

KEITH RICHARDS. DAVID BOWIE. MICK JAGGER. To the casual music fan, these names represent an indelible testament to the glowering peacock swagger of '70s-arena rock.

Story by Joey Hood

Photos by Chris Franko

But to MTSU alum Carla Rhodes, these men are her bottomless muses to rock 'n' roll puppetry. And then there's public television's *Lambchop & Friends* ventriloquist, Shari Lewis

"I saw Shari Lewis on television when I was 9

years old and that was enough to convince me that I wanted to be a ventriloquist,"

Rhodes said in a recent interview from her New York City apartment.

"As a teenager, I got obsessed with classic rock 'n' roll, but I learned to play guitar and put the puppets aside for a bit," she added.

Rhodes, a 23-year-old, corkscrew-haired waif with painted red lips and spitfire moxie, made her puppet love for the Rolling Stones known to Richards and Jagger themselves.

In 2005, with her Richards-inspired "Keef" puppet in tow, Rhodes said she crashed the Stones press conference at New York's prestigious Juilliard School of Music. With a precariously placed cigarette dangling from Keef's lips, Rhodes said she nearly upstaged the veteran rockers and the tongue-in-cheek debacle later garnered press coverage on VH1's week-in-review reel.

A 2004 mass communi-

cations graduate, Rhodes now moonlights as an in-demand graphic designer for a sundry of Madison Avenue companies by day and milks her brazen brand of caustic puppetry to Manhattan cabaret clubs by night.

Her off-kilter humor and sly pop culture references have attracted clubgoers as varied as Whoopi Goldberg, Paul Shaffer and "Sex and the City's" Chris Noth.

But while the Big Apple's alternative weeklies can't fathom a review of Rhodes' work without employing some form of the word "whimsy," Rhodes said she doesn't see herself as your typical ventriloquist.

According to a 1996 *New York Times* feature, then-teenage Rhodes told reporter Abby Ellin that "People associate vents with crazies—and most are. But I don't talk to my puppet unless I'm onstage and I don't eat with her."

While a world of difference and student-loan payments separate that fresh-faced whippersnapper and the seasoned young adult, Rhodes still approaches the task at-hand with a ferocious verve and unwavering dedication.

"It's very hard. I don't get much sleep," Rhodes said.



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Talking the TALK

MTSU grad Carla Rhodes took her ventriloquist show on the road: NYC to be exact

Rhodes said she tried her hand at metropolitan living initially with manageable month-long increments, later culminating in her full transition to a snug Greenwich Village loft.

"Every time I had a break during college, I'd use the time wisely and come up to New York to perform and meet people. This helped make the transition very smooth because by the time I was a senior at MTSU, I had a whole network of friends in New York," she said.

Rhodes used her contacts as leverage, eventually landing an internship with MTV. While at the cable network, the rubber-faced comedienne unleashed Keef on the Manhattan studios and appeared on MTV 2's "The

Fugliest Men in Rock" countdown, where she voiced deadpan witticisms such as "A.J. from The Backstreet Boys needs to shave that growth!"

Rhodes admits that the



Rhodes and a rooster: doing their unique chicken dance.

permanent post-college move to New York was difficult, since she had \$500 in her pocket.

"New York City is very expensive and unless you're wealthy, it's going to be rough. You really have to budget your money and watch your spending," she said.

But with her fresh spin on a vaudevillian mainstay attracting the attention of martini-sipping Manhattanites, Rhodes doesn't seem to be suffering from small-fish-in-big-pond syndrome too terribly.

"I don't regret a moment. It's very fulfilling to chase your dreams," Rhodes said. "I slept on people's couches and roughed it for a bit and things kind of started to work themselves out like they always do." **MP**