

Those Clowns at Old Yeller

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On the south-west side of Detroit there is an old house with a history that is rich in diversity and co-operation. It was given the name Old Yeller by current owners Alyssa and Kristen, who continue in a long lineage of occupants that came to Detroit to build the life they dreamed of. Alyssa and Kristen have a deep appreciation for the story of this house, which reflects that of the surrounding neighborhood, and even the city overall. The house was built in 1891 during the onset of the automotive industry, and served as a multi-family home to immigrants from Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Lithuania and Latin America for over one-hundred and thirty years. People these days are drawn there to party and offer their skills in painting, installation, lighting and sound design to create a space that is as much for the community as it is for entertainment. Old Yeller turned ten years old this summer, and a couple of weeks ago, they threw their fourth annual Underwater Clown Rodeo. I had the opportunity to interview Alyssa and Kristen about their experience as tenants, property owners, and community leaders in Detroit who have transformed their home into a safe space for creative freedom and expression...

Ashley Cook: Okay, so what was the date of the most recent Underwater Clown Rodeo?

Alyssa: August 9th, my birthday. The party started at 9 p.m. and people stayed till the morning.

AC: So you guys told me earlier that you own this house, and that you lived here as tenants before you bought the house from your landlord. What year did you buy it?



Underwater Clown Rodeo 2025, flyer by Alyssa

A: We bought it in 2021, started renting in 2015. He actually wasn't even looking to sell it. We kinda sprung it on him. He was a neglectful, hands-off landlord. His wife inherited the house from her family who moved here in 1950. We were actually the first sale since then. They were trying to keep it as a rental but doing shifty shit, had an overall lack of care and interest in the house, and eventually felt overwhelmed by it.

AC: Were you throwing these sorts of parties here when you were renting? Or was that only until after you bought it that you started throwing the parties?

A: We've always been throwing parties here but they've evolved and become a lot more intentional, community and art focused.

Kristen: Yeah, we used to have a lot of bands play shows here.

AC: What was the first party that you would say had a theme?

K: We always did a Halloween cover show and we have always been into costumes. Intergalactic Prom was an early one, I think that was 2019.

AC: It seems like you guys are interested in themes from fantasy stories.

A: Yeah I'm really into the "bringing out your inner child" type of thing.

AC: Do either of you guys have a history of theater?

K: Not exactly. I'm a teacher at a high school in the neighborhood. I feel like teaching is a job that forces you to use your creative brain often. But I've had a lot of odd and interesting jobs. Alyssa and I met working at the Fillmore. This used to be a Fillmore house; at one point I think everyone who lived here worked there too.

A: I wasn't in theater but I made lots of strange DIY props and home videos growing up, and took creative writing, acting and interpretation and dance classes. And yeah. We were kind of jammed in here. It was janky. Now it's just us two living here long term. It's nice to have a lot of space, but we move all of the furniture when we have parties. We don't have a lot of large parties. We don't want to make our neighbors mad because they've been so supportive of us. It's also a lot of work.



Shark Dentist 2023 by Morgan



Alyssa at the 2025 Underwater Clown Rodeo by Ari Bardallis

K: And it's not just moving the stuff that's a lot of work. It's decorations, the whole production of it, like the stress of organizing who's coming, who's performing...At this point, it's established. So we don't want to be lazier about the party. Like we want to have good bands, good DJs. We want to have food. We want to have everything that everybody needs.

AC: And it's free, right?

A: Yeah. We'd never charge a cover.

AC: So how do you guys financially support the party?

A: We find ways. Arts and Scraps gave us a scholarship, almost all of our art supplies came from them over the years. Friends donate a lot of supplies, their time and skills. We spend a lot of time making decor with cheap, free or donated materials. We do pay out of pocket for stuff and then make some money back through t-shirt sales and donations.

AC: So the Underwater Clown Rodeo is annual, right? Do you have any other parties that are regular?

A: Well, there is the Halloween party, which we might take off this year. We did the ten year anniversary photo show for Old Yeller in June too.

AC: Alyssa, what's your background then?

A: I've always been a weird art freak but I didn't know what I wanted to get into at community college. I decided to do ceramics, so I ended up working in that field for like a decade. I started working in the music industry about the same time at various venues and festivals. I worked in the art department at fests for years doing backstage/vip decor and that really inspired me to bring what I was learning into decorating my own space. I've been into decorating spaces and silly parties since I was a kid, I would always pick weird themes for my birthday parties.



Kristen Sharkhead at the 2023 Underwater Clown Rodeo by Jason Rho

AC: How many people are usually involved in throwing the Underwater Clown Rodeo?

