

# HEK MAG

Spring/Summer 2006

**ANYWHERE  
ONE CAN DREAM  
IS GOOD**



THE CITIZENS BAND

NOW PLAYING

*Photo Anna Bauer*

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*The Citizens Band of New York breaks just about every law of the entertainment industry. In Hekmag, founder and creative director Sarah Sophie Flicker delivers an exclusive, poetic insight into the inner life*

*and is incredibly good at it. Sarah Sophie Flicker delivers an exclusive, of a collective, artistic consciousness.*

"Beautiful music, believing in something, being good to each other." The message doesn't sound like it would knock the socks off hardboiled Manhattan audiences. But for quite some time already, New York has been marveling at a phenomenon that hardly anyone in Europe or Asia even knows – the Citizens Band. This wild mix of artists, which includes singing supermodel Karen Elson and trapeze artist Chelsea Bacon, seems to achieve the impossible. Dozens of renowned musicians, directors and artists meld their creative personas onstage to produce a show that is fascinating the American cultural scene. Why is it so appealing? Maybe because something like this is unheard of in the land of commercial entertainment. Or maybe simply because, emerging from a pop-culture machine that appears to be frozen in a state of star cults and coolness, this troupe makes a tempting offer: you can relax.

*You can laugh. You can cry. You can be amazed.*

For New York gallerist Jeffrey Deitch, famous for his unerring intuition, it clicked immediately. When he saw the Citizens Band for the first time a year ago, he added the group to his artist roster on the spot. The Citizens Band and their opulent stage performances have hit a nerve that no one knew even existed. The group's first show was called "Je t'aime, scumbag" – a powerful, avowedly political mixture of musical cabaret and artistic vaudeville show. It brought 1920s Berlin back to life smack in the middle of Manhattan. Their subsequent shows "No New Thing Under the Sun" and "The

Trepanning Opera" deal with the Bible and the American health system. Not exactly showbiz-compatible subjects, yet Manhattanites were tripping over each other to get into the overcrowded theaters.

The troupe was founded in the fall of 2004 by director Sarah Sophie Flicker, musician and filmmaker Adam Dugas and singer Jorjee Douglass. Within months, it had developed a unique kind of gravitational force:

*across the entire spectrum of artist cliques, the avant-garde seems to feel magically drawn to them.*

Their declared mission is an open exchange, well beyond vanities and competitive wrangling. More and more artists are joining the experiment, and not just since Melissa Auf Der Maur, Billy Corgan and Maggie Gyllenhaal have appeared as special guests. The Citizens Band has meanwhile grown to thirty members. There are no castings, the group grows through personal contacts and recommendations.

How does this strange formation work? Hekmag invited founder and creative director Sarah Sophie Flicker to write about it. Already in her first sentences, it's clear we're entering into brand-new territory. Have a nice trip!

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*Chelsea Bacon, choreographer and aerialist.*

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Karen Elson, Ronan, Sarah Sophie Flicker and Adam Douglas in "No New Thing Under the Sun".

Text          Sarah          Sophie          Flicker

My uncle has always said that I'm the citizen of three countries, the United States, Denmark and Fairyland. I always shared my citizenship to the two former with my countrymen/women, but Fairyland was solely mine. Being an only child is lonely and demands a wildly active imagination; regardless of solitude, my fantasy world has always kept me company and is always very specific. It isn't a place I can explain, or ever thought was tangible or something I could share. When I walk down the street I know that I see things how I want to see them, I create stories for everyone, I block out what doesn't appeal to me and I fixate on what I find beautiful. The world I inhabit is romantic, it is lyrical, musical, there is a load of lace and soft lighting, fog and blurry images, it always takes place before the 1930s and it involves vast amounts of false nostalgia.

You likely haven't heard of the Citizens Band. If you are reading from outside of the United States you most definitely haven't seen us perform. We are a cabaret/theater group of approximately 30 artists from New York City. We consist of singers, musicians, actors, screenwriters, dancers, aerial artists, contortionists, schoolteachers, filmmakers, sculptors, models, concert pianists, make-up artists and songwriters from every

walk of life. *We formed somewhat through osmosis, with a desire to cast the net wide* and find like-minded people who wanted to create a fantastic neverland existing somewhere between 1880 and 1930. Our performances are always a response to the political climate, and in the tradition of cabaret, a satirical critique of it as well. We have never conducted auditions; to become part of the collective has always occurred through referral. The Citizens Band is the happiest experiment I have ever been a part of.

Jorjee Douglass was, and still is the most extraordinary girl I have ever met. It seems a prerequisite for joining the Citizens Band is that each member is the most extraordinary person ever met, at least as far as I am concerned. I met Jorjee in San Francisco when she was the lead singer of Stone Fox. She was the perfect combination of a Victorian doll, "Cabaret", "Pretty



Karen Elson, model and singer.

Baby", "Henry and June" and "Daisies". We became friends and years later, sitting in a Manhattan restaurant, The Spotted Pig, with Paul Cantelon and Angela McClusky (the penultimate Oscar Wilde meets Betty Davis meets Lord Byron meets Billie Holiday married couple) we all decided it would be divine to create a salon and perform as a cabaret called the Citizens Band. This all occurred back on a gloomy night in 2004 when politically we seemed to be caught in the Bush administration's politics of ego. A time when being "right" was/is more important than the truth and imperialism, unilateral decision-making, isolationism, contempt for international collaboration and the inability to relinquish any control EVER was making America look like a country with a narcissistic personality disorder. Gee, what better time than to form a politically minded performance group based on the concept of collaboration!

