



So You Think You Wanna Be a Rock Shrink

LISA THALER, *Class of 1987*

A former social worker turned psychotherapist channels her passion for music into a profession counseling rock stars

by Jessica Levine '13

All the world's a stage for class of '87 alumna Lisa Thaler, whose unique career combines the seemingly incompatible fields of psychotherapy and rock music.

When Thaler, a band psychotherapist, first set foot in the halls of Amherst, she had very different aspirations for her future.

"I was an English major at Amherst College and always thought I would become a writer," Thaler said.

Despite her choice of major, Thaler was intrigued by the sociology courses she took at the College, particularly the study of "what made human beings tick [and] how outside influences factor in on the individual," she said.

Now, years later, she is grateful for the curriculum flexibility that Amherst allows its students because it led her to develop an interest that would one day shape her career.

"I enjoyed the liberal arts experience of being able to take classes in whatever interested me, and I took advantage of being able to take courses in the other schools in the area," Thaler said. "I started out focused on English and, yet, here I am as a successful psychotherapist."

Social Work in New York

After receiving her B.A. from Amherst, Thaler put her interest in English aside to pursue further education in social work. She received her Master's Degree in Social Work (MSW) from New York University and went on to post-graduate training at New York's Women's Therapy Centre Institute. In 1991, Thaler opened a private psychotherapy practice in New York City that she still maintains

today.

In addition to running her practice, Thaler remains involved with the organizations that provided her graduate and post-graduate education.

"I am on the faculty of The Women's Therapy Centre Institute and teach and supervise other psychotherapists in training," she said. "I have run groups for The Women's Therapy Centre Institute, New York University's Counseling Services and for The Renfrew Center of New York."

Thaler specializes in the treatment of eating disorders and finds her efforts worthwhile.

"With the eating disorder treatment that I do, I also help save people's lives; [it's] a very rewarding experience, indeed," she said. "I've very much enjoyed my career thus far. It is an intimate, heartfelt and profound privilege to be a part of someone's personal growth."

Luise Eichenbaum, Thaler's mentor and co-founder of The Women's Therapy Centre Institute, met Thaler "in the mid-1990s as her teacher when she was doing her post-graduate training at The Women's Therapy Centre Institute," Eichenbaum said.

Eichenbaum is proud of the difficult but rewarding work that Thaler does.

"Lisa is a committed, thoughtful and creative psychotherapist," she said. "She chose to work with what some in our profession consider to be a very difficult population of women who suffer from disordered eating and body self-hatred. I have great respect for the work she does."

Jumping into Music Late

As she built her psychotherapy career,

Thaler simultaneously fostered her longtime interest in music.

"I always have been an avid fan of rock-and-roll," she said. "Unlike most people who pick up an instrument as a child or in college, I started playing guitar when I was 28. I had done some singing in junior high and high school but took it up more seriously in my late 20s."

Thaler's music became more than just an individual hobby when she founded her own band 10 years ago.

"I came to the realization that playing music was more fun than just about anything else one could do, especially as an adult," she said. "I founded my band, Frisky Business, in 1999 and continue to play with them in various venues in New York City. In my free time, I go to hear live music as much as possible, [and] I try to play music as much as time will allow."

Rock n' Roll and Psychotherapy

Initially, Thaler kept her career in psychotherapy and her affinity for rock music relatively separate. However, just recently, her career took a unique turn when she decided to combine psychotherapy and the stage.

"Recently, it began to occur to me that I would like to do therapy with rock bands," Thaler said. "All bands have issues, from the most superficial and mundane, to the most profound and destabilizing. Like in any relationship (or family), communication styles and ability to resolve conflict are of supreme importance."

In addition to her therapy work with band members, Thaler is developing a project on band dynamics that she hopes to present at the 2010 South by Southwest Music Festival in Austin, Texas.

"I am in the process of interviewing musicians and music industry people about their experiences with band dynamics — what, from their experiences, do they see as the key factors that make a band work vs. implode; it is fascinating," she said.

Singer/songwriter Jim Dawson, Thaler's friend and vocal trainer, describes Thaler's job as "rock shrink", a brilliant and timely and overdue concept suggesting that musical artists can recognize and overcome personal obstacles that might impede them in their work."

"Being in a band, especially as that relates to climbing the 'success ladder', can often prove very difficult," Dawson said. "Adding in to that is the idea that many of these artists are young and in-experienced, and that can lead to a deadly combination of elements that can cause the band to 'break-up'. One of the things that music 'types' look for in the signing process of a band is how secure and solid the band members are with each other, and Lisa's concept now brings opportunities to 'work out differences' among band mates before those issues lead to the group breaking up. For me, her work promises — in time — to be the model in the industry. Certainly 'back in the day,' many of my bands could have used her services."

Being a Rock Shrink

According to her Web site, rockshrink.com, Thaler's job as a band psychotherapist is to "provide a calming presence and a stable, safe environment in which [to] explore problems and improve communication and conflict resolution ... [and help] formulate and accomplish band goals, always maintaining a focus on the music."

"I am marketing myself to bands, management companies, recording studios, etc. and am very eager to start doing clinical work with bands," Thaler said. "My 20 years of experience as a social worker, in conjunction with 10 years of experience in fronting my band, as well as the information I've garnered from my research project, have me primed to be an excellent therapist for rock bands."

Dawson agrees that Thaler is well-suited

for the job, despite the difficult nature of the music industry.

"It's not possible to work with a student on their voice without getting a good idea of what kind of person they are in 'real' life, and Lisa was no exception; I found her to be a remarkable woman," he said. "She is strong, compassionate, open, highly professional, quite intelligent, charming, funny, and she proved through our work that she's a very hard worker. While it remains unfortunate to state, being a woman in the 'music business' can often be highly challenging and requires a certain strength that not all possess, yet Lisa took her knocks with the best of them and always managed to get back up off the canvas to be ready for another round. Her professional tenacity always allows her to move forward, and I do admire her for that."



Courtesy of Lisa Thaler

Staying open-minded allowed Thaler to pursue a career that combined her interests.

It would have been very easy for her to simply continue on with her 'regular career' and forget 'the music thing', but she did not and has not."

Costume designer Julie Rae Engelsman, an Amherst class of '88 alumna and Thaler's best friend from Amherst, has remained close to Thaler for the past 22 years and provides a similar account of her perseverance.

"The best description I have always made about Lisa is that she is my one friend in life who is my 'go-with-the-flow' friend," Engelsman said. "She has a wonderful light spirit about her, a great laugh, and she rarely — if ever — takes anything too seriously or personally. She is very in-tune with the inner workings of her body, both physically and mentally."

Thaler said she credits Amherst with shaping her character in ways that are "invaluable" to her today.

"What I remember most about my time spent at Amherst was my quest to figure out who I was, what I liked, who I wanted to be," Thaler said. "I learned to be open-minded. Amherst taught me to be intellectually curious, how to interact with other intelligent classmates and professors and how to value my own intelligence."

As a graduate of the College, Thaler advises current students to "try to get the most out of their time at Amherst."

"Embrace the liberal arts experience and take classes in everything," she added. "You never know how a particular professor or class will influence your thinking and your career path. Don't pigeonhole yourself into thinking you have to pick any particular career just because that's what everyone else is doing; choose your own path."



Courtesy of Lisa Thaler

Thaler sings and rocks out on guitar with fellow musicians in her band, Frisky Business.