

## FOSTER FOCUS

# Rock On

A traveling cat show entertains people and helps other felines find forever homes.

IN THE MOMENTS BEFORE ANY ROCK concert, electricity hangs in the air. Then the moment arrives and the band takes the stage. Pinky, the sultry lead guitarist, sashays over to her instrument. Dakota, the silky-haired drummer gets ready to perform. Beautiful Nue assumes her place at the keyboard. It's showtime! The musicians swing into action. It's not another British invasion. It's the Rock Cats.

### Making Music, Finding Homes

This band of cool cats provides some musical moments in a one-hour performance of the Acro-Cats, a traveling cat circus. Samantha Martin of Chicago, functions as both conductor and ringmaster.

After the performance, Martin relaxes at her booth wearing her trademark black and purple cat suit and cat ears. Prominently displayed on the table is a cage with a gray and white kitten named Mia playing in a donut bed. Mia doesn't perform with the Rock Cats. She's more of a roadie looking for a permanent gig or, more accurately, a forever home. The troupe features 12 feline performers and travels with two to six foster cats. Mia is one of Martin's many foster kitties seeking homes through the Illinois Doberman Rescue Plus club.



**Samantha Martin and her amazing cat troupe**

Between shows, Martin tends three 4-week-old orphaned kittens, whose mother was killed by coyotes. When a fellow rescuer caught a farmer preparing to drown the litter, she took them, then put out a plea for help through the Doberman rescue group. Martin took three. Now, the kittens and Mia can look forward to a promising future.

While acrobatic and musical cats may amaze and delight, Martin hopes the audience will take home more than a smile. She wants people to develop a closer bond with their own cats. And more than that, she'd be delighted if a qualified family would adopt one of her homeless waifs.

If adoptable kittens are too young to alter, adopters must sign a spay/neuter agreement. Later, a member of the club follows up to make sure the new owner actually had the kitten fixed.

"Most people have a latchkey relationship with their cats," Martin says. "More cats are relinquished than dogs because [people] haven't developed the same relationship." But, she's quick to add that there can be.

To see more of the Rock Cats, visit <http://amazinganimals.biz>.

BY DUSTY RAINBOLT  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAMANTHA MARTIN

**Rock On** (continued from page 42) for more than 100 cats and kittens. In her time as a foster mom, Martin has bottle-fed a dozen orphans, some as young as 1 day old. Oswald, who now performs with the Acro-Cats, came to her as a 2-day-old.

Martin had no idea how many cats and kittens were being euthanized on a daily basis until she walked into the animal shelter to pull her first official rescue for the Doberman club.

"People drop them off like they drop off old clothes," she says, disbelief echoing in her words. "Cats aren't disposable."

She came home with 11 otherwise doomed kitties that day.

While the foster cats are in her care, Martin teaches them a new set of skills. At the sound of a whistle, they run into their carriers. This skill could save the cat's life in the event of a fire or other disaster.

"I whistle when I bring the bottle and pair the food with the whistle," Martin says. "Then, when they begin eating solid food, I whistle and put the food in the crate. It's a really strong behavior. They'll always see the crate as a safe place."

Her rock stars even have open carriers on stage. If the pressure of performing becomes too great, and the cat finds himself freaking out, he can seek out the safety of the carrier.

"We go on to the next trick," Martin says. "It's a negotiation and a level of trust. The cats are clearly in control."

In addition to the carrier feat, Martin teaches her fosters something to make them more adoptable: sit pretty, high five or wave. A cat named Roo learned to push a shopping cart, a skill that so impressed one woman that she adopted Roo and purchased a mini shopping cart for her to push around.

A brown tabby named Sasha learned to play the piano. Whenever her new owners come home, the cat serenades them.

Martin says the bond between the feline Liberace and her owners is so strong because of her special skills.

"They'll never give her up," she says.

The longer a cat stays in Martin's care, the more tricks he learns. She especially loves taking feral kittens and teaching them to crave human attention.

"There's no reason for kittens to die," she says. "It doesn't take much to socialize [them]."

Just sitting with the frightened kittens gives them the chance to get used to people. But Martin does more than that: She gets them addicted to love. Hey, that could be the title to a song! 🐾

"Training creates a bond because you have a common language," she says. "Trained cats act more like dogs. They want attention. There's more involvement."

Mental stimulation from training helps combat the boredom that causes so many behavior problems.

"If you have an active cat with nothing to do, he's going to entertain himself," she says. "But you may not like it. In the cat's eyes, he's not being bad; he's doing what cats do."

Training gives people the ability to channel that activity in a more acceptable way.

"Instead of [fretting about your cats] climbing the curtains, give them a cat tree they can climb," Martin suggests.

### Helping Unwanted Cats

In April 2009, Martin joined forces with Illinois Doberman Rescue Plus club to foster cats in need. Before then, she rescued feral kittens and tamed them on her own. Since working with Doberman rescue, she has found homes (continued on page 58)

Dusty Rainbolt is a member of the Cat Writers' Association and International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and is the author of *Cat Wrangling Made Easy: Maintaining Peace & Sanity in Your Multicat Home*, *Ghost Cats: Human Encounters with Feline Spirits*, *Kittens for Dummies* and *All the Marbles*.