A: It's so hard to gauge; I'd say several dozens of hands were involved. It's like a shifting group from year to year. Some friends are able to help more consistently, and even if others are here only one year, their art pieces are used again in following years.

K: For sure. And the community aspect of our parties is partly why they are so successful. You have all these people who care and want to participate, and then you have all their friends who want to come check it out and it just grows like that. And people can find a niche at our parties that works for them - art, music, management, food, community care, performance, pranks, activism - whatever it is, our space is open.

AC: So this is the fourth year of the Underwater Clown Rodeo, as you mentioned.

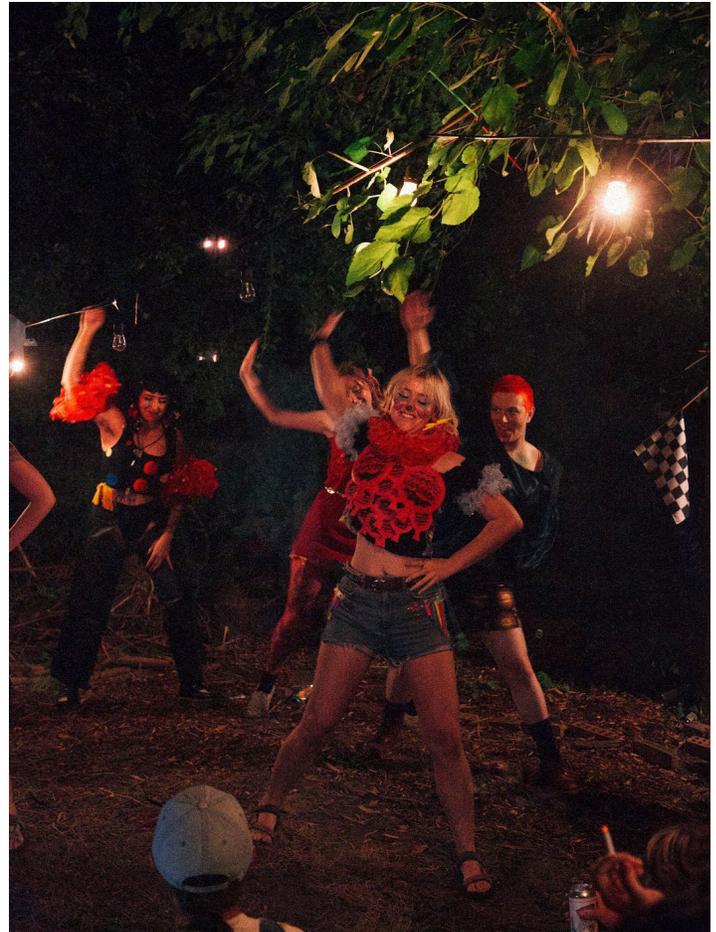
A: Yes, but we also had a Clown Disco in 2019. We also had several other Leo parties that had no theme. We did Jello wrestling for my birthday one year. The Leo parties are birthday parties for friends that were born in Leo season. Myself, Gwen, Nolan, Grace, Alex, etc.

AC: Okay. Cool. So, what's your favorite thing about the Underwater Clown Rodeo?

A: I think it's how people really seem to drop their egos when they come in. Everyone is really goofy, and it's hard to take yourself seriously when we're all dressed really silly.

AC: I'm sure there's so much to say about the house and the parties. Is there anything you would want to say specifically?

A: I think one of the most important things that allows us to exist as we do, aside from the overwhelming support of our talented friends, is our relationship with our neighbors. We've been getting compliments from neighbors who either attended or enjoyed from afar seeing everyone's costumes and hearing the fun. Our neighbors that have lived here for 65 years, a couple in their 80's, popped in the backyard during set up and told us to make sure we turn it up extra loud so they can hear haha. We are blessed.



Napoleon Dynamite Dance at the 2023 Underwater Clown Rodeo
by Mark Linehan



Underwater Clown Rodeo 2024 by Jason Rho

K: Our neighbor and good friend Eddie did security for us at parties for years. He passed in 2023 but he's still looking over the neighborhood.

