunch of other people that they were wrong, which was a very strong driver as well, I just desperately didn't want to do a job I didn't want to do. I'd kind of prefer to live in the woods, and grow food, rather than go and do something I didn't want to do every day.

I mean, the essence of who I was has always been there, and people who've known me that whole time would tell you that my personality is similar. But in terms of my own relationship with myself, that has vastly changed, to the point where it's now, I think, unrecognizable from where I was when I was younger.

Amanda

I went through a seismic shift having a miscarriage. Whatever it did, and that particular kind of loss and grief, but also the incredible empowerment, of realizing how much autonomy I had over my own body, was a game changer.

KT

We were just having lunch and talking about Punchdrunk Theatre, which is an amazing, experiential, immersive theatre group from London, who now are doing stuff all over the world, but it's a very magical, mysterious, frightening experience, going to one of their shows. And that's how I kind of ended up feeling when my dad passed. It's like this door, that's always been there, that you didn't know was there, opens, and there's a whole other wing to your inner world,

that you didn't know was there. And you find these rooms that are dusty, that have meaning and significance. And there are parts of yourself that you don't know yet.

MUSIC BREAK - Bigger On The Inside

Amanda

You were adopted.

KT

So I was adopted when I was 18 days old. I was born in Edinburgh, and adopted by an academic couple from St. Andrews. The adoption thing is really strange, it was always something I was quite proud of growing up, my parents were very good at making it something to be proud of, and I was also a quarter Chinese, which made it kind of really mysterious and exotic. I didn't look like anyone.

It's that sliding doors thing, you know that you could have had, bizarrely, many different lives depending on who was at the top of that list that day and who picked you up, but then that's the same for any being coming into the world, it's just kind of more visceral, in a physical way, for me. But you do have two mothers and two fathers and it's double. It's a lot to take in, and there's definitely questions that you have about that, about who you are, the nurture/nature conversation is really kind of exciting and interesting. But the more difficult emotional aspects of it have hit me much later in life, much later.

And I don't have my own kids, and I think that if I was a mother, that would probably play a whole different game with me, emotionally and psychologically. I have really close relationships with other kids, but it's just not something that has ever... I've never had an urge to have my own. Whether it's because of the adoption experience, I don't know. I mean, everything plays into your decision.

Amanda

I really did not feel called to have kids, and then I kind of just did a... what the fuck, fine, whatever.

KT

Was it because you met Neil?

Amanda

Neil made it easier to make the decision to have kids because I was like, well, okay, this relationship could definitely contain a child. Of all the things that you'd kind of want to tick off on a list of, if I'm going to do it.

But I think it's a lot easier to understand why a really engaged, busy, inspirational, heavily connected artist would not want to have kids. There's no hole there to fill, and I struggled with

this all through my 20s and 30s, I was like, I don't feel like I'm missing anything. In fact, there's all these things I want to do, that if I have a kid, I'm just not going to be able to do, and having a kid looks more like a door closing than a door opening. And I still feel that way. I mean, I had a kid at 39 because I was like, fuck it, I've done a lot, lots of sex, drugs and rock and roll, lots of traveling, lots of adventures. This is one adventure I haven't had, I'm just gonna roll the dice, and try it. But I still grapple with what doors close when you have a child, because they do, and it's very different for men.

KT

Oh, yeah. I mean, it's funny, because I would have conversations, inevitably it was with guys on tour, sometimes with really successful musicians, and they would say, oh, you know, you can still do it, you just take them with you, and I'm like, you don't do that! Your wife is looking after your kids at home, and being a single parent!

I think I also knew within myself that if I did become a mother, I don't know if I want to do this anymore. I think I'd want to be at home with my kid.

Amanda

That's one of the things I'm struggling with right now.

KT

And I don't mean that in any judgmental way, I just think from a personal point of view, I think I would wanna be growing carrots.

Amanda

And you do. That's the thing right now, is I feel torn between...

KT

But then, you also have his future to fight for.

Amanda

Right. It's sort of like an embarrassment of riches. It's like, do this thing that I love, and connect with all these people on tour and travel, or do I stay home and lick my delicious child? And both are really attractive. And I am still struggling, I'm struggling a lot right now.

KT

But everybody is with everything.

Amanda

It's just choose your own fucking struggle.

KT

Choose your struggle. But I saw an amazing Q&A with [Marina Abramović](#), oh my god, amazing performance artist, who did the face to face seated silence at MoMA. And she's fierce as fuck, man. She doesn't care.

Amanda

She does though.

KT

Well, she did a really good job of acting that she didn't care about other people's opinions of her her opinions. And so, I'm sure she cares what people think about her work, but she was doing this Q&A, and it was at the Royal Festival Hall, and it was packed out, and someone asked her, are you a feminist? And do you regret not having children? She didn't flinch at all. And she just went, I'm an artist. I can't have children. I was like, woof!

