From Issue #43 • May 22, 2014

Clarion Call

An Alaskan singer goes it alone — with a little help from her fans.

By Kellie M. Walsh

This article first appeared exclusively in The Magazine: The Book *earlier in 2014, and has been updated for this regular issue.*

Marian Call in performance

"Lyrics first, and usually there's kind of a spark that makes the lyrics go. If I have a concrete idea, it's so much easier."

Alaskan singer-songwriter Marian Call sits in the finished basement of the home of a

board-game designer in an affluent suburb of New Jersey, describing her creative process.

“Once in a while [a song] will come out fully formed…Other ones are like little puzzles. It reminds me of doing quadratic equations. The quadratic formula is so beautiful and elegant. I loved algebra: there was always an answer. You just had to balance and [go] back and forth until you got the answer. I loved making things balance.”

Call munches on a post-concert snack of raw broccoli and a cupcake. She has a tall smile, ghostly skin, and dark shadows beneath her eyes that swear to her diligence and autonomy as an independent artist. “Now it’s hard for me to see a song if I don’t construe it as like a little problem for myself, a problem to solve. There’s something very right-brain about the idea, and there’s something very left-brain about the solution.”

You could say the same about Call’s career.

One listener at a time

Call has no label, no manager, no agent, no day job, no trust fund, and no health insurance. She writes, sings, edits, produces, mixes, arranges, performs, schedules, books, and promotes her music herself.

But describe her career as DIY, and she demurs, insisting that to call her independent as an artist is to overlook the interdependence with her audience she requires to sustain herself. "I'm a big fan of this old-fashioned village fiddler model," she says, referring to a system in which the villagers may not pay the musician much, but they make sure he doesn't starve. "There's something about that that works for me."

Old-fashioned models applied with new technology are, in fact, the bedrock of Call's career. While many artists feign interest in fan engagement and the disintermediation of art, Call has made them the foundation of her business and her lifestyle. She sleeps on fans' couches; she holds concerts in their living rooms. She lives much of her life on social media. Her home base may be Juneau, but her potential market is the entire Internet.

And through strong vocals, clever songwriting, and a relentless work ethic, Call has built a network of approximately 10,000 fans — included among them Wil Wheaton and the cast of *Mythbusters*.[1]

But in lieu of mainstream fame, a record deal, or label representation ("No, no, no, I'm deeply uninterested in those things"), she maintains a modest definition of success: "I will have made it when I have health insurance and can go to the doctor or dentist when I want to, and when I am out of debt."[2]

Artist, starving

"Like Amanda Palmer, I'm not afraid to take your money," Call is fond of saying. "But we have a very, very poor relationship in this country between arts and money. We're very, very squeamish about it. We think that there's this purity about arts that we don't want to connect it to money."

Call counts her audiences mostly by the dozen and her wages in increments of $10 and $20 through CD sales, digital downloads, and concert donations.[3] Nearly all of her music is available to listen to online for free.

To understand why Call's ability to support herself through music is impressive, consider some better-known contemporaries. Corin Tucker, founding member of the riot grrrl band Sleater-Kinney, works a day job. Cellist Zoë Keating, despite mainstream recognition and 1.2 million Twitter followers, made just $900 from 232,000 streams of her music in the first half of 2013; that's less than one-half penny per play. Punk icon Exene Cervenka stopped taking medication for multiple sclerosis because the costs without health insurance were prohibitive.

In a 2011 TEDx talk, Call described how she must convince people "intentionally and repeatedly" to pay for what she calls art's spiritual value. In a landscape in which audiences expect to consume media for free, she explains, "The current market value of my product is zero dollars…I'm basically on an educational mission in order to get paid."

Spiritual value or no, art for a living requires commerce. Raised in a musical family outside Tacoma, Washington, Call recognizes the necessity of good business skills. She may also have picked up a survival trick or two during her classical music studies at Stanford. One such trick: commissions.

Nerdy undertones and overtones

Call credits her career to discovering three things: the tenacious spirit of Alaska, the unmediated connection between artist and audience on MySpace, and the complex relationships of space cowboys on the TV show *Firefly*.

The three came together in May 2007 when Call, then 25, won a *Firefly*-inspired songwriting contest.[4] With sales of her just-released debut album, *Vanilla*, buoyed by *Firefly* fans, Call set off in 2008 on her first-ever tour. She traveled through the Western United States and Canada in her combination home/tour bus, a converted vintage Greyhound dubbed the *Millennium Tortoise*.

As Jonathan Coulton has proved, the online market, especially for art aligned with geek culture, is a powerful one. Later that year, sci-fi/fantasy collectable makers Quantum Mechanix commissioned Call to write and record a full-length album.

