

Meet Cleo the Cat, Houston's Glamourpuss

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Cats aren't public creatures. Our relationships with them are often centered around the home, or perhaps just one room or a particular chair. We share them with the world through photos and stories and videos, but rarely do they accompany us on a walk or for a meal.

There are some exceptions, like [Cleo the Cat](#). She's a born entertainer, a companion, and, most notably, a clothes hound. Much like grand dames and superheroes, Cleo believes that a costume is just everyday wear.

She's a fluffy tortie who lives in Montrose, Houston's coolest neighborhood, and she's not content to stay indoors, which you don't really know about your cat until you give it a try. Cleo's owner, Deborah Thomas, says it's good to try it in stages.

"Take them out for a little while, walk them around the block in a stroller or on a leash," she says. "They tend to do better when they know where they're going. She's faster when she's walking home or going somewhere she wants to go. If it's somewhere she doesn't want to go, she won't do it."

Cleo craves attention from the public, which is why you'll find her at bars ([Rudyard's](#)), at restaurants ([Bocados](#), [Canopy](#)), and at the record store ([Cactus Music](#)).

"She enjoys being around people and gets annoyed if they're not paying attention to her," Thomas says. "Some people just walk by her and look without saying hi and that's when she goes, 'well!'"

People are paying attention; Cleo has more than [500 fans on Facebook](#).

"The Facebook page gives me a way to share my crazy cat things and not put it on my own page," Thomas says. "I have friends who are like, 'stop talking about your cats!' So this is how I spare them. Cleo also has a bunch of videos on [YouTube](#). I did a video about [giving a cat a bath](#), all the steps, and it has more than 20,000 views. And she [tweets](#)."

Cleo comes from humble beginnings, like most cats. Deborah received an email a few years ago from a rescue group saying that a group of cats were due to be destroyed by the county shelter and needed foster homes, so she picked up two of them: Cleo and Emily. They quickly made friends with then-only-cat Clarence.

"When I lived in Austin, Cleo and Clarence were therapy animals at nursing homes. Cleo especially enjoyed it. Cats often don't get it; dogs understand that what they're doing is a job, that they're there to make people happy. Cats usually don't understand why they're there, but Cleo gets it. She understands that she needs to make people happy."

Deborah was inspired to dress up Cleo simply because her friends dressed up their dogs. Cleo's a special cat in that she took to it.

"I can even put hats on her. I think she just likes to entertain. She can wave, too. She does things for treats."

Cleo has around 15 outfits. Not that there's much of a difference between a cat costume and a dog costume, but those that Deborah buys are made for dogs. She says she's kicked around the idea of making and selling cat-only outfits herself.

The other cats get dressed up occasionally for photos, but none get the star treatment like scenester Cleo, who is the star of two parties every year: her birthday (a party that has been held for five years now) and an artier affair called Cleo's Trio, which is in its second year. Both raise funds for various no-kill shelter charities, like [Friends for Life](#).

"I love music and art and dance and have a lot of connections to arts organizations and performers in Houston, so I got them involved. I wanted to create an art event that united the community to help our animals."

Thomas doesn't mind the term "cat lady," she says she enjoys it. You'll find photos of the cats around her home, as well as plenty of items for them to climb. Thomas and her mother, Doris, create a very loving home for Clarence, Cleo, Emily, Blaze, Nicholas and Lily.

"I'm fascinated by the loving feelings they give you. Their warmth. When they look at you, they caress your soul, you know?"

The world's greatest Mathlete
By SARA CRESS
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Joe Mathlete says his ideal Mathletes show would be one in which he's in the audience watching. "I'm not altogether that comfortable onstage, " he says. "I'm not usually paying attention to what the crowd is doing. I'm just trying to keep everything from derailing completely."

But for a guy who doesn't feel comfortable onstage, Mathlete sure knows how to attract attention. He's the the man behind the deadpan Internet phenomenon, Marmaduke Explained (marmadukeexplained.blogspot.com), which has landed him on a panel discussion at Harvard's ROFLCon in April along with the Homestar Runner creators, the guy that perpetuated Chuck Norris' mystique, and some LOLcat scholars.

"I'm not going to do anything else in my life that will get me a chance to speak at Harvard, " he says.

He's also the leader of the Mathletes, which isn't like any other band you know. It's a lo-fi, indie-pop spectacle with a revolving cast of characters that last year included 30 people. Some regulars include former Infernal Bridegroom Productions staffers and members of indie-rock band the Dimes.

"For about two years there was a steady lineup, and then people started filtering in and out. We broke up a bunch of times. I knew that never really meant anything. At the beginning of this year I thought it should be about having fun, having anyone who wants to play do so, worrying less about rehearsing. I can't rehearse. I can't expect other people to."

