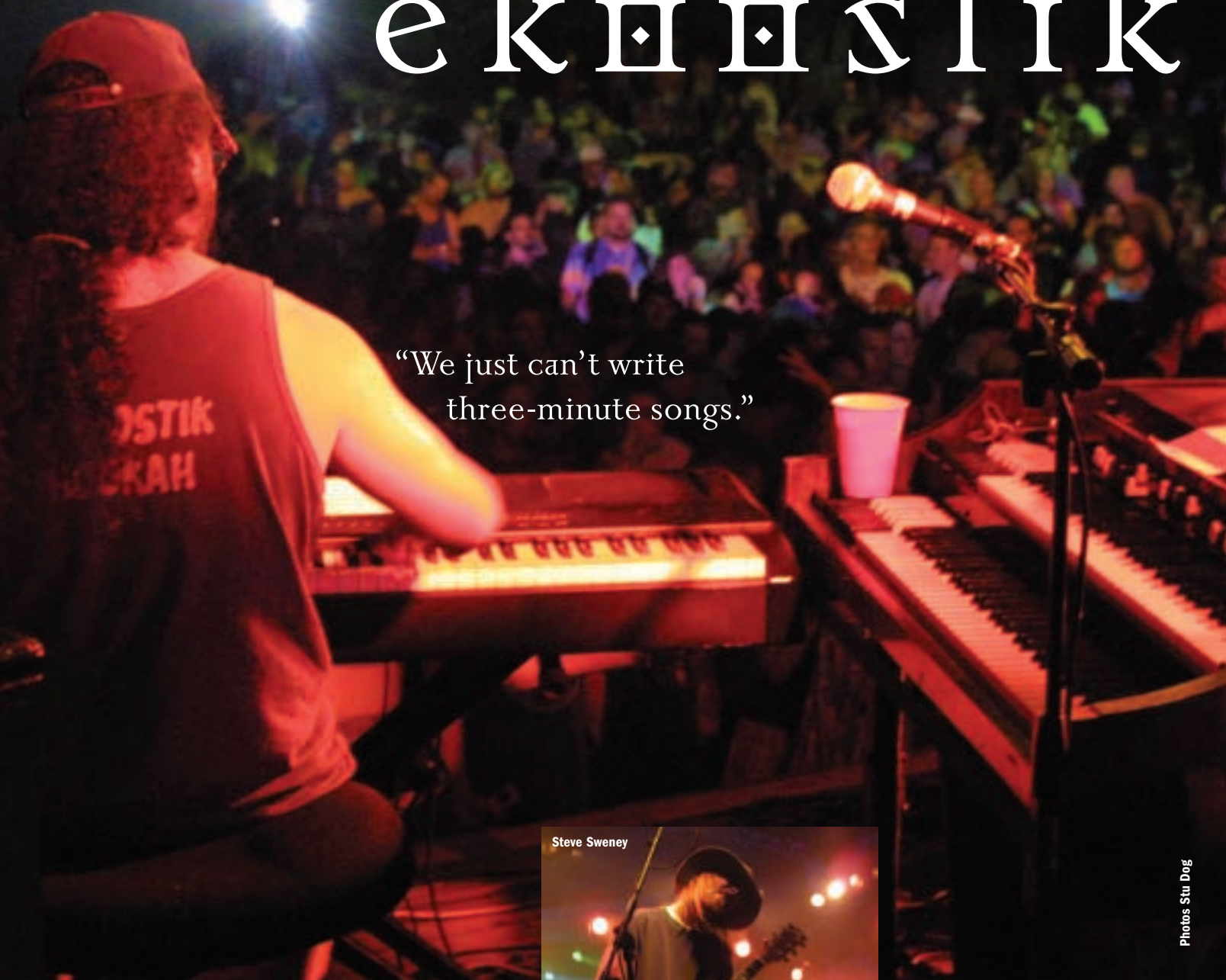


by Mick Skidmore • photography by Stu Dog and Jeff Muller

# ekoostik hookah: HOMETOWN MAYORS



“We just can’t write three-minute songs.”



Steve Sweney



Ed McGee

Photos Stu Dog

EKOOSTIK HOOKAH ARE THE MAYORS OF THEIR OWN CITY—AT LEAST FOR A FEW WEEKENDS A YEAR.

Playing a party mix of jazz, funk, folk, bluegrass and rock, ekoostik hookah are dark horse candidates for success. But like the best politicians, the Ohio-based sextet has built its support through slow, steady road campaigns, earning the backing of rock and roll royalty along the way.