Amanda

But that's true for her! But it's also bullshit.

KT

Exactly. Yes, it's true for her, and what a great feminist moment, where feminism is women being able to do what they want, and not be judged for that. So it was really refreshing to hear someone's completely honest, unapologetic stance of how they were doing what they did.

And then she said, no, I'm not a feminist, because if someone tells me I can't do something, fuck them. And I was thinking, yes...

Amanda

This gets down to semantics of what it means to be a feminist.

KT

I was like, yes, okay, however, there is a very real glass ceiling. And there is a very real door that closes in your face as a woman at times when you want to do something, and you can't get past, and so yes, I don't care what you're telling me, but I also can't get through the door. But it was refreshing, not to hear someone say they're not feminist, but just to be totally, unapologetically strong in their conviction. I like that a lot.

Amanda

The attitude is its own spectrum. You've got the attitude over there, cos she's super hard.

KT

And I personally relate to the fact that I personally do not feel like I could do this and be a mom. I just don't feel like I could do both things.

Amanda

Yeah, I had to get to the point within myself where I knew I was gonna have to find a new script.

KT

I basically have a new yardstick, it's just if I'm ever moaning about my schedule, I look at your Instagram. I'm like, shut up, Tunstall! Look at Palmer!

MUSIC BREAK - Look Mommy, No Hands

Amanda

So we actually have a lot of things in common. Physicist dads.

KT

Oh, god, I didn't know that.

Amanda

I was raised by my mom and my stepfather, my parents split up when I was less than a year old, and then my mom shacked up with a PhD physicist.

KT

I did not know that.

Amanda

And she was a computer programmer, and I was like, the weird arty one in this family of very, very, like, straight intellectuals.

KT

Yeah, me too, no one else plays an instrument in my family.

Amanda

Really interestingly, John, my stepdad, and my mom, didn't have any music in the house. They didn't listen to music really, ever.

KT

Me neither. That's so crazy! You're the only other musician I've met!

Amanda

But John was into [Tom Lehrer](#).

KT

Of course he was! That's so crazy.

Amanda

And I don't think Tom Lehrer gets enough credit in the annals of songwriting history.

KT

Oh my god, I couldn't agree more, he's a genius! He's the Roal Dahl, Sartre of satirical piano music!

Amanda

If you don't know who Tom Lehrer is, he was a super, super hyper intelligent mathematician, and he wrote satirical piano songs. I think he started out lampooning...

KT

Like, there's Poisoning Pigeons In The Park. He wrote this amazing song about the atomic bomb going away. (*sings*) We'll all go together when we go!

Amanda

And he just entertained people, he was just this incredibly entertaining satirical songwriter. 50s, early 60s. There was a show called That Was The Week That Was, and I think about him a lot, and one of the things that I wanted to ask you about was about speed and songwriting. Because one of the things that I love about Tom Lehrer is imagining him, just sitting there in his room in Cambridge going, I'm reading the headlines, I need to come up with a song for Friday night, because it's basically like Saturday Night Live, I just need to come up with my good satirical song for this week, writing really fast, with a song that he's gonna have to memorize and play two days later. And I actually think that that can give birth to some of the best material, because your inner critic just has to stay outside, because you just have to get this song done, now.

KT

Oh my god, I mean, I put deliberate time pressure on myself all the time.

Amanda

It's the best.

KT

It's the best. I perform, in all ways, better under pressure. But the other thing to mention about Tom Lehrer as well is, unsurprisingly, considering his genius, he ended up writing for Sesame Street as well.

Amanda

I did not know that.

KT

Yeah, so he ended up as part of the Sesame Street writing team, and the music on Sesame Street is just absolutely brilliant.

Amanda

Brilliant. (*sings*) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12!

But here's the other amazing thing about Tom Lehrer. He decided not to continue his legacy, and tour the world, and be the entertaining piano playing songwriter. He decided at a certain point in the 60s that he was just done.

KT

Wow, I didn't know that.

Amanda

And he wanted to be a math teacher.

KT

Why do we want to do what we do?

Amanda

I'm narcissistically hungry. I don't know about you. I just need to be loved and seen!

KT

I believe I am in the same boat as you. I'm maybe not quite as far along on the admittance.

Amanda

It's really liberating when you start saying it out loud.

KT

But I have to say that I think that part of my deep personal shift has been a complete flip of purpose, in terms of why I like performing. Because I definitely got into it because I wanted lots of love. A friend of mine said that you don't become a performer of any kind unless you either have too much love or not enough, which is very interesting.

