

Rooftop Sessions a new way to see a concert



Sarah Shown and Taylor Galassi from This Way to the Egress recording the band's Rooftop Session at the Cigar Factory in Allentown. (TAPE SWAP RADIO / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

By **Daryl Nerl**
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Recording live music on the roof of a 120-year-old building is a challenge, not surprisingly.

That's what Tape Swap Radio and The Alternative Gallery discovered last month when they arranged for local band This Way to the Egress to play atop Allentown's Cigar Factory for a new series called "Rooftop Sessions,"

There was wind and noise and the building's old freight elevator made squealing noises that made recording difficult. Ultimately, Brandon Wunder, superintendent of the Cigar Factory, shut the elevator down for three hours.

It was also "mind-blowingly hot" on the roof on June 18, the date of the recording, says Sarah Shown, who sings and plays keyboard and violin for This Way to the Egress.

"Being it was the first session in general, they were working out kinks on their end. We didn't know what to expect, so we were working out kinks on our end," Shown says. "All in all, the adrenaline and the excitement took over. So it still came out pretty great.

“When you are doing what you love with people who are fighting the good fight, it’s really easy to have a good time. We really, really enjoyed it.”

The fruits of their labor will be revealed this weekend.

Audio from the first Rooftop Session will debut on WDIY-88.1 FM during Tape Swap’s normal time slot at 11 p.m. Friday, with music and interviews with This Way to the Egress, a vaudeville-and-punk inspired band.

The high definition video, which features shots from an aerial drone camera operated by George Wacker, will be available on Tape Swap’s website on Sunday.

For the past four years, Tape Swap Radio and The Alternative Gallery each have done their part to create platforms for local independent musicians.

Tape Swap has done this by developing a semi-weekly radio program and video podcast that gives audiences a snapshot of bands through recorded music and interviews. It also sponsors local concerts.

The Alternative Gallery has done this by providing live performance space in its studios at the Cigar Factory, a repurposed 100,000-square-foot industrial building at 707 N. Fourth St., that houses galleries, shops and artists studios.

“The Rooftop Sessions” will be much like the Tape Swap Radio program, with four songs recorded live and an interview with band members.

Tape Swap regularly has recorded its sessions at Shards, a Bethlehem recording studio, but program co-founder Shamus McGroggan says they wanted to try something different.

“I think it’s safe to say when you look on the internet or go on the radio, you’ll see a lot of studio sessions,” he says. “You can control the environment. It’s very easy to get crisp, clear sounds.

“When we’re looking for new ways to grow and new ways to showcase bands, we thought a cool venue would be the rooftop ... making them level with the Allentown skyline.”

The venture would not have been possible without Brandon Wunder, director of The Alternative Gallery at the Cigar Factory.

“I loved the idea because this building here actually has a very deep-rooted history with the art and music scene here in the Lehigh Valley,” Wunder says. “It’s been practice space, warehouse space. So the creative world has been a part of this space for a long time now.”

Wunder said he also trusted Tape Swap’s leaders, McGroggan and Matt Molchany, to do the project the right way. Tape Swap and The Alternative Gallery have a relationship that extends back years.

When Wunder founded Allentown ArtsFest, an annual early autumn alternative arts fest at Cedar Beach, he turned to Tape Swap to recruit independent bands to play on stage.

“Their approach to recording musicians and supporting the arts is very similar to what we do,” Wunder says. “So in time, we’ve grown to collaborate more and more.”

“[Wunder] really believes in what we’re doing and we believe in what’s he’s doing,” McGroggan says. “We’re really simpatico in that aspect. We both want to raise up the arts and music scene here in the Lehigh Valley.”

“We’re really fortunate to have Matt [Molchany] here who does a great job with sound,” McGroggan says. “You wouldn’t even know it’s outside except for a few wind flickers in between the songs. It sounds amazing.”

McGroggan says Tape Swap selected Egress as the first act for the series because of its unusual sound and visual presentation.

“They’re a very eclectic band. We thought that their sound and how they look would be perfect for that,” he says.

He adds: “We made a conscious effort to sort of reach out beyond our circle of contacts to spotlight this band that really expands Tape Swap Radio and the bands we focus on.”

For This Way to the Egress, the timing of the taping could not have come at a better time, Shown says. The band released a new single, “See No Evil,” on June 18 and is preparing to release its fourth album, “Onward! Up a Frightening Creek,” in September.

“We are super excited to team up with Tape Swap in general because we really, really love what they have going on in the Lehigh Valley and what they are trying to do here,” Shown says. “We were super honored, and super excited, when they asked us.”

McGroggan says Tape Swap is hoping to record three more “Rooftop Sessions” before the cold weather returns. The next band — Dog House Charlie and the Buck Knife, a Wilkes-Barre band that played last year’s Allentown ArtsFest — has been booked.

McGroggan says he is hoping the new series provides an incentive for up-and-coming local bands to keep working at their craft.

“One big common thread here at Tape Swap is that we want to hold a mirror up to the scene as well as document it and kind of inspire people to keep creating,” he says. “By having this out there — that this is something they can do once they grow their band to a certain level — I think it’s going to inspire musicians to want to do something like this.

“It’s also visually stunning. It’s a straight up awesome way to shoot a video,” he adds. “It kind of reminds people that there’s a lot of great music and a lot of great things that can be done here.”

Shown says she is thankful for Tape Swap and The Alternative Gallery and what those organizations have done for local arts.

“There is a ton of talent that is coming through ... that doesn’t feel like it has a home and Tape Swap and The Alternative Gallery are leading the way in giving the underground music — that the standard industry may be a little reluctant to get behind — the opportunity to have somewhere to grow and to be a part of a community,” she says.

“I think that sort of DIY mentality is so imperative because the industry has changed so much over the years. Communities like that are really the key to sustainable art.”

DETAILS

‘Rooftop Sessions’

What: Tape Swap Radio presents live recordings of local bands, starting with This Way to the Egress, from the rooftop of the Cigar Factory in Allentown.

When: Premieres 11 p.m. July 14 on WDIY 88.1 FM, July 16 at Tape Swap Radio Sunday:
tapeswapradio.com

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