Raised on Joni Mitchell, They Might Be Giants, and Beethoven, Call describes her innate style ("the music that I make when I'm doing it for me") as having "a lot of nerdy undertones and references, but it's a little bit more discreet; it's a little bit more embedded in the identity of it." *Got to Fly* (2008), in contrast, is entrenched in its geek tribute album status, featuring songs inspired by *Firefly* and *Battlestar Galactica* and including Call's popular "I'll Still Be a Geek After Nobody Thinks It's Chic (Nerd Anthem)."

Though they sometimes venture outside her natural tendencies, Call says she loves commissions, especially having a concrete idea to wrap her brain around. And the end product is always her own. "Good Morning Moon," a jaunty wake-up call to astronauts, is quintessential Call. It would also be perfect for an Apple commercial.

The mother of invention

"This is the saddest & hardest sort of announcement to make," Call wrote on her blog in March 2009, "but at some point it must be made." Her career had been gaining traction: her first tour had broken even, and online sales of *Vanilla* had increased "tenfold." But in early 2009 Call and her husband separated. "I didn't really have a plan," she says. "I was in Seattle; I was in the middle of a tour. I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do. I didn't even have a car."

In addition to the emotional impact, the separation had substantial financial repercussions: with her husband remaining in Seattle with the tour bus, Call lost both her financial safety net and her physical home. Now effectively homeless, she had to choose between getting a "real job" and continuing to pursue music.

Just before Kickstarter launched to streamline and popularize crowdfunding, Call invited fans to support her through old-fashioned patronage. Donors' Circle patrons invest in her art —

in her future — in exchange for perks like exclusive tracks and the chance to contribute a voice to her next album. (Singer-songwriters Kristin Hersh and Jill Sobule succeeded using similar models in 2007 and 2008, respectively, and continue to do so.)

Meanwhile, with no home to return to and despite a fear of driving, Call financed her first car and finished what she would later call the "Slow Tour," for its pace and illogical logistics.

Fan-powered

Sitting on the sidewalk in Seattle without a plan turned out to be a watershed moment for Call. To maintain forward momentum, she crisscrossed the continent the following spring. Sans promoter, manager, or booking agent, she took the Coulton model of tour scheduling to a new level, mobilizing fans through social media to not only help build the itinerary but, whenever possible, provide overnight accommodations as well.

Across all 50 US states and six Canadian provinces — in backyards and living rooms, on beaches and porches, even in one hair salon (plus w00tstock and Comic-Con) — Call sang. This tour of primarily house concerts ("house" being loosely defined) provided an intimate setting for Call's acoustic sound and a communal, participatory experience that neither traditional venues nor MP3s can capture.[5]

But touring is expensive, and Call's tours generally make only enough to sustain themselves. ("My food and bills get paid, and I live to fight another month," she says.) The activity increases Internet buzz, however, which increases online sales.

Touring also creates the one-on-one connection crucial to Call's longevity. The shared experience of this kind of small-scale entertainment — of the banter between songs, of sharing a beer together, of providing crash space — creates a bond between Call and her audience. It creates investment and friendship. It also creates future customers.

The album born of these experiences was released in October 2011. A double album, *Something Fierce* reflects an "emotional maturity" that Call says results from doing the "grown-up things songwriters are supposed to do" that she'd never done. Among them: deciding what to do for a living, being "broke with no recourse," and suffering heartbreak. More grounded than her earlier efforts, *Something Fierce* displays a confidence that transforms her quirky, sometimes clunky combination of folk, nerd-pop, and jazz into a soaring, tangly testament to courage, love, home, and her adopted state of Alaska.

Building on this success, Call in the summer of 2012 launched the Marian Call European Adventure Quest, a *Legend of Zelda*–esque Kickstarter campaign complete with 8-bit color graphics. She set a whimsical goal of $11,111 to fund her first European tour and to record a live album along the way. Fans knocked that number down in three hours, and the project

grossed $63,000 by its end.

Despite the success, however, Call found herself with higher bills and lower cash in pocket than expected.[6] After fees, taxes, and the cost of the tour, promotions, production, and rewards, she says, “I’m walking away with $8,000 less debt.” She estimates that she is living close to minimum wage — yet “that’s successful as an artist as defined by many of my friends.”

