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## Amy Farrand has traveled a reckless road to become a top local musician

By TIMOTHY FINN  
The Kansas City Star

Sitting in a booth at the Brick, nursing a Boulevard beer and a mild hangover, Amy Farrand is peering at the ceiling for remnants of one of her shows back in 2001.

It involved the performance-art trio the Big Four, a dinosaur piñata filled with Jell-O and pasta, some power tools and a baseball bat.

By show's end, the piñata had been destroyed, its guts had been splayed around the bar and some of those innards had been used as a medium for a painting. "I think you can still see some of it up there," she says.

That was more than nine years ago, less than half of the 21 years Farrand (rhymes with "errand") has spent in the local music scene. Those years have taken her many formative places: to Seattle, where she learned a lesson in breaking and bending rules; to West Africa, where she learned about percussion and the roots of Western music; and to London, where she and two friends gave locals a flavor of Kansas City that had nothing to do with barbecue.

Along the way she has started or joined about a dozen bands, accumulated many friends, provoked some detractors, become an A-list, go-to musician, earned respect from her peers and managed to eke out a living as a full-time musician. And though she says that she is now a reformed bad-ass, she has an enduring reputation for not tolerating poseurs or fools.

"One day I was playing out, and I called Amy up (onstage) to do a song with me," said local singer/songwriter Howard Iceberg. "When I introduced her, I said, 'This is the only woman I know who everybody is either in love with or afraid of.' And someone in the audience yelled out, 'Or both.' "

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*"Amy has paved the way for so many rock 'n' roll girls to express themselves musically."*

— Mark Manning, host of "The Wednesday MidDay Medley" on KKFI (90.1FM)

Farrand's introduction to the world of live music came when she was about 5, via her mother and her first stepfather, who played in country cover bands.

"It was mostly in hole-in-the-wall honky-tonk bars," she said. "If it was her turn to have me, they'd take me with them. Sometimes I'd get up on stage and sing."

When she was 7, she started playing drums. At 10, she learned to play the violin. By then, she'd been exposed to a new kind of music by someone who was trying to corrupt her. Instead, it seduced her.

"My mom and stepdad rehearsed at a band member's house, and his girlfriend had a 15-year-old son who resented having to baby-sit me while they practiced," she said. "So he made me listen to his music: punk rock and metal, like Black Sabbath. And I loved it."

When she was 14, she inherited a two-string guitar from an aunt. She used it to write primitive rock songs. "I played a million songs on it with two strings, then took it to a guitar store, put it on the counter and said, 'I need strings. And I need to know how to string it.' They showed me, and I never had to ask again."

That was the same year she went to Seattle with an aunt and watched a guy in a jazz trio turn his suitcase and its contents into a drum kit. It ignited something fierce inside her.

"It was at Pike Place Market. This little old man comes out with one suitcase, pulls all his stuff out of it and sets it all up, and the suitcase is his kick-drum," she said. "I thought it was brilliant. It made me realize how much was possible if you thought outside the box."

She joined her first band a year later, launching her formal history as a local musician. She doesn't remember any of its several names — "It was not a good band, but most people's first bands aren't good" — but recalls playing local VFW halls, where "the old guy sitting in the back might slip you a sip of beer. I think they liked the idea of having kids with Mohawks run around the place."

But the deeper she tried to get into the local scene, the more resistance and bias she ran into and the more she realized she would have to draw upon something more than talent to get noticed.

"It was tough," she said. "No one in the scene was going to bother with a teenager seriously, especially a teenage girl in the rock world. I never wanted to do the poppy-and-cute girl-band thing. But if you had boobies, you couldn't be taken seriously in the rock 'n' roll world."

So she turned the rejection into motivation.

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*"She's strong and she's tough and all the things a rock star should be. She's also a very sensitive and emotional musician."*

— Betse Ellis of the Wilders

Mark Smeltzer has known Farrand for more than 17 years, since her days with the local pop band the Young Johnny Carson Story. Then she began turning up at the Rural Grit Happy Hours, a weekly event he helped start at the old Grand Emporium in 1999.

"I just found this picture of her from one of those shows," he said Monday as he prepared for the week's Rural Grit show, now at the Brick. "Her hair is white and about an inch long. We're all playing and looking real old-timey, and Amy looks like a complete freak. Which is right up my alley."

They ran into each other regularly at those events and others over the years and become close friends in the process. He calls her a dear friend; she calls him a brother.

In 2006, Smeltzer's father died of cancer. Farrand invited him over to her loft to "build stuff and hang out," she said, "and not be asked every five minutes how he was doing."

She, Smeltzer and her roommate J. Howell cobbled instruments from junk pulled out of Dumpsters — two-stringed cellos, for example, fashioned from shards of metal and piano strings. Then they played the things, making up the music and the rules as they went along. And thus was born the Experimental Instrument Orchestra.