Touring together for just over ten years, the band has made musical acquaintances across the country, in turn inviting these acts to perform at their semi-annual Hookahville festival. Bookending the summer months, Hookahville has become one of the Midwest’s hottest music summits, evoking a communal vibe reminiscent of Sunday afternoon family reunions.

## THE BUILDING BEGINS

**U**nder construction since 1991, ekoostik hookah solidified its sound a few years ago, settling on its most dynamic and most stable lineup yet. Musically, the band still crosses genres as varied as rock, pop, folk, jazz and bluegrass, but unlike many other likeminded bands, ekoostik hookah doesn’t shun the word song.

“I spend a lot of time writing lyrics,” guitarist Ed McGee explains. “I’m not a prolific writer but I put a lot of thought into what I write. I think a lot of today’s popular music is good but lyrically, it’s trite.”

After tweaking its sound, hookah’s lineup finally gelled and began to flush out a musical identity of its own. While its approach to creating music may not be unique, there’s a heartwarming honesty about it. Drummer Eric Lanese readily admits that the band has made a lot of mistakes, though he realizes that some of those mistakes have turned out for the better—like not having a record deal or corporate sponsorship.

The band got together after meeting at school and began playing small clubs and bars. Bassist Cliff Starbuck laughs, “For some reason, it seemed real easy to build up a following in central Ohio. There was a whole community of people ready to get into it. We came at the right time, I guess.” In the beginning, though, the band was winging it.

“We just got a friend of ours and told him what to say and said he should tell the clubs he was a booking agent, and that’s how it began. He now books three or four bands,” recalls guitarist Steve Sweney.

Though each of the six current members cites vastly different influences, they all share a common affinity for making music in an independent fashion. “I never thought I’d be playing in a hippie jamband.”

# DID YOU KNOW

...that Dave Katz, 36, was a member of an '80s hair-metal group named Haven? Or that an urban legend circulates among hookah fans that Dave actually wrote Poison's sugar-ballad "Every Rose Has It's Thorn?"

...that Cliff Starbuck, 31, is an accomplished artist and practices Tibetan Buddhism? Or that his family is one of the original Quaker families that settled Nantucket 13 generations ago?

...that Steve Sweney, 32, was a piano prodigy who began classical training at the age of three? Or that he doesn't fly, and will travel to Europe for ekoostikhookah's 2004 tour by sea?

...that Eric Lanese, 37, was an extra in Twisted Sister's "Be Cool to your Skool" video? Or that Eric is a life-long friend of 90210's Luke Perry? The two met while growing up in rural Ohio.

...that Ed McGee, 34, joined the band in 1996, but was the opening act at the first Hookahville in 1994? Or that he is a former Guinness Book Record Holder? In 1988, he and 13 friends established a new record for leap-frogging—888 miles.

...that Johnny Polansky, 35, was on the winning team of the "2002 Bubba Gump Invitational" golf tournament, put on by the band Rush? Or that he is a Pittsburgh native and huge Steelers fan, and has the team's logo tattooed on his right arm?

says Polansky, "but it's really great. It works well and I can't think of a better place I'd rather be." Sweney's tastes are as diverse as progressive rock and classical piano; keyboardist Dave Katz has a propensity for classic '70s and '80s melodic rock à la Tower of Power and Chicago, Sting and U2; Starbuck's tastes lie in bluegrass and acoustic blues; drummer Eric Lanese is into hard rock like Aerosmith and AC/DC; percussionist Johnny "Starrcat" Polansky has a penchant for Latin rhythms, dance and techno; and McGee is into articulate lyrics and complex song structures.

In line with the bands basic utilitarian outlook, each member brings in songs and all add their input.

"It's a six-way thing," explains Sweney, "and the songwriters tend to be pretty receptive to anybody's suggestions, as long as they're good. We struggle through. Sometimes everybody has different ideas and we collectively try to decide which one is the best."

The end result is a sound that reflects their varied influences. Even though they appeal to a "tie-dye, Grateful Dead-like audience," they've forged a sound of their own that covers a myriad of styles. "We started off doing a couple of CSN tunes and Dead songs but we tried to stay away from them, as people were already calling us a 'Dead cover band,'" recalls Starbuck. Polansky believes that there's much more to the band than the jamband label implies, and would rather simply define them by saying "we are a rock band and we jam."

