

## Kiva Microfinance

"Loans that Change Lives." Make a Difference and Lend Today!

[www.kiva.org](http://www.kiva.org)

Public Service Ads by Google

METRO TIMES | 4/14/2010

# Potluck utopia

Glass Rock gains international momentum through a long-distance relationship

BY CYNDI LIESKE



PHOTO: CLAUDIA BURLOTTI

Kathy Leisen is browsing through a box of cassette tapes that sits on a small table in her sparse art studio. Less artistic types might've used this space as a living room if they lived in the Corktown house that Leisen shares with her boyfriend.

The many cassettes here chronicle the Glass Rock singer's various vocal styles — from ethereal to husky — as well as the musical experimentation she's done over the years, all recorded on the trusty Tascam four-track recorder some friends once bought her as a birthday gift. The box contains roughly two dozen compilations, and she's got another couple dozen stored elsewhere. Leisen jokes that one day she'll create a boxed set out of them.

"I've probably spent 10,000 hours with those [four-track] headphones on," she says. "The creation of a song has always been like magic to me. I completely fell in love with [the process] — and it just seemed to be something I had a natural aptitude for. I was immediately hooked."

And now there's a growing international fan base that's beginning to feel that aptitude about Leisen's sultry, bluesy vocals, which she has merged with a moody, lounge-rock vibe in New York City-based Glass Rock. Britain's *Uncut* magazine called her "a confident, soulful singer in the vein of Chan Marshall." Other listeners have referenced her with Van Morrison, Suzanne Vega and Sinéad O'Connor, with the sometimes almost ambient music described as "the sound of a dying decade, smooth, bleak but with an unerring beauty," as well as "rust dipped in honey" — perhaps the missing link between the Stevie Nicks version of Fleetwood Mac and Yukon Blonde.

Former West Bloomfielder Matt Kantor — Leisen's longtime friend, bassist and collaborator in local psychedelic pop band Soft Location, and now in Glass Rock — couldn't agree more with those raves: "Everyone loves hearing Kathy sing."

Following stints living in New York City, San Francisco and Florida, Leisen — who makes her living as a visual artist (she currently has a show at City Bird, midtown Detroit's trendy new gift shop) — has called Detroit home since 2003. The 1995 Grosse Pointe South High and Eastern Michigan University fine arts grad works for the Ox-Bow Art School and Artists' Residency in Saugatuck, traveling to art schools throughout the year; she'll be living at the camp as an instructor this summer.

Leisen also likes moving back and forth between the visual arts and music, as well as combining them, as she did last summer when she cleared and mowed the 60-by-100 foot vacant lot next to her home to host six art installations. Various musicians stopped by to perform throughout the exhibit. And a year ago, the singer played drums in the Trashers, a local band whose only show was at the UFO Factory art gallery in Eastern Market.

"One of the best things about living [in Detroit] is that almost everyone you know has a basement," she says. "That's why it's so easy to play music. You can just spontaneously say, 'Hey, come on over and let's play.' A lot of bands will just form for a couple of months. There's a real nice culture that grows out of that here because it makes it easy and fun."

In New York, where she lived from 2001-2003, most of the affordable living spaces were tiny and bands rented rehearsal spaces, which meant lots of advance planning and money.

"Here, it seems you can find more of a balance," she says. "I can afford to have this space but I also can afford to have time. And that provides bands with the time to get better."

So exactly how did Leisen end up as the lead singer of a Brooklyn-based band? It started with Soft Location's *Diamonds and Gems*, her band's 2007 album on indie Muddy Mitten. A vinyl pressing of *Diamonds* found its way into the hands of Aaron Mullan, a guitarist and studio engineer who's in the Brooklyn-based folk-rock ensemble Tall Firs. Mullan played it when he guest DJ'd on a New Jersey radio show last year.

"It didn't leave the 'new arrivals' pile next to my turntable for over a year," Mullan says. "Now, I just leave it there on principle. It will never be filed on the record shelves."

Leisen's Detroit neighbor, Crofoot Theatre talent buyer and local music aficionado Greg Baise, heard Mullan's show and told a disbelieving Leisen of the airplay. So she e-mailed Mullan in Brooklyn and the two met in Manhattan. With the addition of guitarist Dave Mies, drummer Ryan Sawyer and Kantor, Glass Rock hatched.

In December, the band performed an early public gig, supporting Sonic Youth — Mullan is that band's live sound engineer — in Ireland.

"It was like jumping into a big icy pool," Leisen says, with a nervous laugh and shudder. "I think it was good because after that, it [gigging] almost seemed easy in comparison — just because we all felt such a pressure to do a good job. I mean, you look to your left backstage and there's *Sonic Youth*. How thrilling is that? How fun! I recognize that in every moment."

Glass Rock's recorded their debut album, *Tall Firs meets Soft Location*, which dropped in January on Thurston Moore's label Ecstatic Peace! And things have moved fairly quickly since. The band supported Pavement's Stephen Malkmus & the Jicks on four European shows, and performed two times at the 10th anniversary of the All Tomorrow's Parties fest in England.

The shows and recording taught the band something about themselves. "We all just clicked on a personal level," bassist Kantor says. "We all grew really close as friends. We were soon playing tighter and sounded more confident."

Kantor believes their compatibility also stems from two long-standing friendships within the group. He met Leisen in the Majestic Theatre's parking lot when they were 15, and have been friends since. Guitarists' Mullan and Mies began playing music together as teens in Baltimore, Md.

"It's really an interesting dynamic to have two pairs of very close childhood friends, almost familial people, in the group," Kantor says.

Since two of Glass Rock's members live in New York City, the band functions like how long-distance family members or lovers do, via e-mails, calls, Leisen's occasional trips to New York and a website — [glassrocklife.com](http://glassrocklife.com). Earlier this month, Leisen flew to New York with new songs and the combo began working on their second album.

"It is a group writing process, but the original ideas so far start with her," Kantor says. "She's just really prolific. And she's really talented so it's great to have someone like her in the band as a constant source of lyrics, song ideas and direction."

There's talk of touring this summer if schedules work out. Leisen will be at Ox-Bow. Kantor's a social worker. Mullan's schedule with Sonic Youth is full and he may also be busy with Tall Firs.

"From our perspective in New York, Detroit is some sort of utopia where all the artistic types know each other and hang out at potluck dinners," Mullan laughs. "And Glass Rock is pretty much a potluck dinner. We each bring something to the table and everybody compliments everybody else on what they brought in. But like a potluck, it really is mostly about the hanging out. Other people go whitewater rafting or to knitting circles or something. But we have this band."

*Glass Rock plays the opening reception for the 2010 Cranbrook Graduate Degree Show at MOCAD April 17. Member and guest preview is 6 to 8 p.m.; public opening follows at 8 p.m. With Xiu Xiu.*

© 2010 Metro Times