

## Hanna Fox Interview



### Interview: Hanna Fox

The name Hanna Fox is not spoken around the drummergirl office so much as invoked--usually with a look upwards towards heaven and the accompanying words, "What. An amazing. Drummer." Best known for playing with the indie band Babe the Blue Ox, Hanna has racked up touring mileage like you wouldn't believe. The band (consisting of Hanna, Tim Thomas and Rose Thomson) has played with groups like Cibo Matto and Cake, and has rocked the stage in every big town in the country as well as the podunk towns you've never even heard of.

Currently, living and working in Brooklyn, Hanna sat down with drummer-girl and let us peer into her head. Here's what we found.

#### Just the Facts:

Name: Hanna Fox.

Age: 36.

Where she's from: Atlantic City, mainly.

Current bands: Babe the Blue Ox, of course. And I have a new band--Ducks on the Pond. I've been working with a fabulous musician named Miggy Littleton and my husband, Eddie Gormley who's also a drummer. I think Karla Schickele is a sort of part of the band too, but it's still in flux.

Previous bands: What previous bands? None. Is that funny?

Website: We're in limbo for now--Tim's working on it. But I did just get us a band

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#### **Drummergirl: What were you doing pre-Babe the Blue Ox?**

Hanna: Going to college. I went to college at Brown in Rhode Island with Tim and Rose of Babe the Blue Ox. That's how I knew them: from an electronic music class.

#### **DG: Were you a music major?**

Hanna: No. They were.

#### **DG: So you didn't play the drums before you met them?**

Hanna: No, I didn't. Here's the chronology: I grew up playing the violin and the piano. Got really sick of the piano 'cause everything I did sounded like bad Carly Simon and kind of stopped for a few years. And then I did this composition stuff in college which was...totally out--it was atonal, arhythmic, just these building blocks of sound. And that was great for me;

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it didn't sound like Carly Simon at all. And then I met Tim and Rose. I finished college and then I took up drums....Moved to New York, moved in with Rose, my bass player in Babe the Blue Ox. We didn't plan to be a band but we built a practice space in our attic. And she and Tim were collaborators, and they were looking for a drummer. They weren't looking for a drummer who didn't know how to play the drums--like me--but they just didn't find somebody to work with. And after awhile, they were there, I was there, we were playing...and after about a year, we realized we were a band.

**DG: And how did the name come about?**

Hanna: They're midwesterners and Babe the Blue Ox is a pretty big myth in the Midwest.

**DG: Do you remember any of the names you threw out?**

Hanna: We were B.O.X. first--we thought it was hysterical to have this name that was an acronym for nothing. Actually we traveled around as B.O.X. for a couple of years. Then there was a rapper named B.O.X. We just didn't care enough to bother with it, so we threw [out] the name.

**DG: How did you start playing the drums? What inspired you?**

Hanna: I don't know exactly what inspired me. I know I needed a new instrument. I tried it. It worked, it really worked. It just felt great.

**DG: Did you start off with a kit?**

Hanna: Actually most of the kit I have now is the first kit that I bought. It's this old Gretsch kit, I don't know exactly from what year, with, I guess, a Rogers sparkle bass drum and Gretsch toms--so it's a mixed kit--and a Ludwig metal snare. But this guy sold it to me for a couple hundred bucks because he wanted this new big huge giant ten-piece whatever. I was in Atlantic City at the time. The aesthetic was different, let's just say. But also, I mean, you know, young guys, they want that shiny kit.

**DG: So this is what you play now? It's lasted you this long?**

Hanna: Some of the pieces. And also right now I have drumkits in two places so I basically use everything that I've ever had. I have a rehearsal space with my band and that's in the basement of a friend's apartment. And then I have a kit in my house which is a very mix-and-match kit. But most of my main drumset now is a wooden Gretsch kit. I've filled in pieces.

**DG: Do you have any world music percussion stuff? Congas or other hand drums?**

Hanna I do have congas and I am definitely deeply influenced by Latin and African music but a lot of that is on drumkit. It's not like I made this idea up. I spend a lot of time putting layers of rhythms that would be played by groups of people onto the kit. I often use each limb to play a

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different percussionist's part.