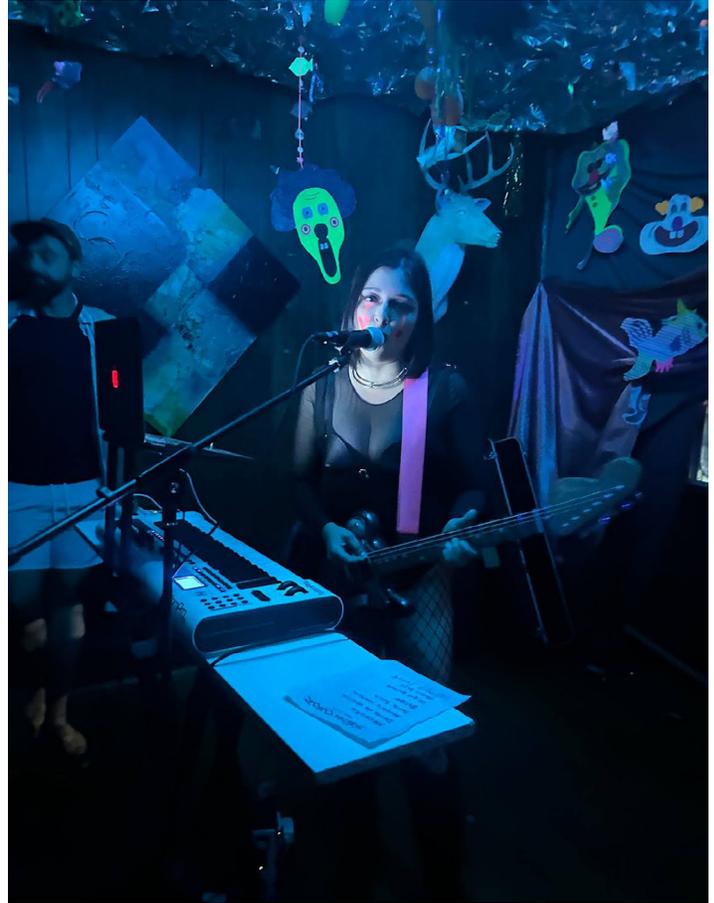
AC: How did you both end up in Detroit?

K: I always wanted to be in Detroit. I went to school in Ann Arbor and I knew I'd move here after. When I was in school, I lived in a student co-op and that set me up for my later housing endeavors. I came of age in a cooperative environment where you have to share the tasks, not be shitty to your roommates, vote democratically, respect the structures and rules of the house. After that, I lived with friends on a big property in Southfield, we called it "the Farm", and though we were renters, we needed clear organization because we had big goals - renovate the house and the greenhouses. That project fell through, but then a friend told me he knew of a yellow house for rent in Southwest, and I was immediately in. We filled the house and I fought to keep strong organization and the cooperative spirit rolling because I believe that's the only way to keep a big house with a lot of moving people and pieces afloat.

AC: And that kind of structure is not necessarily inherent, especially in the society where you have the nuclear family and outside of that there is hierarchy that reduces this opportunity for collective agency.

K: Yeah, that is one thing that I wanted to preserve and keep building with the house. A sense of community. And even though it is just the two of us now, we host workaways, couchsurfing, offer rooms temporarily and work trades, so people are coming in and out.

It is important for us to acknowledge that this house is not just us. It's a community of people who have helped out here and hung out here and lived here - we've had over forty



Selma OXOR at the 2024 Underwater Clown Rodeo by Alyssa



Sunrise at the 2025 Underwater Clown Rodeo by Andrea Montiel de Shuman

roommates over the past 10 years. That's how we have been able to have these parties, and that's what makes this house so special. We also have amazing neighbors, who support us and we support them.

AC: I was just thinking, maybe that it is because Detroit is how it is that these kinds of spaces can exist, but then I'm like, no, they're kind of everywhere...right? Using your living space as a place to hold events...I guess that's like a good leeway into sort of the "moral of the story", which is to encourage more people to throw parties or community events in their spaces.

A: Yeah, do these kinds of things we're doing, talk to your neighbors, invite your friends over to make crafts, be silly.

K: Detroit is special in that way though. I was talking to my friend who lives in New York about this. She came into town for the party, and she was like, the thing about Detroit that is so nice is that people invite you over to their house. That doesn't really happen in New York because they have these tiny little apartments. In Detroit, many people have entire houses with backyards; spaces where they can actually host people.