Deitch Projects, helmed by Mr Jeffrey Deitch, was one of the first gallery openings I went to when I moved to New York. The feeling that this gallery was some sort of incarnation of Andy Warhol's factory overwhelmed me. Jeffrey supports young artists before anyone else knows of them. He gives

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them a platform in the public forum and, as an artist, what you decide to do with that platform is up to you. This approach impressed me to no end. So when Adam Dugas asked me to screen my film *Kill Your Darlings* (a film made with my filmmaking partner Maximilla Lukacs) at a Deitch Projects salon I was beyond flattered. I, of course, screamed, "Yes!" and added, demurely, "Can we have a cabaret performance as well?" Adam agreed as long as he could participate. Soon we were conducting rehearsals in my living room, feverishly rehearsing songs. Karen Elson and I huddled together shyly overcoming stage fright while Rain Phoenix ran the rehearsals with an iron fist. I was also taking trapeze lessons from aerialist Chelsea Bacon who agreed to perform as well and, hurrah! The Citizens Band was born. This first show itself was hilariously sloppy and we all kept getting up on stage to sing again and again and again... but Jeffrey Deitch was there and felt the excitement. Shortly thereafter, we were officially on the Deitch Projects artist roster.

*Sarah Sophie Flicker, writer, director, actress, and trapeze artist.*

As our shows expand and become more theatrical and narrative, our alliance has expanded as well. We now number 28 in cast and orchestra. We have also begun to work with

visual and graphic artists. *Collaboration is wonderful because the land where your collaborators are waiting, with bouquets of their own ideas in hand, balances the frightening dark forest you trudge through while working alone.*

Together we bring something into being that can only exist with everyone's input. As we talk about a show, ideas foster other ideas and suddenly, because of this exchange, an idea

becomes a reality. What alone can seem impossible swiftly materializes with a coconspirator pressed firmly to your left and your right.

It always sounds pretentious when artists talk about the loneliness of creating their work, because really, what a gift to have the time or resources to create at all. But, the truth is, it is lonely. Working alone is a slippery slope into the damp well of self-doubt and brutal self-critique. We've heard the stories of tortured artists going mad, destroying their work, and destroying themselves throughout time immemorial. Their angst casts a romantic hue and we assume that we must SUFFER in order to create great art. Well, I'm sick of this assumption. It's not to say that isolation and darkness don't play a part in creativity, but I prefer a group hug to self-flagellation any day.

I would tell you all about our process, how we begin with a political topic, scour books, old photos, the Internet, the news for thoughts in order to write a script. How we then approach songwriters in the group with particular topics to play with, how the cast then arrives at rehearsal with obscure references that take our germinating idea to a new level. I could guiltily tell you how the musicians all lug their instruments across town and up the stairs when the elevator is broken or about the rehearsals in my living room that look somewhat like a salon from the 1920's with wine, food, piano, horns, dancing, costumes strewn about.

*Someone is running around like an excited child using a wooden spoon as a microphone, two people are in a corner practicing the Apache Dance;*

someone else in the hallway is practicing a tap dance. I would tell you about the extra-



Above: Rain Phoenix, singer, songwriter and actress.

Below: Viva Ruiz, dancer and filmmaker, and Karen Elson.

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1920s Berlin in the middle of Manhattan.

ordinary learning curve that occurs when you pry yourself open and listen to all 28 people in the room and their thoughts. I would love to tell you about each member's history or the way in which we challenge each other to do things we never thought we could. I would even try to describe that magic moment when a song or scene or mood infects each one of us and it seems as though a collective consciousness does exist. But those moments are few and far between and, chances are that you haven't seen us perform and none of these stories mean much to you. But the mere fact that these moments happen at all – why just one in a lifetime seems like a gift – is enough to keep me writing about the magic of collaboration.

Of course collaboration is difficult and rife with problems.

Trust is always an issue as *nothing belongs to anyone, not an idea or a character or an entire show, they belong to all of us.* You have to trust that when you put your ideas on the table and your hands behind your back that you won't be laughed at or stolen from. Credit has to be shared and the creative process can be long, laborious, and all egos have to be measured gingerly. It is human nature to cling to our own views; we want to believe that our particular ideas prevail. We all love to be right. Yet, when we realize that relying on only our own vision deprives us of all the other ways an idea can be looked at, it seems silly to cling so tightly to a singular image. And isn't that the point of collaboration? To create what could not be conceivably envisioned alone.

Back in Fairyland, I am walking down the street and the light hits a puddle on the water in a particularly beautiful way at 4pm in the winter. I can call Karen or Jorjee or Rachelle Garniez or Chelsea and tell them that it reminded me of a firefly trapped in a bell jar and we need to think about global warming. I can call Ronin or Paul or Adam and tell them how the tree outside my window looks just like a monkey eating a leaf and they will all shout "Evolution vs. Intelligent Design!" Who would have thought that the world inside my head could make its way onto the stage so easily and be understood by so many others. I love collaboration because it takes me out of my awed seat as an outsider and into the arena of the group. I have always adored the quote, "Most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator; for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, and a man who wails is not a bear" (Aime Cesaire). Perhaps this seems like nonsense, but I would venture to be certain that any member of the cabaret would find it quite inspiring and clear. After all, our solitary fairylands will always be our own but to share our thoughts and ideas generously coupled with the joy of not creating alone is a glorious challenge that I am grateful to share with the countrymen and women of the Citizens Band!