The thing I find interesting about my body is, when my dad died, I had this... Eastern religion would call it a Satori moment. It's just this wake up, and it was like that, it was this wake up, cosmic wake up, where I was looking at my dad's body. It was the first time I'd seen a dead body, and it was fascinating, and incredibly moving, and I just realized he was this complete bag of bones. And he was literally keeping himself going to spend more time with us, and with the world. But I was looking at it, and I suddenly just had this completely new appreciation for my me-car, for my vehicle, and I realized looking at him, this is all I have, until I'm lying there. I don't get a new one. It's very unlikely I'll get new parts. This is it. I don't want to be in pain, and I don't want it to break down.

And then I thought about all the things that my body has offered me. One thing that my body has offered me, and I kind of feel like you are the same in this way, but tell me if I'm wrong, cos it's very interesting, is my body does not react badly to performing, in any way. I've never had

stage fright, I've never been scared of... I enjoy it. I actually am socially quite awkward. I'm a bit socially anxious, which is a very late in the day realization, I used to think I loved socializing.

Amanda

In what way?

KT

I'm pretty anti-social. I like one on one, or maybe four people. Over and above that, it's now got to be a very special event for me to want to go and do that.

I love performing, and I love being in that environment.

Amanda

But does some of that have to do with the context of your life, and who you are in it, and the situations that you find yourself in?

KT

Not knowing what to say, and I immediately start performing, and then being the center of attention, which I don't want to be. It's like a tick. I feel like it's a phase. I feel like I might become a really sociable grandma, and throw parties, but for now, I'm delighted with my own company, which is very new for me to do.

Amanda

Didn't you also just go through a breakup?

KT

Seven years ago, yeah. It was a divorce through me realizing I wasn't happy. There was not anyone else involved, and it had been a nine year relationship. At that time, when all this was happening, I deleted 80% of my contacts. I was just like, I don't know these people. We don't make each other happy.

Amanda

You winnowed.

KT

Yeah. And it just thinned like butter. I realized I didn't have enough time for the people who did love me and who I loved. I've never looked back on that. That's been a huge step of self care, that has made me a much more deeply healthy person.

Amanda

My old mentor, who I lost right around the time Ash was born, who was like a dad to me, used to say...

KT

What was his name?

Amanda

Anthony. And I named my kid after him. He used to say, the most important thing in life is keeping good company.

KT

I think that's amazing advice. And kicking out bad company, that's also... Life is too short for bad company, really.

Amanda

You don't always have agency over the company, because you've got family to deal with, and people you have to work with, so when it comes down to what you do get to pick, you better be fucking discerning.

KT

I take myself on dates all the time now. So I love going to the movies on my own. I went to see Joker on a Friday night, the weekend it came out, on my own. And it was really funny, cos I don't think twice about it now, and I got some popcorn, and I went and sat down, and there was one seat empty, cos everyone was in, and this girl looks at me weird.

Amanda

I love doing shit alone.

KT

It's great.

Amanda

I love going to see theater, I love going to restaurants. I love going to bars alone. This is the weird thing, I love going to bars alone, not so I can meet people, but so I can be around people.

KT

For your quiet pint.

Amanda

Yes!

KT

Do people speak to you?

Amanda

Usually not, because I'm not that famous. So my favorite thing...

KT

But just in general, you don't get people, loners, coming up?

Amanda

Not really. I'm just too weird looking.

KT

You look like you could fight, by the way, that's probably why.

Amanda

I'll clock you. But I realized this about myself I think in my early 30s, because I was told by people that I was the sociable one, and I was the extrovert, and Amanda the extrovert and the attention getter and stuff. And then I actually realized that I'm at my most happy, because everything is always a weird alchemy of ingredients, right? And I realized I was at my most happy, when I was around a bunch of people, on my own. And I was like, wow, that's really bizarre.

KT

And do you consider that is what a show is?

Amanda

If a show is really good, you don't feel alone. If a show is really good, you feel hyper-connected.

KT

Yeah, of course, yeah.

Amanda

And a show is great if you hate being told what to do, and you kind of love control of the narrative, because you're in control. I talk about this a lot with Neil, because Neil and I get pegged as complete opposites, right? Amanda's the extrovert, super social, blah, blah, blah. And Neil is the introvert, the writer. What I actually find is fascinating, is that we're really not. We're both sort of ambiverts.

KT

What does that mean? I don't know that word.

Amanda

You're both introverted and extroverted, depending.

KT

Ambivert.

Amanda

As in, ambidextrous. I think a lot of what Neil and I have in common, and a lot of performers and artists have in common, is a lot of it is just about control, and not super negative control, like I have to fucking control you. Neil self-defines as an introvert, and as a person who doesn't like people, and is socially awkward, but he's very comfortable on stage, as long as everything is settled. We all want what all human beings from the fucking dawn of time have wanted. We want connection. But it's the way we get it in our flavour.

