

THE ICICLES:

— by Brian J. Bowe

Feel the Happy

Whether you know it or not, you've probably heard songs by Grand Rapids-based indie popsters The Icicles. Perhaps it was the psychedelic commercial for the Motorola Krzr phone. Maybe it was ultra-cheerful Target ad campaign. Thanks to these prominent international commercials, this band with deep Grand Valley roots has been heard far beyond Michigan.

The Icicles play cheery retro futurist pop. The band's sound combines '60s organ driven silliness with '80s atmospheric reflection, wrapping it all into an attractive package that's nonspecifically nostalgic — retro for an era that never really existed. "I like way too many of the eras myself to be stuck in one," said Gretchen DeVault, the band's lead singer and primary songwriter.

DeVault ('97) is joined by fellow alumni Joleen Rumsey ('96) on keyboards, and Rebecca Rodriguez ('00) on lead guitar. Emily Krueger — a current student in the accelerated nursing program offered by the Kirkhof College of Nursing — plays bass. Drummer Greg Krupp is the lone non-Laker in the band. Founding drummer Korrie Ottenwess, who left the band in 2003, holds bachelor's

and master's degrees from Grand Valley and works in the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership.

On stage, the members eschew Gucci and Prada in favor of Butterick and Simplicity. They wear handmade matching outfits in day-glow prints from vintage patterns. They once financed studio sessions by selling mittens and hats they had made. They write their own candy-coated pop songs and run the band like a cottage industry. Musically, the band's pop sound is a world removed from punk rock. But the Icicles' DIY ethic is straight out of the hardcore punk playbook, and it has helped attract a large international following.

"It's like indie pop is the new punk," DeVault said.

A strong work ethic can only take a band so far, though. Over the last year, the Icicles have gotten a huge push from a couple of national TV ad campaigns. The band's song "Sugar Sweet" from the album *A Hundred Patterns* was featured in an international commercial for Motorola's Krzr mobile phone. DeVault

said it was "a little bit of luck and a little bit of being in the right place at the right time."

"We spent a lot of time on that album, and we did a big push when we released it," DeVault said. "One of the places we sent it was a music direction company, but we didn't hear anything for at least a year. The album had been out a good year before we got any feedback. It came out of the blue — they e-mailed us. It ended up in our junk mail originally."

The same company pitched Target with the tenacious earworm "La Ti Da" from the band's *Arrivals and Departures* record. The retailer used the song at the center of its "Long Live Happy" ad campaign.

There was a time when having a song used in a major commercial would have been the kiss of death for an indie band's credibility.

But the Icicles said there wasn't even a conversation about whether or not to do it.

"It's so different now. The way bands get their music out is through TV and through advertising because commercial radio is horrendous and doesn't



photos by Bernadine Carey-Tucker

Gretchen DeVault

play bands,” said Krueger. “That’s how it happens now. The exposure we’ve gotten from Target? We would never get that from commercial radio.”

The money from the commercials hasn’t allowed anybody to quit their day jobs (though Krueger confided that the Target commercial put a new roof on her house). But it has given the band a budget to pursue its passion without worry.

“It’s allowed us to record an album, it’s allowed us to go on tours and not have to be stressed about the money,” DeVault said. “But even on the tours, we’re still staying in people’s houses.”

The band is excited — if philosophical — about its growing fame. “You’d never do this if you didn’t want success, but at the same time, we would

have given up a long time ago if that was the only reason we were doing it,” Krueger said.

The seeds for the Icicles were planted in the mid-’90s in the basement of Kirkhof Center at student radio station WCKS. DeVault was one of the founding members of the station’s staff, and Ottenwess followed the next year.

“It was a crazy time, but we put our hearts and souls into it,” DeVault said. “We were young and wanted to change things and do radio and put good music out there.”

The social scene that spawned the Icicles was centered around WCKS. “It was a really cliquy sort of affair,” Ottenwess said. “Joleen was friends with people who were radio station people.

We had a lot of parties at her house. I remember her being too shy to be involved with the radio station, but she was friends with people who were.”

For this group of geeked-up music obsessives, the transition from listeners to performers seemed natural. “We were constantly listening to so much cool music, it made us want to make music, too,” DeVault said. “It definitely inspired us.”

