



# HEART & SKULL

Music, motherhood and macabre fine art: HEATHER GABEL is half of St. Augustine's rock-'n'-roll power couple.  
By Nick McGregor. Photos by Walter Coker

One look at Heather Gabel's morbidly fantastical collages and paintings might make you think she's a tortured soul. Severed limbs sit in elegant repose. Cartoonish lasers shoot from the eyes of mutated silhouettes. A devilish-looking mother on all fours seizes her baby in her teeth. Anatomical illustrations, anthropological bone formations and copious helpings of spilled blood add ghastly flair to otherwise beautiful studies of the nude human form.

But for an artist so seemingly obsessed with gruesome,

gothic themes, Gabel is surprisingly warm, easygoing and enthusiastic. The Ontario native and recent St. Augustine transplant radiates a girlish charm when she's discussing her work, sheepishly attributing initial artistic success to a Father's Day flier created during her childhood, at her Montessori school. And though she's played many parts in her 33 years, from accomplished student to punk-rock T-shirt designer to full-time merchandise slinger to in-demand fine artist, Gabel's latest role — mother of 1-year-old Evelyn, her first child with

Against Me! frontman and husband Tom Gabel — seems to have brought her full circle.

The pair are definitely a new kind of power couple for the Ancient City — more tattoos than Minorcan heritage families, certainly, and more cultural clout than most denizens of the local art scene. At the same time, they seem determined to just fit in, making appearances at neighborhood block parties, attending concerts like the recent Dead Prez show, and participating as equals in local artistic endeavors.



**In a male-dominated musical world, Heather Gabel stood out, for her visually arresting artwork, her kick-ass attitude behind the merch table and, well, let's be honest — also for making plenty of dudes in the mosh pit take pause. How could a tall, tattooed, talented and beautiful woman not?**

In fact, the pair holds their first joint show next week, at St. Augustine's new Anchor Boutique. Heather Gabel will show and sell her artwork and graphic designs, while Tom performs an acoustic set in the boutique's courtyard. The show demonstrates the city's cultural evolution, from being the home of "The Cross & Sword" to a place where the performance is truly cutting-edge. It also speaks to the couple's desire to fully inhabit the neighborhood they now call home. Having toured internationally and lived in many regions in North America, both were ultimately drawn to St. Augustine. Says Gabel, "We felt like out of anywhere, this was somewhere we belonged."

**H**eather Gabel grew up in Windsor, Ont., a nub of southern Canada that's actually south of Detroit, and directly across the Detroit River from that industrial city.

Though still a Canadian citizen, she's lived in the U.S. since she was two, after her parents moved with her and two younger siblings across the river to live in the Motor City. She took an early and precocious interest in art, earning the accolades of teachers in grade school, and participating in regional and national exhibits in high school. She won a photography scholarship to the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, where she studied for a year. Then, at 19, she transferred to Columbia College Chicago, where she complemented her camera skills with a major in fine art.

While working as a bike messenger, she struck up a fortuitous friendship with Matt Skiba, Rob Doran and Glenn Porter, three musicians who'd just started a fledgling punk band called Alkaline Trio.

"I was in school, they were in school, and they were like, 'Hey, make us a flier,'" Gabel says.

"Then I made a few T-shirts, and then their band kept getting more and more popular, which led to more and more work for me. Once they started touring full-time, I went with them, and over the course of 10 years, that was my job — selling their stuff all over the world, and designing new T-shirts every time they went out on tour."

Her popular work with Alkaline Trio — she created their iconic heart-and-skull logo, inspiring the band to name its record company Heart & Skull — helped Gabel land assignments for other punk-rock outfits. Some were big names (Rancid, My Chemical Romance, AFI, Green Day), some were decidedly underground (Fake Problems, Reggie & The Full Effect, The Start). In a male-dominated musical world, Heather Gabel stood out, for her visually arresting artwork, her kick-ass attitude behind the merch table and, well, let's be honest — also for making plenty of dudes in the mosh pit take

pause. How could a tall, tattooed, talented and beautiful woman not?

Against Me! frontman Tom Gabel surely wasn't the only hopelessly romantic punk to fall hard for the artist formerly known as Heather Hannoura. "I was a fan of Heather's artwork before I even met her," Tom says. "The first time I saw her in a magazine, I remember remarking on her picture: 'Huh. OK!' And then a few years down the road, I met her, we got married and then we had a daughter."

