

# Amazing Acro-Cats arrive for Detroit purr-formances

Ellen Piligian, Special to the Detroit Free Press 8:29 p.m. EDT October 19, 2016



(Photo: The Amazing Acro-Cats)

Picture it: Fourteen cats on stage in colorful scrunchie collars, jumping through hoops, riding skateboards, walking high wires, climbing ropes, ringing bells, even playing in the “world’s only” cat band — Tuna and the Rock Cats featuring a chicken named Cluck Norris and a groundhog to boot.

The best part? The cats don’t always do what they are supposed to do.

For Samantha Martin, who is the CEH (chief executive human) of the Amazing Acro-Cats traveling show, that’s a recipe for success.

People “love seeing the cats do anything, even if they don’t do the tricks,” says Martin of the show, which is in Detroit for four performances Thursday through Monday. “It’s a win-win.”

Martin, of Chicago, is no crazy cat lady although some might question her lifestyle. She travels the country up to nine months a year in a full-size tour bus she shares with a merry band of trained pets who don’t always get along off stage, she says.



The musically inclined felines known as The Rock Cats are part of the Amazing Acro-Cats, which is doing four shows at The Jam Handy in Detroit. (Photo: The Amazing Acro-Cats)

Even Martin, who’s single, admits: “I’m not living the ideal lifestyle for matrimony.”

But she is living her dream.

Martin always wanted to train animals for TV and film. Now her colony of cats, with names like Tuna, Pudge, Pinky, Nue, Oz and Alley, perform on stage as well as do production work including commercials, film projects and music videos. They’ve been featured on “CBS Sunday Morning” and “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.”

Martin, who has a degree in animal husbandry and early on had an Acro-Rats show — rats are highly trainable and very focused, she says — decided to go all out after years as a zookeeper and wildlife educator. She chose cats because they are one of the most requested animals for production work.

“I knew they were difficult to work with,” says Martin, who uses only a clicker as a training device. She started doing shows at art galleries and pet expos, passing the hat, learning as she went along. They were a hit. “People just loved it,” she says.

By 2009, she began rescuing cats for her show. At first it was more out of a fear of getting a cat that didn’t work out than wanting to help the cats, says Martin, who trained a litter of kittens she fostered herself.

When she learned how many cats are homeless, she says, “It was a life-changing moment. I realized all these cats with nowhere to go were dying and being put down every day.”



Since 2009, Martin, who always travels with foster kittens, has found homes for 188 cats, she says.

Whenever possible, the show partners with local rescues, which get a portion of the show’s proceeds. Martin lets them educate about pet overpopulation.

Her focus is the show, which these days often sells out to crowds of 500 people of all types. “That’s one of the coolest things,” Martin says. “We’ll have a guy with a Mohawk next to a granny.”

The show combines cat tricks with Martin sharing her story and her relationship with the cats. And she’s learned to roll with the antics. Sometimes the show screeches to a halt, she says. “Once the cats disappeared and returned with a giant cockroach and were tossing him around and batting it.”

**Samantha Martin leads the Amazing Acro-Cats.** (Photo: *The Amazing Acro-Cats*)

Other times, people lure the cats offstage to pet them. “They can mingle with the crowd but we don’t encourage people to give them cat nip and getting them high,” she says. “Only after the show.”



Martin used to get frustrated when they didn’t pay attention. “I wanted a perfect show, like the Russian cat show,” she says of one of the few other cat shows in the world. “They are perfect, that’s all they do.”

In the end, she opted for a more relaxed life for her fur babies who hang out with her and watch TV. “I didn’t want to sacrifice the human-pet relationship,” she says.

Although the show is high on entertainment, the big takeaway Martin hopes people get out of it is that cats can be trained — and can do even more than a dog, she says. “Their minds needs to be stimulated ... even 10 minutes a day gives them an outlet.”

Mostly, though, it’s so they’ll never be homeless again, she says.

“If you train your cat, you’ll bond with them and then you’ll never let them go.”

## **The Amazing Acro-Cats**

7 p.m. Thu. & Fri., 1 p.m. Sun., 7 p.m. Mon.

The Jam Handy

2900 E Grand Blvd., Detroit

\$23 and \$33. Tickets available at the door and at [brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/2579943) (<http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/2579943>).

A portion of the proceeds will benefit local rescue efforts for Animal House of SE Michigan — a no-kill animal rescue. Motor City Rescue will also have an adoption event. More info on [the event’s Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/events/1608389052785767/#) (<https://www.facebook.com/events/1608389052785767/#>).

More info on the Acro-Cats at [the group’s website](http://www.circuscats.com) (<http://www.circuscats.com>). see [www.circuscats.com](http://www.circuscats.com).

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