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KICKSTART THE ARTS

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Posted: Monday, July 23, 2012 3:50 pm

Daniella Cortez

Alaskan musician Marian Call has raised over \$40,000 in less than two weeks to fund a European tour and produce a live album documenting the tour. She reached her initial goal of \$11,111 in less than three hours, and over \$30,000 in just a few days. Staggering numbers for any indie musician but especially profound considering she raised the money in small increments from individual donors. And she's not done yet.

Imagine how much better art could be if every artist could get their project funded by the people who were actually interested in it. Artists like Call are using a site called Kickstarter.com as a way to fund the projects they want to make by reaching out into the community they're making the art for.

Kickstarter offers a new set of lingo—the projects are called campaigns and the people who donate the money are backers. They require that each campaign offer their backers something in return for their donation.

Site-wide, the average backer spends about \$25 on a project. Call's backers average closer to \$80. She credits her success with knowing her audience and striking a balance between how much she needs to complete her project and what can reasonably be raised. That's where she came up with her initial goal, "I knew I could fund that amount, I'd raised that before using other methods," Call says.

Backing her campaign is like getting in on a really complex game of Dungeons and Dragons, complete with pictures of our metal-clad singing heroine and an extremely well-written page filled with ways for backers to play along. Become a backer at the low end and you get stuff like a copy of her existing catalogue but also a new twist on the reward, at every level you get tokens that can be used to vote on where she'll be playing on tour. Back her at a higher end and the rewards get pretty cool: musical voicemails from the road, personal hand-written post cards and even a concert in whatever tiny hamlet in Europe you choose.

Reading through her campaign is dizzying, it's obvious a lot of work went into it, and it's not surprising that she met and exceeded her initial goal in such a short time.



KICKSTART THE ARTS

Clockwise from top left: Seth Boyer, wrap photo for Able and Cain, Marian Call, The Young Guns.

CHILKOOT CHARLIE'S IN THE HEART OF SPENARD!



As the site becomes more commonly used to fund projects and competition for attention gets steeper, these



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Music Events

Thursday	JUN 26
Led Zeppelin	4:30 pm
Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center	
Pink Floyd: The Wall	4:30 pm
Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center	
Anchorage City Limits Open Mic	7:00 pm
Anchorage City Limits Lofts	
Friday	JUN 27
Saturday	JUN 28

incentives can make or break a successful campaign.

The rate of projects that get funded on Kickstarter is about 44 percent, not bad odds if you're in that winning column. Kickstarter is all or nothing funding, if the artist's goal is not met then they receive none of the money they raised towards it. This puts a lot of pressure on artists to create a campaign that is unique in its concept, enticing in its rewards, and judicious in its fundraising goal.

The tools Kickstarter offer are useful enough to outweigh the cost, judging from the rising use of the site. Alaskan artists like Call are willing to exchange the 10 percent cut the site takes for its ease of use and ability to appeal to a larger audience.

Call is familiar with using funds from her fans to get projects done. She produced *Something Fierce* in 2011 using money from her Donors Circle project, which she launched on her own website. Part of what makes Call's current campaign so successful has been her research and dedication to putting together a solid project before launching it. Her fans have been asking for a European tour and so she says she was ready to devote everything to make that happen. She has a solid record of success behind her as well; touring tirelessly for years and working hard to make sure she's making music and putting together projects that her fans want. Artists like Call, who have a strong following already and a history of touring nationally, have an easier time getting the cash to roll in. Her fans are eager to see her go on another tour, to record a live album and to feel like they get to play along at home even if they're not in one of the places she'll be touring.

Call is an example of how crowd funding has evolved over time and how successful it can be when done right. She offers some words of advice to newer artists looking to fund a first-time project, warning them away from attempting big projects right away with sites like Kickstarter. She says that there are often hidden costs in producing a studio album and for someone who is doing that for the first time a Kickstarter campaign may not be a good fit. She thinks that the site can be an extremely useful tool for people who are running projects with a specific price tag and that tailor their projects to their fundraising abilities.

There is a good segment of people that Kickstarter will work for—if they're being reasonable in their funding goals. She notes local musician Seth Boyer's recent campaign as an excellent example of this going right. Boyer wasn't asking for a lot of money and was able to raise it successfully thanks to strong local support coupled with a fun reward structure. He knew the costs of putting out an album and had already demonstrated his ability to follow through by self-financing one the year prior.

"Kickstarter worked beautifully for me, but it takes deftness and tact to pull it off," Boyer says. His success was aided by already having an album out to offer to his backers and promising things like singing telegrams at home or work in exchange for the higher priced donor spots.

The competition between artists for funding and the looming specter of the site becoming obsolete concerns a lot of local artists who have used Kickstarter. Local band The Young Guns has plans to launch a Kickstarter campaign shortly to help them produce and press their first full-length album. Matt Eley, their guitarist, sums it up thusly: "I'm looking forward to launching our Kickstarter soon, and it'll be cool to see how it works out, but I wonder what comes after Kickstarter. If it's something we'll be able to use again or if we'll have to stay on top of what comes next."

Sean Mannion, an Alaskan filmmaker currently living in New York City, recently wrapped up a successful campaign to fund his short horror film *Abel and Cain*. Mannion says he has reservations about using crowd funding for future projects.


"Right now it's really taking off and there are some projects that have brought in quite a lot of money and made significantly more than their goals. Those are unusual projects, though. How the increasing number of those projects, which often have the involvement of celebrities (or at least people who have a considerable number of fans on the Internet), affect smaller projects like mine, I'll be curious to see. I fear it won't be the case that the rising tide will lift all boats," Mannion says.

It's a legitimate fear, especially considering bigger name artists like Amanda Palmer are using Kickstarter to fund major projects. Palmer started with a \$100,000 goal to fund a new album, book and tour. Her campaign closed at over a million dollars. Major artists like Palmer have turned away from record labels and have started using independent financing, which allows them unbridled creative control, but Mannion fears this has also made the Kickstarter climate a lot more competitive for newer or less well-known artists. However, it has also inspired upcoming talent to get away from relying on major label support to make it big—artists like Palmer prove that the power of fandom can create momentum, and artists don't need out-of-touch executives to dictate how their creative process works.


While it will always be easier for big names to raise money fast, it is all dependent on the individual backers. Kickstarter is consumer-driven, and that keeps the power in the hands of the end user with the credit card at their disposal. Kickstarter does a fair job of curating projects in a way that allows users to search for things that interest them and not just see the projects that are popular. This feature alone makes it priceless to the indie artist who needs a single place to get their vision out there.

One of the things that makes Kickstarter user friendly from a backer perspective is that it's easy to see what artists are hosting campaigns in a specific geographic area. Alaska has recently supported projects that included sending local mixed media artist Enzina Marrani to Argentina to complete an artist's residency program and a two-disc anthology of local bands called *Cold and Loud*. Not to mention half a dozen albums and regional tours from local musicians funded just in the last few months. Currently there are a handful of projects out of Alaska that are open to new backers.

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Posted in Music article on Monday, July 23, 2012 3:50 pm.

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