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JUNE 19, 2008

Johnstown's underground scene heats up with new venue 709 Railroad St.

BY MANNY THEINER

According to the **MySpace** page for **Jacob Koestler's** now-defunct band, **Elementary Thought Process**, his home base of **Johnstown, Pa.**, is known primarily for a few things: the devastation of the 1889 flood; the vanished steel industry; and the world's steepest vehicular inclined plane. To top that off, it was the setting for the iconic Paul Newman hockey movie, *Slap Shot*.

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And much like the underdog "Charlestown Chiefs," this city located about 90 minutes east of Pittsburgh has rocketed to sudden importance as the third most thriving music scene in the Commonwealth (sorry, **Erie!**). Much of its success is due to members of hard-touring, folk-punk orchestra **Endless Mike & The Beagle Club**, including Koestler.

Some Beagle Club members have moved to Pittsburgh; a couple of weeks ago, they celebrated the band's second CD, ***We Are Still at War***, with release events both here and in Johnstown. Although many of Pittsburgh's core punks still keep the Beagle Club at arm's length, neophytes who saw the band were impressed enough to buy more than 25 CDs at one show. And the band members have learned some important things from the Pittsburgh scene's venues, promoters and collectives: Get organized and do it yourself.

"All the shows used to be in fire halls in various municipalities on the outskirts of Johnstown," Koestler told me from the road, on the Beagle Club's latest two-week tour. "But we'd run into problems with noise ordinances or underage drinking, or someone would punch a hole in the wall at a hardcore show. One by one, halls dropped off or raised their rent and security requirements."

Since 2000, members of the Johnstown scene had released various albums and art projects under the collective name **My Idea of Fun**, which grew to include several dozen bands and just as many artists. But they lacked a steady venue where they could chart their own destiny.

After a year of preparation, during which Koestler and others on the lease met monthly rent payments while undergoing meticulous city building-code enforcement, they opened a new space in April, named simply **709 Railroad St.** "We wanted to call it that so the name would stay a blank canvas," says Koestler. The former warehouse includes a front room devoted to a library and community meetings, and a larger back area split into an art gallery and show space. The first art show -- works by high school students -- opened on **June 13**, and they'll host about two concerts per week.

"If the date is open, you can use the show space for \$100 if you're charging admission, and if you're having a craft circle or something free like that, there's no charge," says Koestler. "Basically, you can do whatever you want with the place as long as it's creative and free-thinking."

For more on Johnstown's developing musical potential, see www.myideaoffun.org and the scene's discussion board www.vocalyouth.org.

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Fashion4ward

7/26/2008 - 9:12am



709 Railroad St. is the perfect example of the motivated young people who are turning Johnstown around.. slowly but surely. Look for more from Johnstown in the near future. These kids really get it.

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deloris

6/19/2008 - 4:35pm



I was at the opening and it was a great success from what I saw. The hard work the organizers put into get the space up to code and attracting people to the event was fantastic. It was great to see something like this available to the community. Props to the team that worked to pull the opening off. Woot!

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