In(ter)dependence

Call is still working to fulfill her Kickstarter campaign obligations more than a year later: she has finally delivered all pledge rewards, but her stretch goal (a baker’s dozen of cover songs) remains undone. She also maintains relationships on social media and estimates that she

spends 90 percent of her time doing administrative work like emails, logistics, spreadsheets, and mailings. The trade-off of independence requires choosing either to concentrate fully on art and give up control of the business, or to run the business and squeeze the art in "around the edges."[7]

This past December Call released the album *Sketchbook*, a personal but barebones production recorded mostly in homes on tour. Her 200-plus days on the road each year don't allow much creative studio time, so she travels with a portable recording rig. "I feel very determined," she says, "and that means that I just do what you have to do where you have to do it."

She laughs, but *Sketchbook* is a good example of the art/money conundrum. The next phase of her artistic cycle, she says, is to stay home to write and record. But doing so requires a sustainable Internet income, which requires products. And products require staying home to write and record. "Staying ahead of that curve is a constant challenge," Call says. She's intent, however, on spending more time in Juneau making art in 2014 — somehow.

Now 32, Call has already conceived her next major recording, a research-heavy, multi-year project on a scale she hasn't tackled since *Something Fierce*. She's not ready to announce it publicly, however: as of this writing, a grant application that would have guaranteed a few months at home to work has just fallen through. Now what? She's not sure. Call can't say where she'll be in six months — *any* six months — because she seldom knows herself.

Despite the uncertainty, the "real lesson here," she writes via email, is that "being small and independent makes you strong." But Call isn't just nimble; she's resilient. Despite the blow of the lost grant, in less than 24 hours she'd progressed from describing herself as "spinning" without direction to talking of charting new waters. "When something like this happens, I get out the map and chase the next opportunity wherever it leads me," she writes. "My dinghy may be home-built and tiny and leaky, but she turns on a dime."

Fearlessly entrepreneurial and fiercely generous

While describing her artistic cycle, Call interrupts herself in mid-sentence. Wisps of red hair circle her face. "See, thinking this way? All of this thinking this way is why 'fearlessly entrepreneurial' matters to me."

Call is referring to a tweet she'd sent from the Alaska Arts Conference: "Just heard the phrase I want on my epitaph, re. the arts: 'Fearlessly entrepreneurial & fiercely generous.' working toward it. #akartsconf."

"A lot of people are fearfully entrepreneurial, or afraid of being entrepreneurial," she says, "or

hate money because it has hurt them so much, like a dog that's bitten them before. Or hate people who make money because *they* are not making money, and they're upset by this. It's something I deeply understand. I lived for a long time without anywhere to go, staying on people's couches and sleeping in my car and in a tent sometimes. I have fewer illusions about money than I did. But I also think that being afraid of it is not a good solution."

Call uses "entrepreneur" without opportunism; rather, she epitomizes her belief that entrepreneurship and generosity are not antithetical. Upon succeeding at that European Kickstarter campaign, for example, Call immediately made pledges to other Kickstarters.

Perhaps therein lies the balance, the *x* in the equation of making a living on interdependence. "If I stop being a generous person, or if I'm not a generous enough person, then that would be my definition of failure," Call says. "Money is not worth very much if you don't spread it around to other people."

Photos by Brian Adams.

1. Call estimates 10,000 based on mailing list subscribers and social networks. ↩
2. The effect of the Affordable Care Act for Call remains unknown. Being "sort of a last-minute person," she missed the open enrollment deadline for 2014 by approximately three hours. "They failed to specify [the deadline] was midnight *on the East Coast,*" she says. ↩
3. Call usually requests donations for performances rather than setting ticket prices. ↩
4. The "Sing a Song of Saffron" contest was judged by, among others, actress Christina Hendricks, *Firefly*'s Saffron herself. ↩
5. John Vanderslice described his first experience with house concerts as "intense." Manjula Martin wrote about Vanderslice's Tiny Telephone recording studio in "Flaws and All," found in Issue #20 (July 4, 2013) and in the ebook edition of *The Magazine: The Book (Year One)*. ↩
6. This situation is not uncommon. Even Kickstarter says so. ↩
7. Call is not alone in this conundrum. Angela Webber, fellow independent artist and one-half of the Portland-based duo the Doubleclicks, writes via email, "It's hard to find the balance between doing all of the business and finding new gigs, and trying to make time to actually write songs….And if you spend all day sending emails, you really don't have anything interesting to write songs about." ↩

Kellie M. Walsh is a writer, editor, and Web and content strategist. Her work has appeared in Creative Nonfiction, The Rumpus, PopMatters, *and on the websites of Fortune 500s, nonprofits, and a seven-piece jazz band. Kellie also runs a tiny creative services business with her husband. They live with an army of houseplants in the New York City area.*

troubles? Email us. Talk with us on Facebook, Twitter, and App.net. We accept article pitches. Consult our FAQ for more answers. Subscribe to our announcement list to be informed of new issues.