KT

But then also, the middle man in our connection with other people is our work. And I think as an artist, you're always going to have parental protective emotions about that, and how it's experienced by people. I very rarely have a bad gig.

Amanda

Me too.

KT

I could probably count on one hand the amount of times I come offstage and feel bad about what's happened. I don't care about mistakes, I love them, it's so funny. And it's original, it's real. I studied the art of clowning, commedia dell'arte, at university when I did my theatre course, and it was such a beautiful idea, the original art of clowning was actually really medicinal for people. It was being able to watch someone else fail, and laugh.

Amanda

In a safe space.

KT

In a safe space, and just be so relieved that it's not you.

MUSIC BREAK - There Will Be No Intermission

Amanda

This is something that's so subtle, it is hard to talk about with anyone else who is not a professional performer, but I've had a very weird thing happening on this tour in particular. I've been touring for 20 years, gazillion different venues. I did realize a few years ago that one thing that was driving me subtly nuts, that I had never noticed, was all the people in the environment of a show who give no shits. And I started realizing one of the things that I loved about doing the spontaneous gig that you came and did with me in Edinburgh, and doing a house party, and doing a pop up show is that literally everyone in the space wants to be there. And when you're playing in a huge venue, there's a lot of people who are just there because they fucking have to be. They have to work the door, they have to do security, they have to just clock their job. And I started realizing that I just felt uncomfortable being around those people, given what I was doing on stage. I could have done the math and realize that the kind of material that I'm doing in this

show, this was gonna come up, but I was touring in the States, and for the first couple weeks, I was having to confront going from moment to moment, being on stage, telling these hardcore stories about grief, abortion, miscarriage, death, and then getting off stage for the intermission and literally seeing, like in Philly, six dudes watching hockey with their hands down their pants, 20 feet from where I was performing, because they were just union guys who had to be working in security. They hadn't even heard or watched the show, they had no idea what I was doing. But, they were supposed to be my guys, in my space, and I was like, this is what drives me crazy, is the cognitive dissonance of what we do in the spaces we do it, and then having to walk by those six guys, in my stage, constantly going, hey!

KT

And of course, you get called a diva if you're asking the staff of a venue to not scratch their balls while you're playing.

I haven't been so bothered by that, but it is one of my major pet peeves if there's someone I can see in the wings who's looking at their phone or something, I hate that. To the point where I think from now on I will stop and say, put it away.

Amanda

For this tour, I started asking that. I was like, if you're in my eyeline...

KT

It's incredibly distracting.

Amanda

Right, but so here's the moment that I think, it took me years and years and years to get there. There's that self editor that goes, you're gonna sound like such a fucking diva. And I'm just not gonna say it, because I don't want to get a reputation as being a diva. And now that I know that I'm allowed to ask for what I need, I've started asking during soundcheck, can no one just be on their phones sitting in these seats during my show? Can you make sure that you're not on the wings of the stage just watching hockey? I'm here doing a job for like, 1000 people, I'm allowed to ask for that.

KT

One of my major pursuits in life is reaching the land of I don't give a fuck what you think of me. I'm gonna do what I do, and this is what I need to do it.

Amanda

We just met a couple of months ago, we met at this weird gig in Philly playing for a bunch of non commercial radio presenters, and you had just had something happen with your hearing. When you're a musician, your ears, your vocal cords, are your life blood.

KT

Your hands.

KT

That's the thing that sometimes you lie in bed going, what would I do if I didn't have that? If that stopped working, or if this broke?

So 10 years ago, I suffered some sort of event in my left ear, where I ended up with tinnitus, and top end hearing loss, so I couldn't hear the shower, I couldn't hear the indicator on the car through my left ear. And I had this constant ringing in my ear also. Took a few months, I was quite depressed at first, it just makes you not want to go outside, tinnitus is not fun at all. And especially as a musician, but anyone who appreciates sound, you've got this tone that your brain is creating in the absence of that frequency that you can't hear anymore, it just creates, for apparently no reason, and it plays you constantly this drone in your ear.

I got used to it, and I got to the point where it really didn't bother much anymore. And I was aware of the hearing loss, in that I would sort of have to swap my headphones over when I was doing mixes for albums, but I never really liked super noisy pubs or that kind of environment anyway, so it didn't massively impact my life. But it was annoying.

Weirdly, another thing that happened was I couldn't double track my vocals when I was recording anymore, which means singing exactly the same thing on top of a vocal that you've already done. I would be out of tune. Something was happening where if I could already hear the same line, I couldn't match it. I could match it if it got muted, and it was just on its own, but something frequency-wise was happening.