If you haven't guessed by now, Heather Gabel isn't your typical suburban mom. Her tastefully arranged tattoos include plenty of scissors, birds and skulls. Almost all boast clean lines, a funky sense of nostalgia and a proliferation of black. The art on her skin is an accurate representation of the art she creates, which goes much further than just T-shirts and logos. She began painting seriously when home off tour. Usually when she finished something,

# HEART & SKULL



she just gave it away. But while she was living in Oakland, a friend saw her work and asked if she'd take part in an exhibit he was curating. Since then, she's had something in a gallery almost every month, and every year, she mounts at least two solo shows, including exhibits in Chicago, Minneapolis, New York, Berlin and Belfast, along with Los Angeles, where the Gabels moved last year after spending most of 2008 in St. Augustine.

"We couldn't decide where we wanted to live," Heather says, "so since Tom was recording [Against Me!'s 2009 album 'White Crosses'], and I was due with Evelyn right when they were supposed to be finished, we figured, 'Let's live in L.A. for a while.'"

"We liked it," she continues, "but we just liked it more here in St. Augustine." The couple moved back this past September.

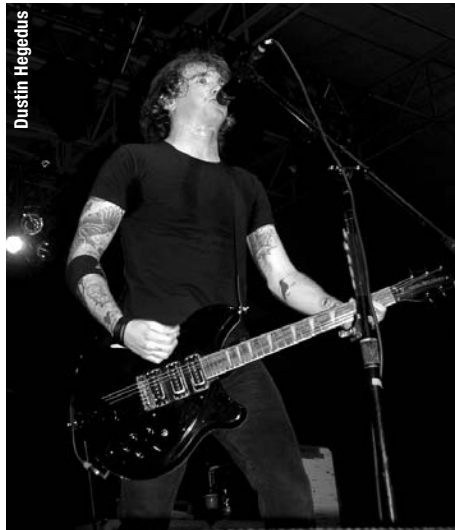
Her husband, a Florida native and longtime Gainesville resident, agrees. "The baby had a lot

to do with it," he says. "L.A. was fun, but after we had our daughter, it seemed like St. Augustine was a much calmer and better environment in which to raise a family." Beyond that, Tom says that Northeast Florida has helped both of their professional lives as well. "As a musician, I need space to be loud and make noise. And Heather's dealing in something that's physical — she needs space to create her paintings and graphic designs."

So far, Heather believes her new surroundings have been beneficial to her art, and her morbid imagery meshes well with the nation's Oldest City.

"St. Augustine has sort of a violent past," she laughs. "It's one of the most haunted cities in America — although I'm not seeing things yet, which is kind of a let-down. I at least want to see a ghost! But a lot of things like that have been running through my head in my time living here, and that does come out in my work."

# HEART & SKULL



**The pair are definitely a new kind of power couple for the Ancient City — more tattoos than Minorcan heritage families, certainly, and more cultural clout than most denizens of the local art scene.**

exclusively for a solo exhibit at downtown St. Augustine's Anchor Boutique. Opened by jewelry maker and first-time business owner Laurel Baker in July, Anchor's aesthetic is rooted in historical relics, providing an appropriate backdrop for Gabel's timeless artwork.

"Treasure hunting is the inspiration for the feel and style of the boutique," Baker says. "My dad was a treasure hunter, and a lot of my pieces incorporate real Spanish coins and buckles from the 1500s through the 1800s that were found here in St. Augustine."

In addition, Baker has stocked Anchor with antique clocks, vintage busts and retro pencil and watercolor sketches from Italy, providing more than enough bohemian chic to stand out in St. Augustine's crowded gallery lineup. The boutique has allowed plenty of local artists to exhibit their wares. "We've had Ty Williams display his paintings, Matthew Batty show his folk art wood burnings, and a Flagler College student exhibit her steampunk jewelry designs," Baker says. "We've also had real intimate acoustic musical sets in the amazing courtyard behind the boutique, and the Gabels just happened to be there one of those nights. They actually extended the offer to me — Heather said she already wanted to show her art here. And once Tom saw the built-in stage in the courtyard, he decided he wanted to come play music as well."

Surprisingly, in all their years together, that kind of "couples show" is something Heather and Tom have never successfully lined up. "Usually when I have a show, he's in another city," Heather laughs. "He can never come ... So this is going to be great. It should be really fun to do something with him."