**DG: So each limb is doing something radically different.**

Hanna: Right. It's hard. The patterns repeat themselves and you get used to certain relationships and I have, of course, my physical habits like any drummer. But if I hear something and I want to play something that I haven't played before, it's like rewiring and I take a long time to get the patterns together before they actually sound like music. You know, they sound like a math problem for a little while between the time I hear them and the time I can really play them. Back to the instrument question, I also play shekere (pronounced shake-a-ray), which is the gourd with the beads on it. And you know, I'll bang on anything. But those are the things I actually have facility with.

**DG: Have you ever gotten flak for being a female drummer?**

Hanna: Oh yeah. I guess it's a kind of funny thing on tour. Did you see the movie, Groundhog Day? Bill Murray has the same day over and over again. Touring's kinda like that. You know when somebody says some stupid thing to you and you go, "Damn, I wish I'd said...whatever"? On tour you get the chance because there'll be another idiot who's going to say the same stupid thing. The main thing is that people will come at me and go, "Now, I don't want to sound sexist, BUT...you're the best girl drummer I ever saw" or "you play really great for a girl." You know it's coming because it's, "I don't want to sound sexist BUT." Actually, my friend Harrison, I thought he came up with the best response which I've been using ever since. At first they'd say "I don't want to sound sexist" and I'd go, "Then don't." But Harrison had a better idea. When they say "I don't want to sound sexist," you go, "That is great. I am so glad to hear that."

**DG: (Laughing:) Basically, "Good for you. Cool!" And then walk away.**

Hanna: Yeah. It's like, "I'm so glad for you!"

**DG: On the flipside, do you ever get people coming up to you after shows who have positive things to say?**

Hanna: Yeah and women, men, girls, boys, I mean, it's--I don't really think that most people go talk to someone after a show. Or they might say hi and kinda scurry away or something. But yeah, definitely, it's nice. I get to do what I do and it happens to have a positive impact.

**DG: Didn't Babe the Blue Ox tour a lot?**

Hanna: We have toured a lot. We were trying to make something happen for ourselves. We were trying to play our music for people and that was the way to do it....So we toured as much as we could. For a year now we haven't toured at all. For the five years prior to that we toured at

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least six months out of every year.

**DG: When were you signed to a major label and how did that happen?**

Hanna: I'm not sure. We were signed to RCA, I guess, in 1997? 1998? We released records on Homestead, an indie label, before that and had done a lot of touring. We'd have an audience in a bunch of cities--a decent audience, indie rock style. And then this guy from RCA--he signed Dave Matthews Band, so I think he was the first A and R guy to make money for them in a long time--he took an interest in our band. I think that RCA wouldn't really sign a band like ours except that this guy could do what he wanted because he had just made so much money for the label.

**DG: Did things change?**

Hanna: Well, we made a really expensive record. We made two really expensive records. I have mixed feelings about that. I mean, it's a real privilege to spend a lot of time in the studio. But we sold the same number of records on the indie label [as we did on] RCA because we were never really a priority of theirs so they didn't promote it. So it still functioned the same way: we got our asses out on the road, people saw the band, liked the band (or didn't), whatever. Those major labels are looking for a big radio hit or nothing. So we had these expensive records but still functioned like an indie rock band.

**DG: Are you still with RCA?**

Hanna: No, that's over. Which I'm really glad about.

**DG: Was it with RCA that you went on tour with people like Cake and Cibo Matto?**

Hanna: No, Cibo Matto was before and I'm not sure how they heard about us. And Cake...I don't know how closely related to RCA the Cake thing was. I think that that came because a good friend of mine is friends with the singer from Cake and played our record for him in her living room. So I don't think that that's about RCA either.

**DG: What was the best part of touring?**

Hanna: I guess the overall thing is that I really know the country. I have an idea about the scope of things and what it is to drive through Nebraska and how the land changes between Pensicola, Florida and New Orleans. And all those transitions and what it is to drive through Arizona and over to San Diego, go up through the crazy desert mountains, hit the break, and there's all the cool air from the ocean. All over the country there are things like that. That to me is great. I love that. And meeting people from everywhere. And, you know, it just doesn't suck to be driving along with the sun setting on the snow in Wyoming and along comes a herd of things. And then playing all the time is fun. It's great.

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**DG: What's the greatest drum experience you've had?**

Hanna: Going to Cuba last year to study was unbelievable. But just probably working with Tim and Rose for ten years and developing this very intimate and thorough musical language with two other people.