A year ago, I was on tour with my drummer, we were doing a two piece tour of America, and I woke up on the tour bus. I always use earplugs, and I took an ear plug... one earplug out was great, I took the left earplug out, and there was no difference. And I was like wait, what is going on? And it took about two days for the ear to die. There was a very weird interim period of it kind of sounding like the phone calls on The Simpsons, where everything was like... eh-eh-eh-eh. It was just bizarre. We were overnight to Nashville, and I went to see a specialist. And they said something pretty devastating has happened to your ear. I couldn't hear any more. And I was hearing almost just vibration. And I actually played two shows in Nashville and Milwaukee once that ear had gone. I was on a monitor on the floor, and I went on to in-ears, and it was pretty discombobulating. And it was it was very frightening

Amanda

Did you tell the audience?

KT

No, I didn't tell the audience. I don't think I could have quite handled that. It was like everything I'd learned from 20 years of playing live and performing was channeled into that moment, where I had really hardcore fans at the Nashville show who afterwards said we had no idea there was

anything wrong, it was one of our favorite shows, and I really enjoyed it. I didn't struggle to enjoy the show.

But the second night, which was the Nashville night, I took a bow, and I stepped backwards straight onto my guitar pedal board, which was really weird. I just stepped on it. And I suddenly felt like I had downed an entire bottle of tequila, and I couldn't walk. My balance basically left my body for over a month, and I couldn't cross the road on my own. I had to hold on to the sink brushing my teeth. I had vertigo, which means that every now and then it just feels like someone spins you uncontrollably. I was pretty nauseous at first.

We postponed the tour, we didn't cancel it actually. I was like, no, I'm gonna do it! But we postponed from October to the following May. I ended up having to haul up in New York, because I didn't want to fly anywhere. And I ended up in a really nice, high up 25th flat in Hell's Kitchen, with a view of the Hudson, and I bought a pair of nice pyjamas, and some slippers, and I have to tell you, I know the honest truth is, I could not have been happier. I mean, it makes me quite emotional.

Amanda

You had to stop.

KT

I had to stop. I didn't realize, I'd been fucking desperate to stop. And my body had gone, okay. Or the universe had gone, let's make her deaf. That'll stop her. And it didn't. I carried on. And then the universe was like, okay girl, you can't walk.

The craziest thing about it was, I ended up in this apartment, in New York, with my manager, and my road guy, who's my sound guy, who's great, and I realized that since 2004, when I'd become successful, I had been so busy, any spare time I ever had, I was desperately using to not think about work. And my career had massively suffered. Because I never had any free time to sit down and think about my work, and what I was doing, and if I was enjoying what I was doing, and where I was going, and why the fuck I was doing all this work.

Amanda

My head is gonna fall off from nodding. Same life.

KT

It was insane! And so I actually was given this gift of two weeks, where I couldn't go anywhere. And we sat at a table and went, okay... like, I could have a fucking disability dog now. So what do I want? And it was completely transformational. And it has changed the course of where my life is now gonna go.

MUSIC BREAK - You'd Think I'd Shot Their Children

Amanda

Neil and I both have this problem, right now especially, and every artist I know kind of has this problem, which is you can't make good decisions while you're running at a sprint.

KT

You're in a relay race and you're every single person on the fucking team. Why are we in this situation where we feel like we can't, we're just scared?

Amanda

We're scarcity driven.

KT

We're so narcissistic that we think...

Amanda

Well, because, especially when you're an indie artist, don't have tons and tons and tons and tons of... I couldn't afford to take time off.

KT

It is extremely hard to do this job and get rich.

Amanda

I will share my personal thing, which is, Neil kept making fun of me, because I had been saying for 10 years, I know I'm not making a ton of money. I could be, if I just went out on a solo piano tour, and that was the refrain. At some point, I'll just go out on a solo piano tour, and I'll make bank, and right now I'm on a solo piano tour, and guess how much money it's making? Not a lot.

KT

It's just so expensive.

Amanda

Even with a skeleton crew, it's just so expensive, and you want to pay your crew well, and you don't want to be getting five hours of sleep a night, so you have to...

KT

But every single person I employed on that tour made considerably more money than I did.

Amanda

Yeah, it's the same situation over here.

KT

It was a five week tour. I got to pyjama land, and I got a bunch of steroids injected into my eardrum. I was deaf. My ear was not fit for a hearing aid to amplify anything. There was no information going into my brain through my ear whatsoever. My left ear died.

I believe in magic, so I believe that I certainly have not given up hope that something will happen.

Amanda

You believe in ear incarnation.

