

# Go Batty!



Are you looking for an evening of fun, with enough belly laughs to boost even a Paul Bunyan-sized immune system? Then you must see and hear The Bats—five wild women and the three brave men who perform with them.

*The Bats are, from left: front—Missy Johnston, Craig Cornwell; middle—Susan Thomas, Melanie Johnson, Marilyn Robie, Marianne Sherman; back—Jim Gleason, Harold Sherman.*

Newly listed in the Kentucky Arts Council Performing Arts Directory, The Bats' members are all age 50 or older and have advanced college degrees. Seven of the eight are married.

The founder of The Bats, Missy Johnston, does vocals and percussion and by day is an actress, host of *News Quiz* on KET and a retail sales clerk at *Decoratifs* in Lexington. So why does a woman who is so busy add more to her schedule?

"I think this band has basically rescued me from being a total middle-aged crank," says Johnston. "We laugh all the time, and it's glorious to make others laugh with us. And really, who doesn't want to be a rock star at some point in their lives? We have a following, we sell out every venue we play, and we, miraculously, still like each other after—gosh, I think it's close to 10 years now. It took us a while to figure out who we are as a band, but once that happened, we developed our act into something unique and satisfying, in a boomer sort of way."

Johnston's husband, guitar player Jim Gleason, is a professor at Eastern Kentucky University and a professional musician with the Johnson Brothers band and The Sons of the Frigidaires.

Gleason enjoys being part of this high-energy musical group because "I get to play a really wide range of material to an appreciative audience at every gig. But mainly, I get to perform with Missy and watch her work the crowd every night. She's magnetic on stage—a great singer and a gifted actor. She's quite a rare talent."

Singer, songwriter and guitar player Melanie Johnson, who just released a second solo CD of her own original music entitled *Soul of a Spy*, is a diabetes educator at Central Baptist Hospital.

"What I love about being a Bat is the fact it allows me to still be playing, something I couldn't imagine I could keep doing at my age. And, it's so dang much fun! We often just crack up on stage, and usually it's because of something one of our brilliant ad-libbers says, or something one of us forgets and spaces out on. Middle age [plus] rock and roll make for some antics, for sure! It's kinda cool being a band that

so many people like. We embarrass our kids, but it sure is fun!"

Drummer Craig Cornwell is the director of programming for KET. "We get lots of thanks for providing laughs and fun times. My favorite comment was from a woman whose husband was serving in Iraq and she had been struggling with the whole uncertainty of his safety, and she said we provided her a needed respite—and laughs—from what she was going through."

One of the reasons why The Bats keep their audiences doubled over with laughter is the variety of fun songs they sing, including "Viagra in the Water," "Menopause Rag," "I Know a Place," and "Dieter's Prayer." Some of the songs they perform are from Alison Krauss, Four Bitchin' Babes, Bruce Springsteen, the Dixie Chicks, Linda Ronstadt, the O'Jays, Christine Lavin and others.



Marilyn Robie, who sings and plays percussion, has another reason for the humor. "The choreography is pure foolishness," says Robie, who is a clinical psychologist in private practice. "I personally love the end of the shows when audience members sometimes start a conga line, or dance to 'It's Raining Men' with paper umbrellas. As Jim Gleason used to say after a particularly good gig in the old rock 'n' roll days, it's almost 'too much fun.'"

Marianne Sherman plays the bass, sings and is a songwriter, penning some of the songs that The Bats perform, such as "Aging Lament" and "Cosmetic Surgery." She is the owner/manager of Pro Sound and Lights, a company that does sound, light and video installations in churches, schools and theaters. On the weekends that The Bats aren't playing, she is a DJ.

"I like that they let me be in The Bats and they actually perform songs

that I write. That's a big compliment. Aside from the songs, most of the funny stuff is just our off-the-cuff remarks to each other," says Sherman.

Her husband, Harold Sherman, plays the keyboard and arranges the music. He wrote "Marching Band" for the group. He gives private music lessons, is involved in local musical theater, plays professionally in a wide variety of public and private venues, solo and with other groups, and just about any style of music.

"I do like being a Bat. This is a fun group, plus we do some really good material, including originals, and play for the best audiences in the world," he says.

Susan Thomas, who sings and plays percussion, is the director of Arts Management for the School of Fine Arts at Miami University (Ohio) and drives from Cincinnati just to perform with The Bats.

"Being in The Bats is my creative outlet," admits Thomas, a theater major and winner of a Smitty Award. "I haven't been in a theater production for years. However, this suits me fine. I like that our shows have theatrical qualities about them, that we look for new material and new audiences in order to keep the nature of what we do fresh and interesting, and

that we work so well together. I guess after all these years there is a cohesiveness, a personae and a well-honed craft—those things we share with our audiences—that are the rewards of our artistic endeavors."

Recently, The Bats performed to an enthusiastic crowd at the Thoroughbred Theater in Midway, with desserts and coffee served next door at Quirk Café during intermission. A member of that audience had a birthday, so the group sang "Bald-Headed Men" to him. Other venues to see The Bats include Natasha's Café in Lexington, Equus Run near Midway, private parties and various charity events.

The Bats perform 12-14 times a year in the Lexington region. The Web site for The Bats—Wild Women & Song is [www.thebats.net](http://www.thebats.net).

—MARY JO HARROD