That July, just weeks after it was founded, EIO appeared on the British webcast "Unlit" via a MySpace program, after which the producer said they needed to take the show over to London, which they did in October 2006. EIO performed twice on the BBC as part of its "Electric Proms" festival and at a few music venues in London. They performed in their EIO uniforms: dungaree overalls.

"Everyone was very big-eyed and 'what the hell are we looking at?' Mark, alone, was a spectacle," Farrand said of Smeltzer, a strapping man with the kind of fierce white beard Civil War generals favored. "It was close to Halloween. I think they thought we were in costumes."

The EIO project is as far out of the box as any she has embraced, and sometimes, Smeltzer said, it gets a little too far outside. EIO is all about "falling down and failing," he said. "Half the time it isn't musical, and Amy's very musical so she can want to push in the other direction. Sometimes I have to take control ... and say things no one else can say to her."

And sometimes, he said, he sees a side she rarely shows.

"She has a reputation for being tough, and she is, but I've seen her when she's crying — the opposite of tough, which isn't 'sensitive' because she's also being sensitive when she wants to beat the crap out of you."

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*"There is not a thing in the world the woman would rather do than play music. She is a musician."*

— Abigail Henderson, Farrand's band mate in Atlantic Fadeout

When she was 17, Farrand moved into her own midtown apartment while she was still attending Raytown High School. That's when she started meeting people in the music scene, she said. "I wasn't really seeking it out," she said. "It's weird how you come across people — how you kind of trip and fall on each other. But it was like, 'Hey, we should play together.' "

One of those acquaintances asked her to join the Young Johnny Carson Story, a quirky-pop band that included Ike Sheldon, now of the Wilders. She was 19.

“The high school and college kids loved them,” she said. “They were like Crosby, Stills & Nash meets They Might Be Giants.”

She became the band’s drummer, though it required a technique she wasn’t used to. Once again, she took something into her own hands and gave it her own twist

“I had to use brushes,” she said. “I thought, ‘How the hell is anyone going to hear these things?’ So I developed my own trashy style with the brushes.”

From there, her resumé grew busier, starting with the band Transylvania 2000, which included Corey Parks, now of the psycho-billy band Nashville Pussy. After about a year, Farrand quit the band on the eve of a tour.

“That was a sobering experience,” she said. “I loved the music, but the band was an internal train wreck. I mean, we drank a lot. But there was lots of hard-drug use in my presence. ... I was only 20, but I was smart enough to know I didn’t want to be trapped in a van with that.”

She moved on to front a band called the Blue Light Special: “We were OK. People liked it. But it’s not anything I’d listen to now for any reason whatsoever.” After that she took some time off and spent part of that hiatus in Ghana, where she studied percussion.

“Lisa McKenzie, who was with the Grand Marquis, asked me to go with her,” Farrand said. “She had gotten into world music and started taking tabla lessons. She found out about this school in Ghana and asked me to go. Of course, I said, ‘Sure.’ Then I had to figure out a way to pay for it. So I took a bunch of jobs and saved up and we went. It was a blast.

“It probably took a year to process everything. I learned that the roots of all Western music — rock, country, blues, bluegrass, all of it — comes from there. It really opened up a lot of things for me.”

She returned to the local scene and begin what she admits was a reckless period. It coincided with her membership in the all-women punk band Sister Mary Rotten Crotch.

“Those were some times,” she said, laughing, “I was partying a lot, drinking a lot, hanging out with a rough crowd, fighting in bars ... yes, fist-fighting. I acted out a lot but I had a really good time. It proved to me there are no time machines because future-me would have come back and kicked current-me’s ass a couple of times. I was an obnoxious brat.”

That was also the era of the Big Four, a project with Ben Juneau and Ernie Locke, a troupe whose purpose was to incite, insult and create some indelible mayhem. The musicianship was good, but the reaction sometimes was predictable.

“People said we sucked because of what we did, which was make a lot of people uneasy or upset,” she said. “Sometimes they walked out of the show before it was over, but they remembered us, which was the point.”

Farrand recalled another part of that dinosaur piñata show, which occurred right around the time of the grisly murder of a young girl who came to be known as Precious Doe. Juneau had seen a clip of local news footage that he found provocative and wanted to incorporate it into the show.

“I rarely say anything has gone too far,” Farrand said. “But this time I said, ‘Ben, no, you can’t do that.’ Maybe if it had been a grown man they’d found, but not a cute little girl. It’s unacceptable.”

He did it anyway. “Well, no one attacked him, maybe because he had a bat in his hand at the time,” Farrand said.