KT

Ear incarnation! But the weirdest feeling about it is I'm not. I'd done a lot of self work, by this point. After my kind of breakdown, let's call it, of 2012, where I had to do my Keanu Reeves waking up in the slimy pod of reality, and realizing that life was actually a bit shit, I did a lot of work. I meditated, I read, I journal. There is just a library of people that I look to for guidance. Currently [Abraham Hicks](#), [Eckhart Tolle](#), [Wayne Dyer](#) [Louise Hay](#), [Brené Brown](#), anything I can get my hands on, I listen to, I read, I just am interested in self expansion and self love.

So when that happened to me, I remember running around the apartment singing Nina Simone. (*sings*) I got my legs, got my arms, got my liver! And it was like, I really felt so fucking grateful that I could see. I would probably lose my hearing before my sight.

Amanda

Suddenly you saw.

KT

Suddenly I saw. I have my legs, I've got an ear that works, I can still sing, play, I am enjoying touring more than ever.

MUSIC BREAK - Smile (Pictures or It Didn't Happen)

Amanda

Yeah. loss and grief, amplify goodness in a way that is unimaginable. I remember - god, yeah, it was the Roundhouse, it was my huge band gig in London 2012, because it was the Grand Theft Orchestra tour, and I got the news, literally two hours before hitting stage on my biggest European show tour, that one of my friends in Boston had just been found dead. And she was in her 20s. And she had just been in one of my videos, and she was a huge fixture in my life back home. Someone called me and said, where are you? Can you get somewhere alone? I was like, I'm just about to go onstage, London show tonight! And they told me that Becca was dead. And I remember this moment on stage, where I looked at myself playing, literally looked at my hands playing the piano, and my hand holding the mic, and was just like, oh my god, like Becca doesn't have hands anymore. She's dead.

It was like a cross between an acid trip and a matrix style, I'm actually seeing the reality of my own vital existence, in a way that's so simple. Like, of course I know I have hands, of course I know I'm alive. But I felt it. It was like I felt the blood running through my body, and was like, right. And she isn't. She's gone. She will never feel blood running through her veins again.

KT

There's a time stamp on this shit.

Amanda

It changed my show. I felt so alive in comparison to her deadness, whatever it was. And then I felt the similar thing when Anthony, my mentor, died. And I felt a similar thing after losing a baby in a miscarriage. You just become so aware of what life is, when you face death.

KT

Doesn't it give you a feeling that you have more of a responsibility to be alive?

Amanda

Sure. I mean, I was texting a friend last night, she just texted me and she said, I've sort of lost my equivalent of Anthony, my mentor, he died, I can't actually really comprehend it at the moment, that he's gone. And we started a conversation about death, and life. And death is a massive part of life, it's where we're all headed. Life is basically just a dance that you do. It's a tango that you do with the inevitable end. And if you stop being aware of it, you can't actually enjoy your life if you're not thinking about death all the time.

I'm obsessed with death in what feels like a really healthy way. I talk about it, I sing about it, I joke about it, I really try to remember to look at my hand and go...

KT

How do you feel about it? Your own?

Amanda

I feel like it's gonna come, and when it comes it will happen, and I don't think I will dread it. Death, we welcome you.

KT

I really think it's gonna be...

Amanda

Well, if you've done a lot of work, and you have honed the muscles in your body, and your ability to let go, it is the final fucking exam.

MUSIC BREAK - Trout Heart Replica

KT

So I wrote this record called invisible Empire/Crescent Moon, which one I'm most proud of. It was with Howe Gelb from Giant Sand, he helped produce it in Arizona, and it's a very melancholy folk Americana mood record, but I'm really proud of the material, it's very deep, and well crafted, and all live to tape, and it was a beautiful experience. But I wrote it in two parts, hence the two titles. And the first part I wrote at the beginning of the year, and it was all going well, I didn't think I was making a record, but my A&R guy loved it and he said, you should go back out and finish this and make it a full record.

So the first part of the record was written in the spring, and we were working in Wavelab, a great studio in Tucson, Arizona, and Arizona is like Mars, man, that place is too hot for me in the summer, so I went back to the UK for the summer. And my dad died. And literally a month after my dad died, I left my marriage, because I realized that I was hideously depressed, and not living my life. It felt like someone else's. And kind of as an escape from all of that, that I went back in that autumn to finish the album.

It was such a weird example of songwriting being clairvoyant, because I had written a song on the first half of that record called Carried. And I did not know my dad was gonna die, he was not about to die, he was ill, but he wasn't about to die. He died via an accident with his bicycle, actually. Carried was a song, I had been thinking about death, and of course, part of me knew that my dad was on his way out, but it was not imminent. But I had been thinking a lot about mortality, I think, as well. Carried is a song about the fact that your very last journey that your body will ever make will probably be after you die. So you're gonna die somewhere. The likelihood of you dying where you want to end up is very slim.

Amanda

You're gonna have to get from point A to point B.

KT

You're gonna have to get to final resting point. And I would always joke, when I played the song gigs, I'd be like, so who's gonna take you? And do they have a car?