Given Tom Gabel's national and international popularity, Heather allows that crowd control could be an issue. "We just have to figure out a way for it to not get too crazy, because the courtyard only holds about 75 people," she says. "We'll probably just put his name on the flier instead of 'Against Me!'" (In fact, when the fliers were printed, they said simply: "An Evening with The Gabels.")

Though Gabel has exhibited in more

Florida wasn't always her first choice, however, even if it may have secretly been Tom's. "Back when I was touring, I never really liked Florida," she admits. "It was always so hot, with so many bugs, and it seemed like you were here forever because it's such a big state. But after I came to visit a few times, I was like, 'You know, this is kind of charming!'"

While Heather has adjusted to the idea of Florida, she doesn't think Tom ever considered living anywhere else. "He knew he wanted to be back here, and I can see why. It's so beautiful living by the water."

The Gabels' sunny St. Augustine digs aren't watering down the dark side of her artwork, though. She describes her latest batch of creations as "definitely fantastical." She says it's a shift from the more surrealist stuff she'd been doing, and clearly a new direction. "Usually when a shift like that happens, I don't notice it right away, or it takes a year to reveal itself. But now it's immediate."

Gabel attributes that bizarre spike in her creativity to becoming a mother. "Since having a baby, I don't really have any spare time, so when I do, everything's sort of a rush," she says. "That's why I'm doing more collages, because ideas can come out in spurts. I can leave, come back to it, and it's very spontaneous, where with painting, I have to think about things for a lot longer."

On Dec. 17, local art fans get a first look at those collages, along with Heather Gabel's fresh paintings, T-shirts and prints, all created

# HEART & SKULL

Gabel says her upcoming show at Anchor Boutique will have a mix of work. “I’ll have expensive stuff for sale, but I’m trying to do a lot of work so that all sorts of people can come and get something.”



countries than most of us have visited, she’s still giddy about her first Northeast Florida appearance. “I’m so excited about this show,” she gushes. “Anchor Boutique is so different than anything else in St. Augustine. It’s really brave and ambitious of Laurel to do something like that downtown. Yeah, she’s selling jewelry, but it’s all handmade; she chooses different designers to show their work; and it’s a cool, contemporary, creative space.” The setting is more than just aesthetically pleasing, Gabel says, it’s accessible.

“It allows me to be a little more laid-back than I usually am at a gallery,” she explains. “I’ll have expensive stuff for sale, but I’m trying to do a lot of work so that all sorts of people can come and get something.”

The Anchor exhibit is just the first of what Gabel hopes will be many local artistic endeavors. She co-curated a group exhibition in Chicago this past October, and hopes to get more involved in bringing other artists’ work here. She and Tom have discussed the possibility of opening their own art venue here one day, though neither has time to devote to a gallery right now. But Heather Gabel likes the idea of guest curating “when the opportunity presents itself.”

“Curating is really rewarding in a totally different way,” she says. “Just seeing different things is inspiring, and I think St. Augustine could really use that,” she says. “I’m hoping that if my solo exhibit goes well, I can use it as a springboard to see if any other places are interested.”

No matter what the Gabels do while living in Northeast Florida, it’s clear that they both feel like they’ve finally come home. “Heather and I were comparing St. Augustine to Gainesville, which is considered a progressive college community,” Tom says. “But Flagler gives you that same kind of energy, that constant renewal every school year of fresh blood coming in and old blood going out. And as far as restaurants go, especially for us since we eat a vegan diet, St. Augustine totally has a better scene — The Floridian, Present Moment, Manatee Cafe. Then you have record stores like Music Matters and Budget Records, a couple of cool venues, and kids that are excited to be doing stuff.”

Even given the many years she spent living in big cities and touring the world, Heather agrees. “For as small as St. Augustine is, it never feels like the town is empty. We don’t have that much free time with a baby, but I feel like in St. Augustine, you have more time to reflect on things, and that tremendously influences both of our work.”

“It’s kind of like a Beach Boys philosophy: Move to the beach, put your toes in the sand, and write songs,” Tom adds. “And, fuck, man, it’s one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been in the world.” □

**Nick McGregor**

*“An Evening with Heather and Tom Gabel” is held at Anchor Boutique, 210 St. George St., C2, St. Augustine, from 5-11 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 17. 808-7078. Heather Gabel’s recent work is on display through January.*