Hartford's best new sound: Groove Holmes Band

After years of adversity this local favorite finally stands poised for the big time

By Andy Gloc
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If you've stayed close to the Hartford music scene for the last few years you may have noticed a new sound emerging from the street. Anyone who spends time downtown Thursdays at the Brickyard can tell you: The new sound of Hartford is the Groove Holmes Band.

Founded in 1994 by singer/guitarist Ken Mehler and drummer Billy Macca, Groove Holmes has weathered some hard times and setbacks to emerge as the most talented and exciting unsigned act in Connecticut.

The first incarnation of the band spent days and nights practicing in a storage shed they dubbed the "Tin Can." Along with Mehler and Macca, the group included trumpeter Walter Kulwicki, bass player Chris Cianciulli, and lead guitarist Nate Brahm.

They played locally until the summer of 1996 when Cianciulli left the band to pursue acting. Mehler then left for James Madison University in Virginia, and Macca made his way to Boston. It looked like the band was finished.

However, Fate brought the two founders back together and in one year's time the band recorded their first album, *Paid Mornings*. The seven track cd featured Brahm on lead guitar, Kevin Hadfield on electric guitar and banjo, and David Miller on Bass. The CD established the band's early sound which drew heavily from the influences of the Dave Matthews Band.

The CD served to start an initial buzz in Hartford and on campus.

By May of 1998, the band had picked up Jaime McDonald on Bass guitar. They played dates all over the Hartford area as well as up and down the northeast. After playing Spring Fling '98, the band fell apart again. McDonald left for greener pastures and Macca left as well. "I just needed a little time to figure things out for myself," he said.

Once again, Fate intervened on the behalf of the group. Though Mehler tried to keep the band going by picking up current members Nathaniel Crawford on bass, Craig Struble on harmonica, and Rich Obrero on lead guitar, the absence of Macca's funky timekeeping was hurting the band.

Then it happened. "Billy got in a bad car accident. It scared me. I mean, that's my best friend." Mehler said. The accident would turn out to be for the best though.

"The accident really opened my eyes to a lot of things. I knew that I wanted to get back with Kenny and the new band and tear shit up again."

And so it began again. The band has since been a fixture at the Brickyard on Thursday nights as well as playing at every event sponsored by Radio 104. They have also revamped the sound. "We're definitely more musically original and melodic now. There's also a lot more soul in the band and higher energy," said Mehler.

"It's been great getting out there and playing in front of people and seeing the positive response. We've played Radio 104's Earth Day Celebration, the River festival, and the Big Ass Barbecue. It's just great exposure," said Macca.

Right now, the band is a local favorite and stands poised for a break into the big time. Record companies such as RCA, Interscope, Arista, and Atlantic have shown interest in the high energy sound of Groove Holmes.

The Groove Holmes Band playing to the crowd at one of their packed summertime shows

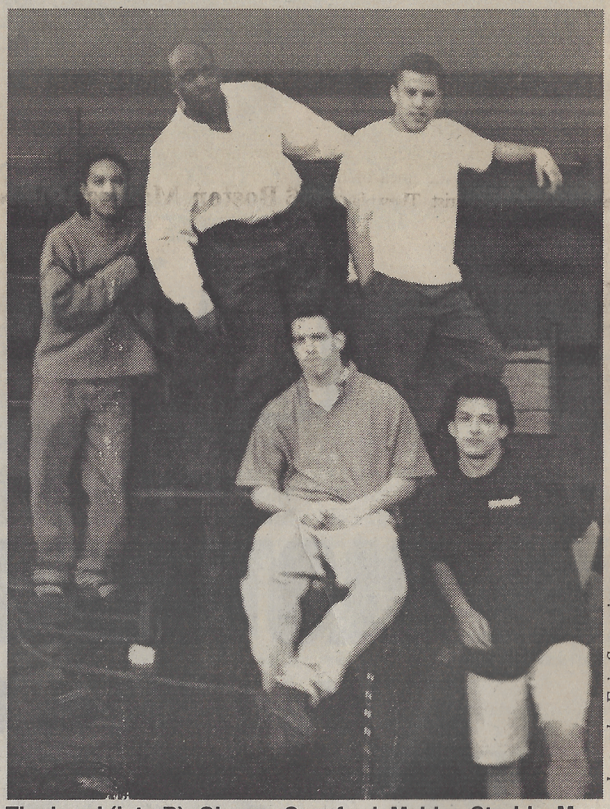
The key to the new interest the group is drawing is their eclectic sound. "Each member brings something different into the mix. Rich is influenced by Trey Anastasio. Craig is a big fan of John Popper and Howard Levy. My style of playing is definitely influenced by Dave Matthews. Billy was taught by Carter Beauford. Nate is all about the heavy R&B sound. When we put it all together, it just clicks." Mehler said.

The band will be heading on tour with local act Rane for the "X Tour" which begins on January 14 at the Webster Theater. They will also be playing all week long in New Orleans for Mardi Gras. This New Year's Eve. the band will be playing The Brickyard's millenium party, the only place to be if you're in Hartford for the big day.

All of this touring and playing out is bringing the band closer to its immediate goal: a record deal. The name of the game is getting signed. After squandering the large advance they got for *Paid Mornings*, Mehler and Macca have more down to earth expectations for their next break. "We would just pay of all of our debts if we get signed. The name of the new album should be *Above Water*," Macca said.

The feeling at a show at the Brickyard puts one in mind of what it must have been like in the early days at Nectar's in Vermont when a local act called Phish started to catch on or back in '92 at the Floodzone in Virginia when Dave Matthews and his quirky little band used to get down for hand-fulls of people instead of stadiums. The raw energy and love of music is unmistakable.

This band is going places. Come down to the Brickyard and catch them before they hit it big, and you can say that you were there.



photos by Eric Summit

The band (L to R): Obrero, Crawford, Mehler, Struble, Macca

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