Amanda

And do they have a nice car?

KT

Do you trust them? It's this weird plan that we all sort of have to make at some point, of like, where do I want my remains to end up, and do I care? Is it for me, or is it for the people I'm leaving behind? What do I consider here?

So this is what this song is about. The last act of someone carrying you.

And literally two months after writing that song, I am walking through Bath, where my parents, my mother still lives there, where they lived, with my dad in a backpack, in a plastic bag, his ashes in a cardboard box. We were eco about it. And my mom didn't want the ashes in her apartment, so I said that I would take them back to London with me.

And it was just the weirdest experience of walking through crowds just going...

Amanda

I've got my dad in the backpack!

KT

My dad is in my bag!

And he was a physicist. So, I remember at 11 years old, I wasn't brought up religious in any way, my dad wasn't religious at all, he just thought it was la-la.

I remember all my friends, and particularly all the boys that I fancied, went to Sunday School. So at 11 years old, I decided I was going to find out what this was about, because everybody goes, and I felt completely left out, so I took myself away on my bike. And I was like, this is fucking dull, why is everyone here?

Amanda

I had to go to Sunday school, it is very fucking boring.

KT

Oh my god. So I went home, and my dad, I've told the story a lot, but it's a good story, and he's reading his newspaper, and the paper is in front of his face. And I say to him, Dad, do you believe in god? And he just doesn't move the paper, I can't see his face, he goes, no. Aliens, everywhere. So no, aliens everywhere, was my religious education from my physicist father, then I got deeply into Isaac Asimov.

But needless to say, my dad had this... you know, there's a beautiful meeting of spirituality and physics, where he knew that nothing on this Earth is new, it's all recycled material, we are stardust. We are made of particles that have been present in this universe from the Big Bang. So he did have this really beautiful, somewhat spiritual belief, that you just go back to cosmic dust.

And here I am on the train. My dad is now cosmic dust, he's actual physical dust, in a bag, in my backpack.

Amanda

Don't lose that backpack.

KT

And I am, at no point after my dad's death, was distraught. I was glad that he wasn't in pain. I'd had a great run with him. We'd said all the things we needed to say, it was the best possible transition of losing a parent I can imagine, it was a celebration of him. And, of course I missed him, and I was sad, but it was a very positive experience of losing a parent.

And I'd asked the women in the funeral home, what was in the box, just so that my mom knew, in case she opened the box, I didn't want her to get a fright, and she said, it is a clear plastic bag. And I was like, okay, thanks for letting me know. And then I'm sitting on the train. And I'm looking at my backpack, and I'm going, it's a clear plastic bag... So, I could look at him, I could look at him. And I had to look at him. And I took it out of the bag, and I opened the box. And I look at this bag. And it's like, the most beautiful, bleached, coral beach sand you could imagine, it was just pure, almost white dust, and and what looked like coral, I guess it was bone, and I was just like... wow. That's amazing. It was really amazing.

MUSIC BREAK - Congratulations

Amanda

I had the same experience, because Anthony was cremated, and then his ashes were divided up between about 10 people.

KT

Wow. I wonder what bit you got.

Amanda

And I cheated. I asked for two. I got me and Neil, but I kept them both, so I got a double portion of Anthony, in two separate boxes, and I remember getting him, and sitting there in my apartment, and opening up those boxes and sort of doing the same thing, and just running my hand.

KT

It's an amazing thing to do.

Amanda

And there you were, you were carrying. You were the carrier.

KT

I was the carrier, definitely.

Aren't we lucky? Oh my god, aren't we lucky that we can literally turn shit into gold? we can make pennies, sometimes pounds, from really horrible situations!

I know you were at the extinction rebellion, I went and played some songs for people the first weekend, and I said this thing I wasn't planning on saying when I was speaking on the mic, and I said music is a force of nature, and I don't mean that music is an amazing energy, I mean, music is a natural force. I mean, music, I think, is the same as breathing and eating and shitting. I think despite any circumstance, Lord of the Flies, however you want to start life, I think human beings will end up playing music. It's happened everywhere, to every single human being on the planet. That you're not necessarily playing, but you're certainly engaged in the communication of music. And it is no coincidence that entirely transcends language, it doesn't matter what the words are saying, proven by our fans all over the world who have no fucking idea what the words are. And they still like it!

Amanda

Yeah. Well, and proven by thousands of years of culture, and now science. Music is...

KT

And in this age of complete obsession with the screen, and with a growing, I guess safety of distance from one another, perceived safety, I always actually take a minute now, and since I've been living in America, it's much easier to say cheesy things to an audience than it is when you're in Britain.

Amanda

Especially if you're in fucking LA, dude.

