



Rabbits with Glasses Has a Vision

Story & Photos by Kevin Fritz

Local band **Rabbits with Glasses** works with music by day, helping the visually impaired learn how to play guitar, and lives their own music at night with their up-and-coming band.

The irony is too obvious not to state: two local musicians in a band called Rabbits with Glasses both work days creating music that can help the blind play guitar. This quirk of fate is, indeed, a mere coincidence, yet it's refreshing to see the bad boy image of rock 'n' roll be supplanted at times and still be music to your ears.

Together for more than four years, Rabbits with Glasses—an up-and-coming band that derives its sound from a range of sundry influences (which you can check out at www.myspace.com/rabbitwithglassesrock)—is starting to reap the benefits of longevity and hard work as part of Orlando's local music scene. Most recently, they were selected over hundreds of other bands to play at SunFest in West Palm Beach, the largest music festival in Florida. And on the horizon, there could be a dream tour as part of an overseas licensing agreement.

Musical Passion & Instruction

Lee Ritter, one of the band's guitarists, says the long haul started after separating from fellow guitar player **Jason Diana** in Boston after their stint in a jazz fusion band following college. They reunited five years later in Orlando and put together a new sound to pursue their passion of playing rock 'n' roll.

"We have a good mixture of similarities and tastes, yet we all have different musical influences," says Ritter, who, like Diana, lives in Altamonte Springs and works for a company called Talking Tabs.

By day, Ritter and Diana spend time in a 6-by-6 foot windowless room in a non-descript building off North Orlando Avenue in Winter Park, painstakingly dissecting popular songs note by note. They record them, explaining into a microphone each musical chord, one at

Jason Diana plays guitar for Rabbits with Glasses, and makes a living dissecting popular songs note by note so that others, including the visually impaired, can learn guitar, too.

Rabbits with Glasses recently had a big gig playing at SunFest 2008 in West Palm Beach: band members (left to right) Jamie Sparks, Jeremy Lupa, Jason Diana, Jason Premo and Lee Ritter.



Guitarist Lee Ritter and several of his college classmates make up the local band Rabbits with Glasses, and the group works together to write their own songs with a variety of musical influences.

a time, so others may learn how to play the tune simply by listening to a CD.

The technology for this form of instruction is the brainchild of Talking Tabs owners **Mark** and **Ellen Hara**, whose son, **Jared**, lost his sight by age 13 from a rare genetic disease that destroys the optic nerves. They introduced him to the guitar and began creating an audio learning device to teach him how to play.

Three years later, you can find Jared on stage playing some of the quickest, melodious licks in town with his own band, Sound Cannon. "I am so impressed with how fast he plays, and he's so technical," says Diana, who graduated with Ritter from the famed Berklee College of Music in Boston.

With the expert guidance of professionals like Ritter and Diana, Mark says it is possible to create simple, yet incredibly accurate music instruction. "They are extraordinary individuals with extraordinary talents," he says.

An Endless Vision

Indeed, what makes Rabbits with Glasses distinctive is its seasoned and educated make-up. Besides Ritter and Diana, drummer **Jeremy Lupa** and bass player **Jason Premo** both hold bachelor's degrees in music industry from SUNY Oneonta. With a background in orchestral percussion, Lupa has been playing for more than 20 years. Premo—with his 6-foot-3-inch frame that commands a stage—has 15 years under his belt. The voice of the band, **Jamie Sparks**, a singer-songwriter from Columbus, Ga., is experienced in a wide array of music, from classical to rock, and has the range and energy to carry out an inspired live performance.

"We all write the songs together, and then Jamie takes care of the lyrics," says Diana, who has watched both the band and the day job morph into something special. In fact, today, Talking Tabs creates audio lessons under the brand Play-It-Now Tunes, so anyone (visually impaired or not) can learn to play the guitar.

For the band, the licensing agreement could be the catalyst they

have been waiting for, allowing their original material to be broadcast on radio airwaves across New Zealand and Australia, as well as being used by Red Bull for promotional material. "[The promoters] say they haven't heard a sound like ours in a while," says Diana. "It's a real positive step for the Rabbits."

He says the band also expects to release its first full-length CD this fall and, hopefully, with a little luck, be on tour by next year. With the vision that Rabbits with Glasses possess, the possibilities are endless. ■

WEB LIFE Tell a friend about the rockin' sound of Rabbits with Glasses from our Web site at www.CentralFlorida-Lifestyle.com.