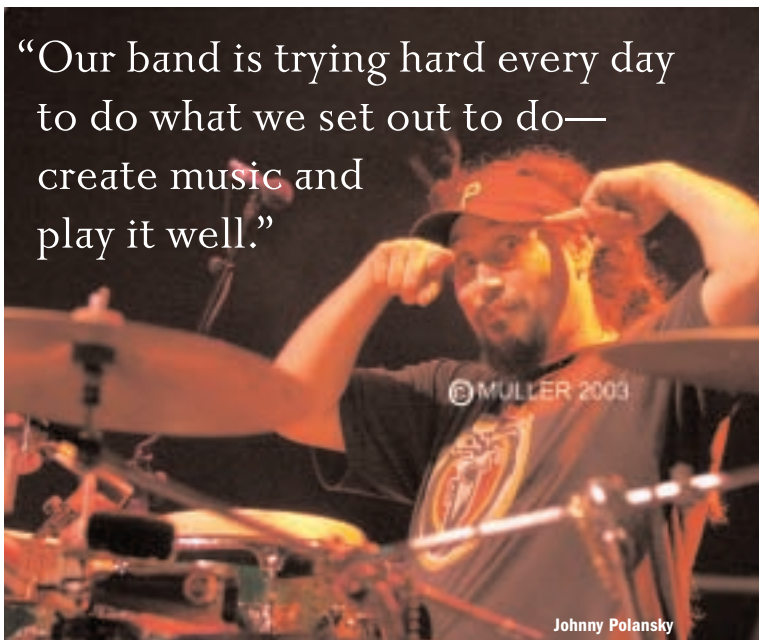
McGee also notes, "I like to think that hookah at its best is taking advantage of the diversity of the individuals and that our songs or setlists show a different topography of different styles of music."

Each album has also brought steady progression in the sound, the art of songwriting, the playing and the diversity of music covered. The band has matured. Its latest, *Ohio Grown*, is a remarkable effort; it's also ekoostik hookah's most varied to date. Starbuck says, "In the studio you are free to do the diversity and I always like that. You can use the instruments that you want, plus I play banjo and other acoustic instruments and I like to work that in because I can't really do that on stage with the high volume we have."

"That album is, I think, the first time that we captured live or in the studio the sonic element to our music," adds Sweney. "Not even our live albums have that." Despite the length of the songs ("We just can't write three-minute songs," says Katz), the band's music has a cross-genre appeal and huge commercial potential. Although the band would like to see its progress move a little faster, it's wary of giving up its freedom by signing to a major label or promoter.

"When a company promotes a band, there's so much clever promotion that goes into it. They have all these people working it and they do it well... but I'd worry, 'Are the fans really there for us and will they come back?'" muses McGee. "Even though we have a slow growth rate we know the fans are there for us, so if they are there and they come back you have no one else to thank but yourselves, and when things don't go well you have no one but yourselves to blame and that, in some ways, is an advantage."

"Our band is trying hard every day to do what we set out to do—create music and play it well."



Johnny Polansky

Photo Jeff Muller

## OUR TOWN

Ekoostik hookah has also matured into a formidable, self-contained, well-run organization that records and releases its own albums (their seven albums have sold a combined total of over 100,000 copies) and books, and promotes itself and runs its own festivals through affiliate organizations. Their series of Hookahville Festivals—they've hosted twenty to date—have been an immense success. This semiannual event now draws close to 20,000 fans a year and continues to grow in stature and popularity. Past festival headliners include many of the band members' own musical heroes: Bruce Hornsby, Bob Weir, Jorma Kaukonen, Dickey Betts, Arlo Guthrie, Willie Nelson, David Crosby, Parliament Funkadelic, Ricky Skaggs and more. Not bad for a homegrown band.

Playing with one's heroes is not a bad gig—if all goes well: "We don't think of it as bad... but we do laugh about it, now," says Lanese, recalling one Hookahville tale. "Bob Weir was onstage. We had worked out two songs but we weren't on the same page, and he started playing 'Lost Sailor,' and we were playing 'Saint of Circumstance.' Bob looked at me like, what are you *doing*? And I looked at him, what are *you* doing? We all started laughing... and it worked out fine."

Though it's rare for a regional band to draw a nationwide audience to Ohio, the group's method is simple: build up a loyal and local following that is free-thinking and believes in your vision. Despite Hookahville's big-name draws, it was evident at this year's festival that the majority of the fans were there to see hookah.

In certain ways, Hookahville is a model, Age-of-Aquarius community. Despite its sizable attendance, Hookahville is characterized by a sublime

sense of tranquility and kinsmanship, where fans are allowed to mingle with musicians. Setting up shop in the pastoral, setting of the Kirkersville Farm (some 25 miles outside of Columbus), Hookahville boasts a pristine locale. Not even torrential downpours can submerge the group's euphoria.

"[One year] It poured for three weeks and was an absolute mess—we hired tractors to tow people into the concert and then we had to tow them back out," relays Katz. "People were dancing in mud up to their knees... The only time the rain broke was when Willie Nelson played—the sun came out and it was amazing and beautiful, and other than that, it rained the whole weekend."

