

Most names are yawns, but our Skymmr rocks the competition

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If there's a cooler name than the Lynyrd Skymmr for any piece of heavy equipment in America, I'd like to hear it.

Milwaukee's river skimmer is back on the water for the season with its rocking moniker. Feel free to hold up a lighter when it sails by.

"We need to check noise ordinances and see if we could crank 'Free Bird' as we're going down the river," joked Bill Graffin, spokesman for the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, which owns the boat.

Yeah, or maybe "Sweet Home Aquabama."

The name came from the creative mind of Jerome Vogedes, who lives near the Milwaukee River on Water St. He won a contest two years ago when his entry quickly floated to the top and beat out the likes of Skim Jim, Slurp John B, Skimmy Dipper and Trashy Lady.

Lynyrd Skynyrd's best days as a band were before Vogedes' time — he's in his 30s. But the consonant-heavy name he devised is a perfectly playful fit for the 50-foot boat that pulls tons of debris from the Milwaukee, Menomonee and Kinnickinnic rivers and the inner harbor every year.

Lynyrd Skynyrd is aware that Milwaukee borrowed its name, and the southern rockers stepped outside before their 2012 show at the Riverside Theater to pose with the boat.

When I talked to Joyce Harms at Veolia Water Milwaukee, which operates the skimmer for the MMSD, she gave me a sense of how its name has burrowed into the city's lexicon.

"I forget how to say the band name anymore because I'm so used to talking about the Lynyrd Skymmr," she said.

The name is printed on the rear of the boat, but unfortunately in letters too small to see very well.

When the skimmer participates in ceremonial events, a larger Lynyrd Skymmr banner hangs on the side. They should leave it on permanently.

Some cities, like Washington, D.C., haven't bothered to name their skimmers. Others have come up with just-OK names. Houston calls its boat the Mighty Tidy, which beat out Stinky Pinky and Captain Clean in a contest there.

Cleveland, home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, settled for the literal Flotsam and Jetsam for its river-clearing boats. New York has a few including the Jamaica Bay, Snowy Egret and Ibis. Yawn.

Jane Dauffenbach, president of Aquarius Systems in North Prairie, which built Milwaukee's boat, said aquatic weed harvesters made by the company were more often named. Brooklyn has the Lake Mess Monster; Bakersfield, Calif., whacks watery weeds with the Mark Twain; and Indian Lake in Ohio uses the pun-free Lake Raker.

So it looks like Lynyrd Skymmr blows the competition out of the water. With a name that suggests high decibels, it's notable that this 3-year-old watercraft is 40% quieter than its predecessor.

The boat is out there from now until November, cleaning up tree branches, plastic bottles, coolers and whatever other crud finds its way into the water. If you can picture 1,225 cubic yards of garbage, and I know I can't, that's how much the skimmer scored last year and sent off to the landfill.

Skynyrd asked, "Can't you smell that smell?" It's the welcome scent of cleaner rivers, thanks to our rock star Skymmr.

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