Mathlete is a little like the Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne: a ringmaster juggling layers of props, costumes and instruments to create a jagged masterpiece of art, comedy and performance. At its heart, though, the spectacle is about the music. The songwriter has been dreaming up fragile, sincere songs since he received a four-track recorder on his 16th birthday. Mathlete, now 24, writes about anything, from his earliest songs about a ladybug and his high school friends at St. John's School to a collection of Christmas songs (check out "Rudolph Dance Party") to songs about animals that contain what he calls "clunky metaphors."

"I like the animal songs. 'Harry the Hornless Unicorn' is about a unicorn born without a horn and feeling incomplete. 'It Is a Difficult Thing, Being a Mule' is about being a mule; you're not a donkey, you're not a horse, you're something in the middle that no one really wants. I write kind of depressed children's songs, I guess."

The Mathletes' many albums (some never released, some released on tiny CD-R label Asaurus Records, based in Athens, Ga.) come complete with hand-drawn artwork, reminiscent of indie-music/art hero Daniel Johnston.

"[Johnston's] songs are just beautifully written. He did exactly what I'm doing, except that he was really good at it. I started taking myself more seriously after listening to him. I was also into Guided by Voices, Elephant 6, Neutral Milk Hotel. That was my punk-rock; it's a kind of music anyone can do."

It was a thrill for Mathlete to appear in Infernal Bridegroom Productions' well-received rock opera inspired by Daniel Johnston's music, *Speeding Motorcycle*. The production will be reborn in Austin for two months of performances at the Zach Scott Theater, starting Feb. 14.

"It's a trip for me. I've never done a whole lot of acting, I don't consider myself a great singer or actor, I was just a fan. Getting to sing my favorite songs in the world for people is a great thing."

This begs the question: Will the ultra-creative Mathlete return to Houston from a city that caters

to the ultra-creative?

"About once a day I say I'm going to leave Houston. I think to myself that I need to get out of this town; it's suffocating me. But I also can't imagine living in any other city. I'm able to do what I want here. All my friends are here."

Joe's impending leave of absence, be it brief or extended, has inspired a Mathletes "pre-hiatus/fake break-up" show, wherein Mathlete hopes to offer a show to trump all other Mathletes shows.

"I want to see how many people I can get on stage. We're not allowed to set stuff on fire, but we can have balloons, so that's a start."

Spinal Tap sheds metal and the wigs

By SARA CRESS

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Michael McKean has never performed in Houston. So perhaps we are lucky that the first time he does, he will do so without a wig, without spandex pants, without the trappings of Spinal Tap, a fictional metal band that came to life. The trio - McKean, Christopher Guest and Harry Shearer - will appear Friday night at Jones Hall to perform songs from Spinal Tap, as well as from their other faux documentaries, including A Mighty Wind and Waiting for Guffman. Chronicle pop music writer Sara Cress recently spoke with McKean (who portrays David St. Hubbins) about the tour, which is called "Unwigged & Unplugged."

Q: Does this acoustic presentation change the humor of a bombastic Spinal Tap song?

A: A lot of the stuff that we do sounds born again. There's a song we do called Majesty of Rock, which is a big power ballad, and we strip it down to two guitars and a bass, and it has this whole other thing; it's even more anthemic somehow.

Q: How upsetting was it that you couldn't do Sex Farm on the Tonight Show With Jay Leno earlier this month?

A: We had a feeling there might be a problem, so we had a backup. I just think they got a little dizzy about it. What really surprised us was going on NPR and having the same reaction. Someone in the front office decided it wasn't right - someone might spill their latte.

Q: When was the last time you did an extensive tour with your bandmates? How are the living conditions different now?

A: 1992. The buses are better than they were back then. They used to have an Edgar Allan Poe

feel to them. Now there's a hookup for an iPod and a DVD player. One of the reasons for not taking all the costumes and makeup people is that we wanted to have fewer headaches, so we plan on having fun.

Q: Is there a bit of Spinal Tap that you don't get quoted to you that you think is hilarious?

A: There's a ramble near the end of the movie where Derek (Harry Shearer) and I are having a conversation on the roof of the Hyatt in Los Angeles at a party, and we're talking about Saucy Jack, and I do this whole thing about life and the afterlife and reality and infinity and it was (completely made up) but a guy in Harper's magazine actually used it at the beginning of an article about infinity and our perceptions. I thought that was the coolest thing.

Q: Is it tragic or wonderful that fledgling bands consider Spinal Tap heroes?