Though the group clearly places its stamp on Hookahville, wet or dry, it doesn't wallow in the limelight (at least for too long). Allowing established acts like David Crosby and Willie Nelson to share their stage, ekoostik hookah doesn't shy away from openly nodding to their influences. Throughout the weekend, the group stood out front, reminding its fans that they, too, are still groupies.

The first Hookahville began almost as an accident. In 1994, the group staged a small benefit in the backyard of keyboardist Dave Katz and band manager Jeff Spencer's home, so they could have running water. "It's become our lifeblood," says drummer Eric Lanese. "We're a touring band and it's our steadiest gig."

"Because it's our festival," explains McGee, "we can input a lot of our own guidelines, for instance our credo to have no hassles or bad attitudes. Even as vague as that is... that's something you can't do if you play the House of Blues or the Great American Music Hall."

"You won't see any corporate sponsorship," says Lanese proudly. "Hookahville is our event. It's always been our event and it's untouched by corporate America. A lot of people like that and a lot of people appreciate it even if they don't realize it. It's kind of subtle and they don't realize they are in an arena that has no advertising or outside input, aside from the small vendors. It [the festival] is probably the most important thing in the development of the band—not the sound of us but as far as the crowd. A lot of people first saw us at Hookahville. We didn't have any plans to make it into a continuous thing but after it was done, by the next day, it was, Wow, let's do this again."

Photos Jeff Muller (bottom) Stu Dog (right)



Eric Lanese

"You won't see any corporate sponsorship. Hookahville is our event."

Not only does the band use its festivals as an opportunity to play to large crowds—and headline over some of its idols—but as an opportunity to turn younger fans onto music they perhaps wouldn't have listened to otherwise. Sweney says, "To a certain extent, we want to keep the young people happy with stuff they are familiar with, but as a band we don't want our festival to have exactly the same lineup as every other festival." Continues Starbuck, "We try to have a balance between what we think the crowd would like and what we like ourselves." Adds percussionist Johnny Polansky, "A lot of people that were at the [most recent Hookahville] wouldn't normally have listened to Clifton Chenier."

## OHIO'S FINEST: ARCHIVIST GREGORY FRAHN'S TOP 5 LIVE HOOKAH SHOWS

**05/28/94 Hookahville, Fredericktown, OH**

The first Hookahville, chosen mainly for sentimental value. The recording is pretty good and it exemplifies the band's original posture, sandwiching individual acoustic sets between two electric sets, something very rare these days.

**04/10/99 Highland Theatre, Akron, OH**

This show was chosen for the band's performance. Their second set was non-stop from the opening note until the encore. It was completely off the hook. The tape's quality parallels the performance.

**02/10/01 Newport Music Hall, Columbus, OH**

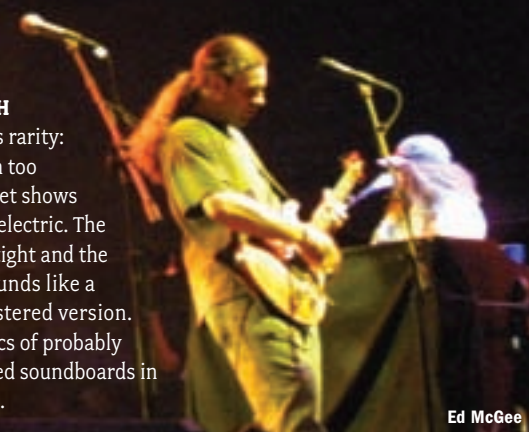
Magically surreal. Every facet surrounding it gleams, from the band playing well and the high energy level, to the rhythmically flowing song selection, not to mention the tapes sound incredible. Get this show!

**07/27/02 Frontier Ranch, Kirkersville, OH**

The band had been away touring for a while and this show was a welcoming home at their home, completely unplugged and raging with life.

**11/01/03 Newport Music Hall, Columbus, OH**

Chosen for its rarity: I haven't seen too many three-set shows that were all electric. The band played tight and the recording sounds like a studio-remastered version. Three full discs of probably the best-mixed soundboards in my collection.



Ed McGee

“The proudest aspect of Hookahville, from the beginning, is that we’ve always done whatever it needs to make it the best event possible,” says Lanese. “Even from the first one we’ve made sure there was food and bathrooms. We have never had to apologize to an artist for the sound quality, the production or the staging. We’ll never have to apologize for conveniences or for the lineup.” Even ekoostik hookah fans are happy to help Hookahville keep its communal feel; many do volunteer work and clean up after the festivals.



