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Long distance runaround

Seattle's The Bitter Roots still finds nourishment in its Missoula origins

by [Erika Fredrickson](#)

Seattle musicians Jeff Stetson and Ben Koostra haven't lived in Missoula for over a decade, but there are obvious clues they're still tied here. For one thing, their band is called The Bitter Roots—a tribute to the Bitterroot Mountains

"Those are my favorite mountains in the whole world," says Stetson.

But the name is also a clever reference to the way Stetson feels about his youth living in a town that, at the time, didn't have much opportunity.

"I don't hate anybody in Missoula and I don't hate Missoula for being Missoula," Stetson says. "It's just that it's a tough place to grow up and a tough place to make a living. So there's kind of a pun in the name, too. It's a love-and-hate thing."

Stetson and Koostra came of age in Missoula in the late 1980s and early '90s, when it was rare to see out-of-town acts on a big stage, let alone local acts playing original music. At the time, Koostra played drums for Silkworm, one of the few bands that were adding edge to the valley's blend of Top 40s and oldies covers. Spawned from a short-lived band called Ein Heit, Silkworm was conceived in 1987 and spun angular riffs and moody, jagged vocals to Missoula audiences. Along with groups like The Banned and Damning Flaw, they were the definition of Missoula's alternative scene.

Stetson also played music, though it was with a lesser-known high school rock group, Into the March, a three-piece band that started experimenting with a more punk sound. By the time Stetson and his bandmates were starting to get into the swing of the scene, Damning Flaw had moved back East and Silkworm had moved to Seattle—sans Koostra—where it put out several successful releases on Matador and Touch and Go. No good band wanted to stay in town for long.

Stetson and Koostra, however, stuck it out, witnessing the next and perhaps the biggest wave in Missoula's independent music scene. In the mid-'90s, Stetson started working as an engineer for Tapas Records, a studio and label on Spruce Street. In 1996, he helped Tom Catmull make his first solo album, *East of Opportunity*. Catmull, now a stalwart of the music scene and an old hand with recording, says that was when he began to understand the process of mixing and mastering.

"I think they had a package deal where you could buy eight hours of recording time for \$300," he recalls. "I ended up buying a couple of those on my credit card, and what I got was Jeff Stetson, in the middle of the night. After all the serious business was done, Jeff and I would go and record. It was basically the first recording experience I ever had. Jeff was a really nice guy and so he guided me through it."

By 1998, the Missoula punk and rock scene was in full force, housed most nights in a bar called Jay's Upstairs on Main Street with bands such as the Sputniks, Fireballs of Freedom, Humpy, and Volumen playing regularly. Stetson's band, Chiseler, was also part of that scene. The band had a grunge influence, and Stetson focused on pushing his guitar skills to make his sound heavier than it had been with Into the March.

"I wasn't so much interested in singing anymore as I was into wanting to be a really awesome guitar instrumentalist," Stetson says. "And so with Chiseler, we were a full four-piece and I just really focused on guitar."



- Jeff Stetson, left, and Ben Koostra, of the Seattle band The Bitter Roots, came of age in Missoula in the late 1980s and early '90s, when it was rare to see out-of-town acts on a big stage, let alone local acts playing original music. But even having left over a decade ago, the musicians still find inspiration in their hometown.

Stetson also started his own recording studio, which he called Water Works Hill Recording Co. and which consisted of a couple of rooms beneath a bank on Higgins. Over the next couple years, his projects included two Chiseler albums and an album called Green Under Blue for Th' Spectacles, the first Missoula band for local musicians Larry Hirshberg and Grace Decker (Cash For Junkers).

By 1999, Stetson was ready for a change. He packed up and moved to Seattle where he fronted a band called manSaveman. Koostra had also checked out of town by then—first to play as a drummer for several jazz artists in New York and then back to the West Coast. In 2007, he moved to Seattle, and the duo started working on songs for The Bitter Roots.

Recently, the band put out its second album, Moral Hazard. The songs are a mix of melancholy and hearty rock, about memories of friends and family—many of which trace back to the musicians' bitter roots in Missoula.

"Ben's dad died when he was in high school," says Stetson. "My parents have both died, and so what you do with that is you use it for inspiration and you celebrate them in song."

It's a catchy record, not necessarily classifiable but with some of the remnants—minor chord riffing and melodic yearning—that marked the early '90s era of underground rock. The album has radio play on 50 college stations in major hubs and counting across the United States, Australia, and the Netherlands. But Stetson isn't really looking to make it big. In Seattle, he's still one of many fish in a big pond, and that's okay with him.

"In Seattle there are thousands of bands," he says. "Thousands. If you want to get a scale of how insane it is, you go to ReverbNation and you can look at the rock charts for Seattle and there's, like, 10,000 bands. It's crazy out there."

For Stetson, it's just the act of recording albums that makes him happy. In fact, he and Koostra recorded Moral Hazard down in the basement of Stetson's home. He still calls it Water Works Hill Recording Co. Despite not wanting to return to Missoula for good, he says, it's a town that takes root in all his music.

"Missoula is a vortex of energy. There's a very powerful pull to that place, and that's a really good thing—and then for a lot of other people, it's not. You kind of straddle those worlds. It's almost like a David Lynch movie, you know? It can get to you."