

## MAKING A CONNECTION

For the band FLAME, developmental disabilities are a challenge—and playing music is a challenge conquered

BY ERIK HAGE

**A** LOT OF WHAT MAKES FLAME REMARKABLE is embodied in Michelle King, the talented, bold-voiced singer-guitarist who fronts the 11-piece band of musicians. The band members all have varying developmental disabilities. Michelle King has autism and, according to Lexington Center executive director Paul Nigra, is "mentally challenged." But the difference between King offstage and on is distinct.

(Lexington Center is the Fulton County chapter of the Arc, a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness and support for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.)

FLAME are between sets at the Lobster Festival in Washington Park, where they have been entertaining a packed tent of milling people. At a side-stage area outside the tent, I interview King, drummer David LaGrange, who is blind and mentally challenged, and percussionist Shawn Lehr, who has Down syndrome.

To King, I am a new person, a stranger, and I have a tape recorder and questions. Initially, her attitude toward me suggests a mixture of wariness and indifference. But it is likely neither. King avoids eye contact, but she is sweet in demeanor and lights up a bit when I explain who I am and what I'm doing. We have the following exchange:

"What's your favorite part about playing in FLAME?"

"Well... (pause) Yeah, um, it first started in 2003. That's when it started."

"What do you like about it?"

"Playin'. Singin' and playin' the guitar."

"Do you guys consider yourselves role models?"

"Yeah."

"How so?"

"Well, um, we have been doin' a lot of stuff since we first started in 2003."

Autism's impact is in the areas of social interaction and communication skills; the difficulty lies in connecting. My uninitiated take on it: It's like King and I have moments of understanding, but they are brief, and then we move in different directions:

"Who chooses the songs?"

"I choose the songs."

"What is it about them that makes you like them?"

"That I pick the songs from the '60s and '70s. The '70s, '80s, '90s... and today."

going. Hers is a rich, versatile voice, full of confidence and resolution. She and FLAME tackle cover after cover—a little Pink Floyd here, some Bon Jovi there. She shows remarkable range and a gift for brewing up a storm on her acoustic guitar.

The playing is tight, and behind her, LaGrange is a powerhouse on the drum kit, hitting furious fills that, in his blindness, he

must "feel" rather than see. A row of other members add some lifting, beautiful harmonies.

BACK IN 2003, DURING LEXINGTON Center's annual talent show, King sang a song that "just blew everyone away," recounts Tim Fiori, FLAME's director of PR and marketing. The recreation director decided that she needed to form a band around Michelle's tal-

ent, so she matched her with LaGrange, whom everyone knew could play drums. They held open auditions for the remaining members. "Within two weeks, the whole band was formed," says Fiori, adding that King didn't know how to play guitar at the time, so one of the custodians taught her. "She's so amazing that she learned guitar in, like, a week."

FLAME have one album to their credit and another on the way. They have their own tour bus, financed from earnings; they will play 87 performances this year (mostly in New York state), and Fiori says he has had to turn down countless more shows due to the high demand. "They don't do any promotion to get gigs. It's amazing. I just get calls every day."

FLAME are filling a void and delightfully upsetting the paradigm. At an event for the Schoharie County Arc in February, I witnessed the local Arc citizens going ecstatic and bounding around to the music on the dance floor while FLAME ripped through a tight, raucous set. They were moved by the music, but one also sensed that they were moved by seeing people like themselves on stage.

Fiori also notes that in FLAME's home base of Fulton County, "The community really takes ownership of the band, and it makes [the community] feel closer to Lexington Center. They play in the community a lot, and the band does benefits in the local area. It has a really positive effect on Lexington."

As to what being in the band has done for the individual members, Fiori says, "It's a lot of their lives. If they didn't have it, I wonder..." He trails off, as if banishing the thought, then adds, "It's helped them overcome a lot of social issues and issues of communication. Getting out in front of crowds and fans and kids across the state has been so great for their social development and has helped them overcome fears. And traveling and staying in hotels has been great for them to develop themselves. And they're also making money, so they're working on finances and a lot of different things."

King, LaGrange and Lehr also point out that their families are thrilled with their involvement in the band. LaGrange, whose conversation is fueled by the same bright, coiled energy that he hits the skins with, nails down the final beat of the interview by shouting, "They get a bang out of it!"

Today (Thursday, June 21), FLAME will play the Schenectady Arc's 50's BBQ in Schenectady's Central Park (4:30-7:30 PM). On June 29, they will return to the same



In harmony: Members of FLAME pose beside their tour bus.

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They have sold more than 2,000 copies of their recent CD, *All for a Reason*, primarily

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