**DG: Have you taken lessons?**

Hanna: I've taken lots and lots of lessons. I think there's lots of way to be a drummer and I wouldn't say that lessons are the way, but for me they work. I think that for me--and I think this could be true for other drummers--in a lot of musical situations there's a pressure to stay in the background. I think a lot of musicians and audiences view drummers only as kind of support for the rest of the music. And a lesson is time to focus on the drums only and to go, "Okay, what can this instrument do?" and not be serving other instruments, not even serving a larger composition. I think you should pay attention to that--that stuff is really important--but to see what the instrument does alone....I think a lot of drummers hardly ever play alone and it's valuable.

**DG: What do you think the drummers role is in a band?**

Hanna: It varies band to band.

**DG: How about in your own experience?**

Hanna: It covers a range. There's dance music where I need to make sure that backbeat's happening, or...in my band, I am definitely functioning a lot of times like this foundation. But our band has a lot of flexibility. Rose, my bass player, and I can lock into a groove, or she can go off while Tim, my ever-rhythmically oriented guitar player, and I lock in. Our band has room for any one of us to play lots of different roles. And I think compared to most drummers in the rock world, I'm probably not staying in the traditional role too much.

**DG: Who have you played with outside Babe the Blue Ox?**

Hanna: I've played with a guy named Chris Cochran and that was really cool. A long time ago I played a couple of John Zorn Games--you know, he has some games that he wrote--Cobra, is a this composition that he has that's a game with a bunch of rules. You do improvise, but there are rules to play, and it ends up being a piece. He didn't direct the ones that I did, other people did. But, you know, I've gone in and banged on some bells for some people's records but not too much playing. I did play on the new IDA record.

**DG: Who would you want to play with if you could?**

Hanna: I would like to play with a big, traditional, salsa band, like...just a little piece in a big, huge, latin dance band. See what that's like from the inside.

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**DG: What drummers have influenced your style?**

Hanna: I'm crazy for Zigaboo Modaliste, he's the drummer from The Meters. My drum teacher in New York, Rob Blumenthal, has been a major influence. And Changuito, my drum teacher in Cuba, changed my playing in ways I hadn't even considered before studying with him.

**DG: What are your strengths and weaknesses as a drummer?**

Hanna: I feel that my weakness is that, in a certain way, I'm not very free. I don't comfortably come up with all kinds of new stuff all the time on the spot. It takes me a long time to develop ideas. And strengths...I don't know. I think I listen pretty well and can get ideas from a lot of different places and turn them into drum grooves. I'm not very limited in my ideas of what can be a drum groove. Ultimately, I want people to at least have some feeling in their hips when they hear me play. But not that it would be straight-up dance music all the time--it might not be a traditional funk beat.

DG: What are your aims as a drummer? What kind of effect do you want it to have on people?

Hanna: I want them to feel it in their hips. I want to be...an integrated part of the music that moves people--emotionally or in one way or another. I guess that's it. I feel like the drums can really do that. I don't think people always know that the drums are what's affecting them. In Cuba, that's explicit, though, which is nice. People, I think, first identify with the voice and you know, I identify with the voice, but some of what they're feeling comes from other parts of the music.

**DG: Do you play other instruments?**

Hanna: I've gone back to playing piano, so in the last couple of years I've been playing piano and writing on the piano.

**DG: Do you plan to record these songs?**

Hanna: Yeah, I've got this little body of work, you know, my four track recordings that I've got at home. And this stuff I'm doing with Eddie and this other guy Miggy. Babe the Blue Ox, it's very collaborative. We share songwriting credits. Tim, the guitar player, is definitely a singer-songwriter guy and [he] has this whole body of work and he'll bring stuff in and say let's play this song and Rose and I will own pieces of it. And then other times we really build things together and I'm a co-writer. But I've been working a lot by myself in the last year which is great.

**DG: Do you plan on performing your own stuff?**

Hanna: Oh yeah.

**DG: Could you talk a bit about your involvement with Lava?**

Hanna: It's this dance troupe and their, I guess director, I don't know what she calls herself, is Sarah East Johnson. She's been a friend of mine for a long time. Their new piece--I think it's called Timberline--is about life

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above the treeline. Before that they were really focused on lava. But it's a group of women and their skills tend towards the very acrobatic. They're funny; they do a lot of faux wrestling and sort of silly stuff. They really kind of invented a sport for themselves. They have these incredibly muscly bodies and they manipulate each other a lot and they do a lot of trapeze stuff--slow motion trapeze stuff.