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*“Amy once introduced me as ‘This is Elaine; I guess she’s my biggest fan.’ It’s true and I’ve said it repeatedly. Amy Farrand is my favorite musician in Kansas City.”*

— Singer/songwriter Elaine McMilian

The Shotgun Idols. Whiskey Boots. EIO. American Catastrophe. The Atlantic Fadeout. She is a member of each. She also founded and is the emcee of the Weirdo Wednesday Supper Club at Davey’s Uptown. And she does the occasional solo-but-not-acoustic/gut-bucket-blues thing at singer/songwriter nights, at which you are advised to listen or at least act as if you are.

“I’ve seen her take the microphone into the crowd and say to someone, right in their face, ‘If you’re gonna talk during

my show, why don't you just tell me about your day,' " Smeltzer said. "It kind of makes everyone uncomfortable."

She is proud of her Weirdo Wednesday project, which showcases burlesque dancers, jugglers, fire-breathers, standup comedians, way-off-center music acts and the food of chef Heather Hands.

If Farrand has a maiden ship band, it's American Catastrophe, whose members asked her to join as bassist about four years ago. "I thought it was weird because I'd never played bass and I hadn't developed a style," she said. "But I thought they'd be a good band to do that with. There's a lot of freedom, and everyone in the band is really talented."

She gets asked a lot to join a band or a project, but Farrand said she is particular. "I'd love to play more music, but time is limited. I don't want to spend it doing something mediocre or half-assed."

She most recently became the drummer in Atlantic Fadeout, but not without consideration and negotiation. The band was started by Henderson and her husband, Chris Meck, formerly of the Gaslights.

"I said, 'What kind of band are you going to be?' " Farrand said. "If you want to be something other than the Gaslights, put down the acoustic guitars. Those are for solo sets and your couch. They're fine sometimes, but not in my rock band."

Farrand's frankness is well-known in some local music circles. Henderson remembers her first encounter with Farrand, back in her brat days.

"She terrified me," Henderson said. "We were introduced and she sort of scowled at me and went back to her whiskey. It was a different time — the Sister Mary days. There were six or seven girls in music in this town and she was one. I could barely play the guitar and was singing to my cat in my apartment then. She was a force, with palpable energy."

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*"I wish it were less of a struggle and sacrifice, but I won't compromise."*

— Amy Farrand

She smiles benignly about those days now. For a long time, she said, anger and resentment were her motivations. She wanted to show up everyone who doubted her or gave her flak because she was female.

"In the beginning, I was horrible on guitar. Horrible. But I'd be horrible for hours, until I was less horrible. Then I became not horrible. I was so dedicated to it, to getting better because I took so much crap for being a girl."

One day, she said, she proved her point to someone she felt needed it, and the satisfaction wasn't all it was cracked up to be. And it changed her.

"There were specific people who had taunted me and jacked with me, and I wanted them to watch me and go, 'Holy (bleep), look at that.' And it happened. And it wasn't that satisfying. It was kind of tragic, actually. They just kind of turned and sulked away. And I thought, 'Why was I carrying all that around? Why did I care what he said?'"

"My motivation got me to where I wanted to go, but the anger was silly."

Asked to put into perspective her 21 years in the local scene, she distilled the past thus: "Lots of wasted time. Lots of excess and partying. Lots of silliness. Lots of wood-shedding and learning by trial-and-error and smashing my forehead against a wall."

Asked about her frame of mind today: "I used to be cocky. Now I'm confident." Asked what she'd like to accomplish over the next several years: "I'd like to travel more. It's so much fun. You meet new people and learn new things. It's the only way to make money. You can't do it touring the U.S."

She recently lost her only part-time job but is getting by on her music gigs, having mastered the discipline of resourcefulness. "I have to hustle to do it. The good news is I've barely noticed the recession."

Nonetheless, she said she won't take a gig just for the money. "I say 'no' more often," she said. "I don't want to waste time on things I don't really like. I want to do things I really love, that I care about."

In other words, create music or start projects that touch or arouse or offend or hush a crowded room. Indulge in art that ignores rules, that leaves an impression, a mark, a stain or a scar.

## FUNDRAISERS

Atlantic Fadeout, including band member Amy Farrand, performs at 8:30 Friday night at Midwestern Musical Co.,

1830 Locust St. John Velghe and His Prodigal Sons perform at 7 p.m. The event is part of the two-day Apocalypse Meow fundraiser for the Musicians Health Care Fund for local musicians. A piece of artwork by Peregrine Honig from the Bravo network's "Work of Art" will be auctioned off on the second night of the fundraiser, Saturday at the Riot Room, 4048 Broadway.

**Other shows:** This week's Weirdo Wednesday Supper Club is from 7 to 9 p.m. at Davey's Uptown, 3402 Main St. The Shotgun Idols will perform Nov. 7 at Crosstown Station, 1522 McGee St. Farrand will perform Nov. 11 at Elaine McMilian's Songwriter's Showcase at the Czar Bar, 1533 Grand Blvd. American Catastrophe will perform Nov. 12 at Davey's Uptown.

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