Alex playing bass and running sound at the 2019 Clown Disco by Kristen Sutter



Gwen and Alyssa building the shark door 2022

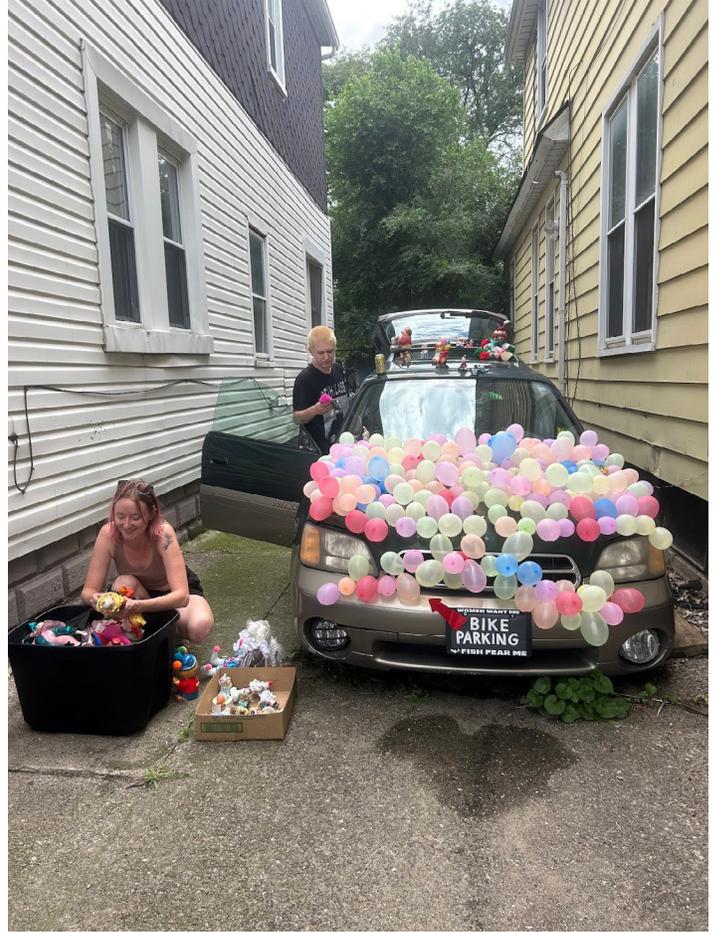


Eddie, Jose, Alyssa & Gwen During Covid 2020 by Mark Linehan

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Art Department 2024 by Alyssa



Grace and Margo 2024 by Alyssa



Underwater Clown Rodeo 2025 by Niki Williams



Underwater Clown Rodeo 2022 by Katy Kildee



Carmel 2024 by Alyssa



Gus and Sage visit Bikini Bottom at the 2024 Underwater Clown Rodeo



Napoleon Dynamite dance at the 2023 Underwater Clown Rodeo
by Michael Sondheimer



Jello Wrestling 2021 by Alyssa



Underwater Clown Rodeo 2023 by Ari Bardallis



DJ Tanner by Ari Bardallis



Gwen, Morgan, Dylan, Kristen, Jose, and Alyssa for the Monochromatic Birthday 2021 by Daniel Hud



Double Winter at the Underwater Clown Rodeo 2024 by J Mulka



Kristen and Alyssa, First Month of Home Ownership by Daniel Hud



Underwater Clown Rodeo 2025 by Niki Williams

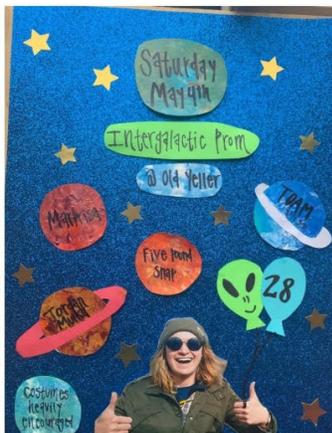
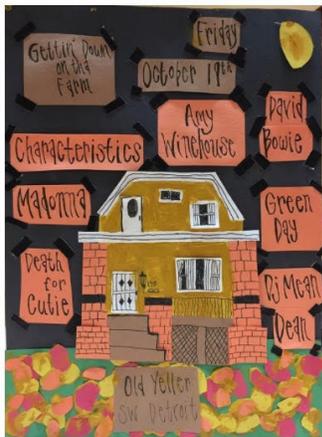
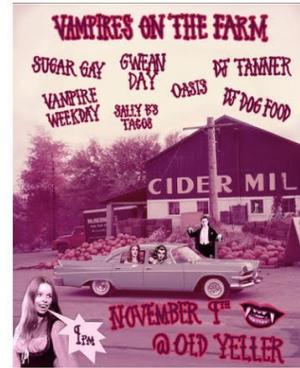
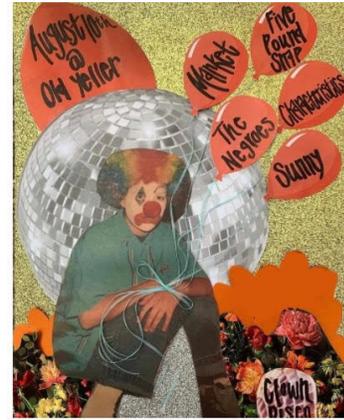


Underwater Clown Rodeo 2025 by Niki Williams



Fizzy Fresh at the Underwater Clown Rodeo 2025
by Kathleen Fortunate Morykwas

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2016 - 2024 Flyers by Alyssa

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