



The River City Sound: Alton says goodbye to Corey Johnson

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Alton loves its local rock and roll.

Whether it comes in the form of live cover bands at everyone's favorite taverns or a group of neighborhood punks playing too loudly in other people's garages, Altonians have a love of music. Beyond rock and roll, Alton also has thriving hip-hop, bluegrass, jazz and orchestral musical scenes. It would only make sense, as Alton was the birthplace of the legendary Miles Davis. One of the many musicians who dedicated a lot

of talent and time to fostering a culture of garage bands and DIY shows before that was a national trend is Corey Johnson.

Johnson is leaving for Denver in April to continue his career as a sales consultant in a jewelry store, and he said he loves his job. Why Denver? Johnson said he needed a change of scenery, and the job opportunity would ultimately be more fulfilling for him. Before he makes the leap and bids Alton adieu (though he swears he will return several times a year), Johnson and his most recent band, Healthy Fears, will be hosting a farewell show at Bottle and Barrel on Broadway.

Johnson was a 2008 Alton High School graduate, and discussed the tremendous amount of music being created by himself and his peers during their high school years.

“It all really brewed in Nik Kodros's basement,” Johnson said. “That's where like three bands practiced, and his dad was really cool about it. It was on Pardee Lane, so of course it was always a party.”

During those years, Johnson said Alton High School encouraged students' musical talents, even going so far as to host shows and battles of the bands for local musicians. Outside of the high school, many aspiring local bands would play the basement of Alton's Presbyterian Church on Clawson Street during its basement dances for high school students. There was also the haunted Red Spoon Coffee Shops in which many students would catch bands from across the region.



At that time, Johnson was in a band Shoot IV Saturday, and they had recorded an album – something unheard of in 2005 from a group of high school kids. It was called “Interview with an Astronaut.”

“Looking back on it, it was perfectly imperfect,” Johnson said. “It was sort of embarrassing and sort of impressive at the same time. It's weird listening to something you made when you were that young.”

Kodros would join the band and it would be renamed Atmosphere Agency. They would be around for a while, until typical high school band drama split them apart. In that time, Johnson said bands such as One Lone Car, which became moderately successful, playing with the Gin Blossoms and being featured on the soundtrack of MTV shows, Bear Hug Jersey and Fight the Giant emerged from his peer group.

Johnson graduated high school and traveled to Chicago where he received a degree in film. While he was gone, however, something tragic occurred, which grimly affected local music and most of his peers. One of his good friends and an incredibly-gifted young musician, Andrew Eichen, passed due to a fall from the bluffs. Eichen was a member of I'm Mr. Silence, which formed with Kodros after Atmosphere Agency disbanded.

When he returned to Alton in 2013, people were still making music, but it wasn't nearly as interconnected.

“People were still playing music, and certain bars were hosting shows, but it would never be the same group of people at any two shows,” he said.

Establishments since the now-closed Spirits Lounge and 300 State Street would host local music shows, even drawing national acts. Johnson formed River City Sound with old friend Derek Spencer, who was in Shoot IV Saturday, and drummer Sean Costin.

“There really wasn't anywhere to play in Alton,” Johnson said. “All the places we played were bars. There were no house parties, there were no all-ages events. There was really no good way to get people under the drinking age to want to get together and play music. There were really no venues catering to that demographic.”

River City Sound entered a battle of the bands through St. Louis-based radio station 105.7 The Point to play a coveted slot at their annual Pointfest. Scores of bands from

across the region entered, including River City Sound. While they did not win, they did come in second place, which allowed them to open for bands such as The Gaslight Anthem.

“From that point on, we were really just playing gigs in St. Louis,” Johnson said. “We had a policy that we would not turn down any show we were offered. We didn't even care about the money. We just wanted to play.”

There was a lack of opportunity for bands to play in Alton, he said. Since the disbanding of River City Sound in 2015-16, however, Johnson has retained Costin on drums and added Alex Adler on guitar and Justin Level on bass to create Healthy Fears.



Healthy Fears recorded music in Bethalto before they played their first show. That first show was in The Foxhole, one of several houses in the Riverbend area doubling as alternative music venues. That was in the summer of 2017, and at that point, Johnson said an actual cohesive music scene had returned to the area.

“It's great seeing people have the comfort of being at a house show,” he said. “House shows are a lot different than venues. It's a completely different atmosphere that is great for local bands.”

While great for local bands, house shows in the area had a lot of issues. Noise complaints from the neighbors led to police shutting them down, and allegations of abusive behavior within that unregulated scene were also realities keeping such possible creative incubators from being ultimately feasible.

House shows aside, Johnson said Alton as a whole has become more open to local original music. Festivals such as Mississippi Earth Tones as well as venues such as Old Bakery Beer Company, Mineral Springs Mall, and latest trend Bottle and Barrel have opened their doors to such acts, often for little if any fee.

On Saturday, March 31, Johnson and the guys in Healthy Fears will be playing a farewell show. Their set will also include tracks from River City Sound. Other bands playing will be The Mindframes of Alton, Church Key of St. Louis and Biff K'narly and the Reptilians.

The show will start at 8 p.m. and there is a \$5 cover.

For the future, Johnson advises promoters and organizers in Alton give more opportunities to their local bands playing original music. He said the idea of getting larger national acts to come through Alton would give local bands the opportunity to open for them and gain more attention from fans coming from other cities to catch the headliner and really enjoying the opener.

“Alton has great music,” he said. “But there seems to be a ceiling on just how far you can get. Not everybody can be as good as Charlie Brockus (a contemporary musician of Johnson's who now makes a living playing music for various institutions around the area, including Ragin' Cajun Piano Bar). You have to give local musicians a chance to open for bigger bands. After we opened for Gaslight Anthem, our band's Facebook inbox was full of people trying to book us for shows. They were coming to us. Also, bands here need to branch out across St. Louis, because that's where the big shows are for now. Alton could really do a lot more with its amphitheater for local music as well. Huey Lewis and the News coming to Alton is great, but it really does nothing for its local music scene.”