**DG: How does Babe the Blue Ox's music fit in with what they do?**

Hanna: Sarah asked us to do stuff for her probably eight years ago. She likes to have a rock and roll energy. I keep talking about my band like it's this big, arty thing, but arty pretensions aside, we sound like a rock band, we have a lot of energy. So we started just working with them, to see what they're up to and we write pieces for them.

**DG: Do you get inspired by what they're doing?**

Hanna: Yeah, but also the reason why Sarah keeps coming back to us is that what we do in general works for her. It's not like we have to become something that we're not. We stretch in a different way but it's not that hard for us to come up with things that they'll want because they came to us because they want what we do.

**DG: So what's this about going to law school? What made you want to go and get your law degree?**

Hanna: It's something I've been considering on and off for a long time and the time's right. They're a couple of reasons. What I do musically is generally not very verbal. Even if I'm writing lyrics--which I'm doing now and have done to some extent over the years with Babe the Blue Ox--I don't really think that music is the place for me to exist completely in a verbal or political way. I would really like to be very, very verbally and politically engaged. And this seems like a good way to do it, a potentially powerful way to do it.

I don't mean to say that music is not political. But the distinction for me is that music is extremely private. It's funny to say, because I perform in public and I love to perform, but it feels safe to me. It's not up for public debate, it's not part of a conflict. It's a controlled environment. I play with people I really trust. When I'm on stage I'm so protected behind the drums. Every once in a while there'll be a stage situation where my back is exposed and there were even a couple of instances where someone's touched me while I was playing--it freaked me out. Normally, when I play on stage, I feel really safe and insulated. I think with a career in law, I'm going to be around people I don't trust, in an out of control situation, and that's sort of the point. Music is so tender to me. I don't want it to be in the whole big badass world with all these villains.

**DG: What kind of law do you want to practice?**

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Hanna: I don't know exactly. I know I want to be a people's lawyer....A friend of mine has been talking to me about this foreclosure prevention project that he has. These sleazy lenders [loan money] to the retired nurse who owns her home at a totally usurious interest rate and she loses her house. And actually the loan is really owned by Citibank who's red-lined the district. I want to think about these things and I would like to have an effect on these kinds of things and we could play benefits until we're blue in the face but it's not the same as being involved in this other way.

**DG: If music doesn't serve that purpose for you, then what does it do?**

Hanna: As much as I love playing the piano and writing songs, I still am primarily a drummer. That's definitely where I feel centered and best. There's a very physical thing it does for me. I'm kind of all over the place and my energy can get really dissipated, and it centers me. My body and my brain will be in the same place and I make these compositions that ultimately become very simple. Like, I can have all of these complicated ideas but when I get them all together and really working they make sense to me. They sound sensible, they really flow, they're very complete, they create this world that is kind of controlled. There's movement within it but I understand the relationships between all the pieces and I find it really satisfying.

**DG: It sounds like even though you'll be in law school you'll still make time for drumming.**

Hanna: I'm definitely worried--I mean, I'm not going to have as much time as I have now.

**DG: How often do you play?**

Hanna: Every day. Maybe one day a week I don't play sometimes, but in general every day.

**DG: For how long?**

Hanna: It really varies and what it is really varies. After I came back from Cuba I was practicing drums, doing specific patterns that I had learned from this guy, for an hour or two every day. Then rehearse with my band a couple times a week for a few hours. Now I'm working at the piano a lot, you know, [doing] other stuff.

**DG: But doing something musical every day.**

Hanna: Pretty much.

**DG: What's Babe the Blue Ox working on now? Touring? A new cd?**

Hanna: I don't think we're going to go on tour much, or maybe not at all. We're kind of done with that. We're going to play in New York. We've written this whole, hour-and-a-half long thing for this dance piece that's in

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August with Lava, so that's a lot of new material. And that's on August 12th and we're having a show on August 13th at Tonic.

**DG: Do you have a day job? And if so, what is it?**

Hanna: I'm an editor for a [corporate] magazine. It's fine, it's flexible, the people are very nice...But I don't want to be part of those nasty, big corporate things and I feel like most of the well-paying, part-time work in town is connected to them because they can afford it. I don't really want IBM or American Express or anybody else like that funding my musical life. I would like the whole system to be like a little bit cleaner than that. I don't think it can be pure but I'd like it to be a little less sleazy.

**DG: If you weren't a drummer what do you think you'd be?**

Hanna: I'd probably be either playing another instrument or making some other kind of art, visual art or something...and going to law school.

