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Not Like the Others

By: Susan Van Dongen , TimeOFF

The Allison Cipris Band will take the stage at the 52nd annual June Fete.

There are a lot of girls with guitars out there, in coffeehouses, strumming along to melancholy acoustic originals, sharing their innermost secrets.

Allison Cipris has a guitar too, and she also sings her hand-crafted songs, which explore everything from the special quality of heartbreak in the big city to celebrating feminine independence. But the difference is, this is not the kind of music with which to settle back over a latte and have a conversation.

Ms. Cipris rocks.

With an exuberant voice and a no-pussyfooting stage presence, Ms. Cipris, her band and her music demand attention — and rightly so.



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The Lovin' Spoonful.

They'll take the stage at the 52nd annual June Fete, June 10-11 at Princeton University Stadium. This year, it's called the Groovy Fete, a celebration of the '60s and the days of "groovin'" to music at outdoor festivals like Woodstock. But this will be ever so much nicer — no mud or hairy naked people. Just plenty of live entertainment, good food, games for all ages and a 10K run. The *2005 Groovy Fete* is sponsored by the Auxiliary of University Medical Care at Princeton and raises money to support the development of the University Medical Center's Breast Health Center.

This may be the most musical year ever for the fete, with '60s favorites the Lovin' Spoonful headlining and more than 20 bands from the tri-state area and around the country rocking several stages. The Allison Cipris Band plays the American Bandstand stage at 4 p.m. Saturday.

Even in these post-feminist days for women singers and musicians, the Allison Cipris Band is unusual because there's a gal guitarist leading the four-piece group, playing bluesy, melodic originals.

"There are so many different phases the music industry goes through," Ms. Cipris says, speaking from her apartment in Manhattan. "I'd like to say that it's easier now, but honestly, you don't see it very often. You see solo artists with session bands, but it's still unusual for a woman to front a band. It's always a collaboration, but with a group, leadership tends to fall into the hands of one person, and it's different to be a woman in that role."

Fortunately, Ms. Cipris' upbeat, no-nonsense manner and stunning talent has helped overcome certain macho peculiarities of the music business.

"Sometimes club owners don't take you seriously, but if you have the right attitude it works out," she says.

With a background in musical theater — she first took the stage at age 6 — Ms. Cipris has been singing and writing her own songs for years, supporting herself with national regional theater work, even a gig as a showgirl on a cruise ship. She spent quite some time as a "girl with a guitar" on the coffeehouse scene in New York, but that changed two years ago when Ms. Cipris brought guitarist Seth Skolnick, bassist Tony Gregory and drummer Doug Clark together.

"I tried to set myself apart by being a little more edgy and grittier," she says. "Even when I did acoustic shows, they were more percussive and harder than typical coffeehouse music. I much prefer to play full band shows — otherwise I tend to miss the drums, bass and guitar. The songs just sound better and we have such a good time together."

Growing up in North Jersey, Ms. Cipris majored in liberal arts with a musical theater concentration at SUNY-New Paltz, but became more and more drawn to rock 'n' roll, finding time to sing and jam with bands around town. Gutsy female rockers like Chrissie Hynde, Sheryl Crow and especially Pat Benatar were Ms. Cipris' major heroes, and you can hear elements of them all in the band's debut album *Not Like You* (Monkasa Music).

"Pat Benatar is a huge influence in the way I conduct myself on stage," Ms. Cipris says. "But the guys in the band also have a diversity of influences — a lot of classic rock like Rush and Led Zeppelin. It all plays into our sound."

"We've written enough material to start recording the next album — we've been writing like crazy," she continues. "The creative project is ongoing, we're really building our repertoire of songs, testing them out. So far, the crowd's response has been really good."

Even before the band, Ms. Cipris was already being recognized for her songwriting skills. The Songwriters Hall of Fame and *Billboard* magazine named her one of the nine best new writers in New York at their 50th Anniversary New Writers Showcase.

One career highlight was when Richie Sambora, the fetching lead guitarist for Bon Jovi, sought her out to do some session work. Ms. Cipris says the song was never recorded (just demoed) and reports that Mr. Sambora seemed like a "very nice guy."

The band has mostly been playing around New York City, in such venerable clubs as The Bitter End and Fez, as well as Arlene Grocery and Crash Mansion.

The next step?

"We're just trying to get out there a little more regionally," Ms. Cipris says. "We want to get in touch with people we haven't reached yet, spreading the gospel, so to speak."

The Allison Cipris Band will perform at the 2005 Groovy Fete, Princeton University Stadium, Princeton, June 11, 4 p.m. The Fete runs June 10, 6-8 p.m., June 11, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. The Lovin' Spoonful headlines. Free admission. Sponsored by the Auxiliary of University Medical Care at Princeton to support the development of the University Medical Center's Breast Health Center. For information, call (609) 497-4069. On the Web: www.princetonhcs.org. The Allison Cipris Band on the Web: www.allisoncipris.com

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