KT

But I always say, this is the only night ever in the history of this universe, that this particular group of people will be in one room together, unless we start an acapella group and we see each other next week. But it's a really extraordinary experience, and you forget that these people will never be together again. It's an opportunity to just take a breath, and realize that that is a pretty ring-fenced experience, and you cannot have that experience unless you are here.

We're looking at a world that is under siege from various angles. And when I sing This Land Is Your Land or I sing, I Won't Back Down, they feel like medicinal songs to help us in times of specific strife. And I know that my music brings joy, and I know that it brings its own medicinal help. I feel my music is not in the bracket of directly poking the monster. It's certainly open to interpretation. Under The Weather was about 9/11. There's an awareness of important subjects, what I'm realizing, and it's so easy to say it, and it's so hard to actually follow it, is the most important subject is just to love yourself, completely and thoroughly, every dark corner.

If you really think about that, as a reality, if every single person was able to do that, we would have no problems on Earth. It would go away. Because we would not just love our own babies, we would love the babies of everything. We would love plant babies, animal babies, bacteria babies. If we have love for ourselves, we have love for everything else. We do not want to harm.

You know that if you eat shit, your body gets sick. Think about what you're putting in your brain, when you scroll through all that crap. It's all going in. Think about what you're telling your friend that you read on Twitter, do they need to know that? Did you read it? Do you know if that's true? Think about what you want to put in your head. And what I've been made to think about a lot is we are living in an age where we think the mind is god. And the mind is not god. God is god, soul is god, source energy is god.

The mind should be this incredible tool that we instruct what to do, and 99.9% of the time, our monkey brain is running the show, and telling us what is real. And we are completely able to tell the mind what is real. And that voice is your source energy soul, instructing your mind as a tool.

My next album is about the mind, I'm in the middle of a trilogy of soul, body, and mind records. So Kin was the soul record, Wax, my recent one, was the body record. The next one, which I have not shared the name of yet, is all about the mind.

But the mind is not built. It's not constructed to know what is going to happen, to predict the future. What the mind can do is look at the past, and basically try and make sure you don't die.

So when you have anxiety, [Joe Dispenza](#), who's an amazing spiritual teacher, talks about this, your body is actually put into the past by your mind, your mind instructs your body, ooh, we know this!

Amanda

Remember this? It sucked!

KT

This is just like this thing, so you should feel like that.

I've managed to get to a place now, not all the time, but much more regularly, when that body sensation happens, and meditation helps massively with this, but just to take a breath. Go, body, what's actually happening? Are you being attacked by a dog? No. Are you in immediate danger? No. Is this fear that you're having real? No, not really. It's a fear. It's not a reality. Okay, body has settled down. Mind. Have a look at everything. Let's see what's actually real.

And every time I do that, I'm forming this new habit, that the body knows it is not the mind, and the mind knows it's not in control. That response, taking that breath before you respond, is the path to peace. If we can action that in our own life, I honestly think that that is the most powerful thing that we can do in the world.

Amanda

This has been The Art of Asking Everything podcast. I am Amanda Fucking Palmer. Giver of all the fucks and no fucks, simultaneously. Thank you so much to my guest, and co-no-fuck-giver-all-fuck-giver, KT Tunstall.

For everything KT go to KTTunstall.com.

For all the music you heard in this episode, you can go to the new and improved amandapalmer.net/podcast

Many millions of thanks go to my incredible team all over the globe:

Hayley Rosenblum who makes all things possible -- she is the ghost in the machine in our Patreon and also makes sure everything else gets done -- words, pictures, live chats -- she is basically always backstage helping me out with stuff, and general internet love, and hands. I could not do this without her. Thank you Hayley.

My assistant Michael McComiskey who makes sure all the trains run on time and that I am able to do all the things, schedules, emails, thank you so much Michael.

Thanks to my #MerchQueen Alex Knight who is also helping us out lately to transcribe all of these conversations so they are accessible to people who cannot listen. Thank you Alex.

And thanks always to my manager in Sydney, Jordan Verzar who brings it all together, and makes sure everyone gets paid.

Last but not least, this whole podcast would not be possible, period, without my patrons. At current count, I've got about 15,000 Patrons and they all give a couple of bucks per month to make it possible for this podcast to have no ads, no sponsors, no censorship, no bullshit, we are just the media, doing what we do, without a boss. So thank you. And special thanks are due to my high level patrons, Simon Oliver, Saint Alexander, Birdie Black, Ruth Ann Harnisch, and Leela Cosgrove, thank you guys for giving so much money to help us make what we make.

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And I just want to thank you for tuning in and spending time listening to these conversations with people like KT who have so much wisdom to impart.

If you've been rating and reviewing the podcast, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Signing off, this is Amanda Fucking Palmer. Keep on asking everything.