## HEY HEY NEIL

That ekoostik hookah hasn’t made as many inroads in other states is indicative of the current music industry. It’s often not how good you are but who promotes you, and who you know. The band recognizes that it’s difficult to break into new markets but as Starbuck says, “We’ve seen it get better in various places. New England has been tough, but each time we play somewhere it gets better.”

ekoostik hookah is currently in the process of fleshing out a batch of fresh material. “We have plenty of songs to record. Soon as we pay off the last studio album, we’ll work on the next one,” says Sweney. “For the last one we brought in an engineer from Chicago and we also rented a studio that we really liked in Columbus. I think the next time we’ll just use our office, where we’re practicing, and we’ll set that up.”

Most of the band members keep busy with side projects. Katz has just released a solo album, *Another Day*; Sweney plays with a variety of people as does Polansky. Starbuck plays in a blues duo around Columbus, while Katz and McGee perform duo gigs. McGee also moonlights as a solo artist.

Ambitious ambassadors, ekoostik hookah will soon launch an un-sponsored tour of Europe. Building off the success of their past Jamaica shows, Hookah may offer package deal for dates beginning in Amsterdam in late March. The band is also working on having a European-only release album that will likely be a compilation of music from their last three studio albums, perhaps with an additional bonus disc of live material. The band’s goals remain simple albeit lofty. As Starbuck puts it, “With each new song we like to bring in something new. Further diversify our sound and we’d like to keep touring. Eventually it would be nice to have nationwide distribution.”

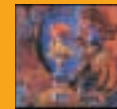
Polansky concurs. “Our band is trying hard every day to do what we set out to do—create music and play it well.”

And of course, Hookahville will continue. Given the success that they’ve had, the band has its sights set on even bigger stars: “If you have enough money you can get anyone to come play,” says Lanese, “but to have Neil Young play here would be great. It seems like he would be a good fit and he is one of my personal favorites. This is a personal plea to Neil Young to come to Hookahville. ‘You can ride my motorcycle.’” ★

## HOOKAHGRAPHY



*Under Full Sail* (1991). Hookah’s first studio release, featuring staples such as “Utopia” and “Walk Real Slow,” was bankrolled by a stranger who heard the fledgling band play at a party. Katz and original member John Mullins share singing and songwriting duties, resulting in a well-balanced disc that is still considered one of the band’s finest.



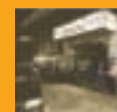
*Dubbabuddah* (1994). Strong vocal harmonies, blistering guitar work, and influences from psychedelic rock, jazz and country reveal the band’s depth in this sophomore release. By the time this album was recorded, the band’s frequent touring had not only won them a grassroots following, but also helped them to explore and develop songs before putting them onto disc.



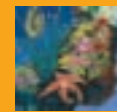
*Double Live* (1996). A successful attempt to capture the energy and quality of a live hookah performance, this two-disc set spans everything from funk (“Music”) to honky-tonk (“Washboard Annie”) to epic psychedelia (“Slipjig through the Poppy Fields”), all with one thing in common: the wail of Steve Sweney’s lead guitar and a tight rhythm section.



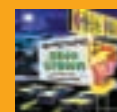
*Where the Fields Grow Green* (1997). The first album recorded with singer/songwriter Ed McGee, who offers strong contributions such as “Through Hiker” and “Springtime Again,” this album also highlights the talents of other members such as drummer Eric Lanese, who wrote and provides vocals for the mandolin-flavored “Caribou,” and guitarist Sweney, who pitches in with an instrumental guitar piece titled, “It Fell Into the Ebb There.”



*Sharp in the Flats* (1999). Arguably the best representation of the hookah experience, this well-produced, impressive live double album not only reminds listeners that old standards like “Loner” and “Utopia” can still pack a punch almost a decade after they were written, but that the newer material from McGee and Katz can take it to the next level.



*Seahorse* (2001). On this disc, longtime fans will be delighted to finally hear studio versions of songs like “Find Out” and “Ridgeway Sky.” The album also features McGee standouts like the anger-fueled “Bone” and his ghost story “Alexander II.” Lanese’s “Highway Home” and Katz’s “Silver Train” emphasize the band’s country and folk roots.



*Ohio Grown* (2002). Regarded by many fans as hookah’s best studio offering, this well-crafted, well-produced album bursts with up-tempo grooves like “Dragonfly” and “Deal With It,” features bassist Cliff Starbuck singing a heartfelt version of “Sweet Lucy” by folk troubadour Michael Hurley, and serves as a great commentary on ekoostik hookah’s current direction. ★ *Tim Ward*

Photo Jeff Muller