But getting there wasn’t easy. DeVault began to learn guitar when she took a class at Grand Valley with Brian Morris. “I think I was his nightmare student because I was so bad. It was horrible, and I think he felt really bad, because I was trying but I just didn’t have it,” she said.

She put the guitar away for a time, but her friend (and

fellow Grand Valley student) Jeremy Spanos began working with her. And then, it clicked. “The second that I learned how to change chords on a guitar, I wrote songs,” DeVault said. “As soon as that happened, it was like the floodgates opened.”

Likewise, Ottenwess was a newbie musician. In the mid-’90s, her guitarist husband had all of his gear stolen. “At that time we were on a quest to replace his gear. We were driving all over the Midwest trying to find these specific speaker cabinets. Finally we found this store in Chicago that had exactly what he wanted. In the window they had a silver sparkle Rodgers drum set from the mid-’60s. That went home



Joleen Rumsey



Rebecca Rodriguez



Emily Krueger



photo courtesy of Gretchen DeVault

From left, are Emily Krueger, Korrie Ottenwess, Joleen Rumsey and Gretchen DeVault.

with me that day," she said. "I didn't really do anything with it. I don't even know why I bought it. I had money and it was sparkly, I guess."

For Rumsey, the problem wasn't musical ability — she took piano from first grade all the way through high school, had classical training in guitar and played flute in her school band. Her impediment was bashfulness. "I was terribly shy, just painfully, shy. I always wanted to make music with Gretchen, but it didn't work out at the time," Rumsey said.

After graduating from Grand Valley in 1998, Rumsey spent four months in India's holy city of Varanasi with a friend. "It was a little bit dangerous, but we stayed healthy, mostly," she said. "I lost a lot of weight, but we came back in one piece."

That trip helped her get over her shyness.

"In India, I was doing a lot of yoga, and I started wanting to sing all the time," Rumsey said. "I went to this concert and saw this singer and I said, 'Ooh, I want to learn from him.' So I asked my yoga teacher to find me a singing teacher, and it ended up being the same singer that I saw."

"I was singing for three hours a day, and I really opened up,"

she said. "It stretched my vocal cords and I got over my fear."

By the time Rumsey got back to Grand Rapids, Ottenwess and DeVault had enlisted a bass player and started a band. Rumsey was in the audience for the first *Icicles* show at a Grand Rapids coffee shop. They were wearing matching outfits — a hallmark of the band's presentation, and Rumsey offered to help out with sewing. But the band was just as interested in her musical skills.

"My first practice with them I didn't play a single note. I was too nervous," Rumsey said, laughing. "But they kept me."

Right away, the *Icicles* had sweet pop dreams. Part of the *Icicles* vibe was influenced by the band's choice of substance to abuse. While other bands may leave a litter of empty bottles in their wake, for the *Icicles* it was candy wrappers.

"We had an affinity for Pixy Stix. When practices would feel like they were dragging, we'd pound some Pixy Stixs, and on we'd go," Ottenwess said.

What the *Icicles* lacked in experience, they made up for in sugared-up gumption. They began playing shows and writing

songs, venturing into the studio in 2001 with Dave Trumfio, who has produced records for Wilco and OK Go. "It was a total pipe dream," Rumsey said. "We did six songs with him in three days. It was so intense, we could barely walk straight by the end of it."

The result, the *Pure Sugar* EP, was released in spring 2002 and started to climb up the charts at small radio stations around the country. "There was a lot of work behind it. We did tons of mailings and we would follow-up with college radio. We all had a list of chores to do," Rumsey said.

The band had big dreams right from the get-go. "Gretchen was super good at setting out goals for the band," Ottenwess said. "We had in our practice space a list of short term goals and long term goals. I actually have a photograph of that board, and if you look at it, every one of those goals was accomplished. And they were big goals, like being on MTV, being on NPR, selling out the first pressing of our album. When we wrote them I didn't think they'd ever happen."

Part of the work involved creating the band's stage costumes — a key part of the group's shtick. DeVault chalked the whole thing up to fate.

"It's a really amazing story, actually," she said. "I had this really cool polyester dress that had this really crazy pattern on it. Korrie and I went to Chicago and found a shirt that had the same material. This is like old '60s stuff, and so it was, like, 'Oh my god, we have to match.' And that's how the whole matching thing started. Then, I had another

dress that was this really cool, rare psychedelic material. I was at a garage sale, and I found a dress with the same exact material."