A: I think it's great. We're not real heroes like, oh, Lemmy from Motorhead. That's a real hero. There's a lot of bands out there that just hang in there and don't sell a lot of records. Marah from New Jersey - nobody knows that band, but they're a great band. I just think that everyone has to look beyond the big headlines and the hype and find their own crush. If people feel that they're changing music by voting on Tuesday or Wednesday nights or whatever they do, they're kidding themselves. Kids who come up and have some disappointments and are told their stuff isn't commercial and they're never going to make it, they're the ones who should hang in there the most because they're probably different enough to be special.

Q: Switching to A Mighty Wind, is there something inherently funny about folk music?

A: I think that anything that is sufficiently earnest is ridiculous.

Q: A Mighty Wind has some sad moments. Is it hard to balance a character like Mitch (played by Eugene Levy) with comedy?

A: His character is one of the saddest creatures you've ever seen in a comedy. My wife (Annette O'Toole) and I wrote the song for Mitch and Micky (A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow, which was nominated for an Oscar). We meant it to be a straight, old-sounding piece of folk music. There are no jokes in it. In fact, it kind of gave (director Christopher Guest) pause. But he used it beautifully in the movie.

It's not easy, but it's short of pathos because it doesn't ask that you really be devastated by it. I don't think it's difficult if you're sincere on both ends.

Q: Do you prefer to jam with headbangers or folk singers?

A: (Laughs.) It depends. It's always fun to be up on a stage and make a lot of noise. Listen, I still love Louie, Louie. Here it is 40 years later, and I'm still turning that song up. I know it's not good

music, but here we are.

Q: What do you have more of on your iPod?

A: I probably have more They Might Be Giants than anything. I have everything they have ever done - including their podcasts. I have a ton of Elvis Costello, a lot of Richard Thompson, June Tabor. I have a lot of old jazz. I do have some rock. I like Arctic Monkeys.

Q: Flight of the Conchords will be at Jones Hall five days after you'll be there. Do you have any advice for them or for actors who tie their careers to music?

A: Oh, I don't think they need any help. I saw them at the Aspen Comedy Festival a few years ago, and I thought they were brilliant. They're doing just fine without me.

Don't invest with Bernie Madoff; it's the only advice I have, but I give that to everyone.

Sew Crafty outgrows its old location

By SARA CRESS

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Not all of us were raised with mothers and grandmothers who knew how to knit and sew and who could pass along the domestic arts as a point of pride and tradition like women once did. So the uneducated masses who want something to do with our hands while watching TV fumble along with books and confusing patterns until they either have a wearable thing or a tangled knot and 20 bucks they'll never see again.

Or we can seek professional help. Sew Crafty, a Heights-area "craft studio," has been aiding Houston crafters since May of last year - primarily in the form of sewing and knitting classes - at a 900-square-foot location on White Oak.

"The smaller space was great for gauging interest," says owner Sarah Gabbart. "To my surprise, people really were interested and classes filled up so fast that we needed a place where we could cover several classes at the same time."

This weekend marks the grand opening of Sew Crafty's new, much larger, much more visible spot on busy W. 19th Street. The two-story space allows the business to expand in a few ways with three spaces for classes, a greatly expanded retail area and a "drop-in craft" area.

"People come in on a Saturday afternoon, they're with their friends or their daughter, and they want to spend 30 minutes on something. Obviously, you can't make a dress in that amount of time, but you can get a ring project and glue a flower on it and you've spent \$5 and entertained yourself for half an hour. That still counts as crafting!"

Sewing and knitting classes range from simple introductory projects – totes and aprons - to advanced pattern-making and difficult sock knitting. The retail offerings might be the most exciting difference from the old location, offering indie kits, patterns and fabric from well-known craft purveyors like Sublime Stitching, Amy Butler and Anna Maria Horner, which have been difficult to find in Houston in the past.

"We have needle-felting kits, sock-monkey kits, a lot of fabric and more to come. I just ordered a ton of Japanese fabrics. We also have notions. We'll also be carrying vintage trims from Tinsel Trading. We'll also have our own kits with patterns and tutorial, if you want to do a project but don't want to take a class, " Gabbart says.

Saturday's grand opening party will last all day, with three free Halloween-related craft workshops: making paper masks at 10:30 a.m., clay pumpkin decorating at 1 p.m. and Halloween costume embellishments from 3-5 p.m.

"This is where I always pictured us being from the get-go, " Gabbart says with her signature enthusiasm. "We've found more instructors, we've been able to create a couple of jobs. And people come in and connect with each other, which is great because this is meant to be a community place. Being in the heart of the Heights, it's easier to do that."