The band members collect vintage sewing patterns by the boxful. "All the girls sew, but some of them need help from me sometimes," Rumsey said. "We don't make Greg sew. At one point I asked Greg if he could at least sew his own buttons on, but his hands don't work like that. So I take care of him."

Rumsey — who is a clothing designer with her own company, Flutter Designs — is the expert seamstress. "I like to give everybody an outfit now and then. It's my way of contributing," she said.

To celebrate the release of *Arrivals and Departures*, the band dressed up in vintage airline stewardess costumes (and Greg dressed as a pilot). "That was my greatest work," Rumsey said. "I made absolutely everything. I sewed so many buttons on. I made extra costumes for people in the audience because we wanted stewardesses handing out peanuts during the show. I made six blazers, 10 hats, four skirts. I think it all turned out pretty well."

Amidst all the playing and sewing, the band's lineup continued to fluctuate. The *Icicles* recruited New Jersey native and Calvin grad Krueger on bass. True to form, Krueger didn't play bass until she discovered the *Icicles* were looking for a bassist. She auditioned after playing for only three weeks.

"When I arrived to audition I had learned all the songs off the first EP and two songs they



photo by Bernadine Carey-Tucker

The Icicles play at the 2008 Addy Awards.

only played live thanks to a couple of bootlegs my husband had made at some past shows,” Kruger said. “They obviously saw something in my determination and offered me the spot.”

But as the band got ready to record its second record, *A Hundred Patterns*, Ottenwess left the band. She was about to graduate from Grand Valley with a master’s degree in public administration and she was getting ready to adopt her daughter Violet.

“I had never had drum lessons and I was starting to feel a lot of pressure when it came time to contributing to new songs,” Ottenwess said. “I was perfectly proficient at what I was doing, but coming up with new stuff again and again and again, I was feeling a lot of pressure about that. I didn’t know if what I had always done was going to continue to be satisfactory or not. Nobody else in the band ever pressured me about it, but I was feeling it on the inside.”

Those feelings of pressure were obvious to her bandmates. “I think the band just started to be more stress than fun,” Rumsey

said. “She’s such a perfectionist and such a hard worker and so ambitious that I think she just had to preserve herself. Even with her drumming — she would count the whole way through the song. It was a stress for her. If a show didn’t go well, she wasn’t happy. She puts a lot of pressure on herself. But we would never have gotten so far without Korrie’s ambition and hard-work ethic and drive.”

Ottenwess said she doesn’t pay close attention to what’s going on in Icicle world — she sees them play a couple times a year, and gets the scoop from Gretchen when they hang out. But does she ever have twinges of regret for leaving the band?

“Certainly,” she said. “There’s lots of things that they’re doing that I think, ‘That would be so much fun to do, I wish I was doing that.’ But at the same time I can easily say to myself, ‘I’m so glad I don’t have to do all that other stuff.’”

Krupp, a veteran of the Grand Rapids music scene, took Ottenwess’ place. The final piece

of the band’s current lineup was put in place when Rodriguez joined the band in 2006. She was initially brought in to add some guitar parts during the recording of *Arrivals and Departures* and ended up staying.

“I just fell in love with everybody, and everyone is so wonderful and I respect everyone in the band so much,” she said. “I started playing gigs with them, and they were like ‘Do you want to be a part of the band?’ and I was like, ‘Hell yeah!’”

Rodriguez is the rocker of the group, and her playing adds a moody atmosphere to the Icicles’ cheery sound. “Pop music isn’t my thing. I don’t really listen to it that much,” she said. “Now I’m getting an appreciation for more pop music, which I would have never had if I hadn’t joined the band.”

With the lineup solidified, the band has mounted tours of the U.S., the U.K. and Scandinavia. said the Icicles’ success can still be hard to believe.

“Even now we have to

tell ourselves that we’re an accomplished band,” she said. “You get lost in all the work. I had to tell Gretchen last week ‘Two of your songs are in major commercials. You’re a great songwriter.’ I think all of us have to sit back and say it to ourselves. We all have to have a reality check on it, because it’s hard to believe.”

Visit the band’s Web site, www.theicicles.com, to see photos, show dates and hear songs.