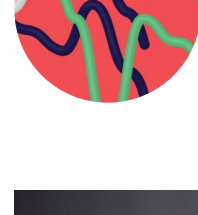


In the Spotlight / World & Folk

# Heading to rock'n'roll heaven – with an accordion: Antti Paalanen



Words by **Mikael Mattila**  
Photography by **Ulla Nikula**  
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In his teens **Antti Paalanen** was a fan of heavy metal. These days he is very much into electronic dance music (EDM). As an end result, he makes relentlessly intense accordion music where these two worlds meet.

A man dressed in a bee suit makes overly comedic gestures of romantic interest in front of random female individuals. The women respond in a way one would react in a moment of a sudden bee attack: they drive him off, startled and upset.

The bee man looks disappointed but bravely storms forward for another attempt. Eventually the bee finds his delicate flower, just as it goes in stories like these.

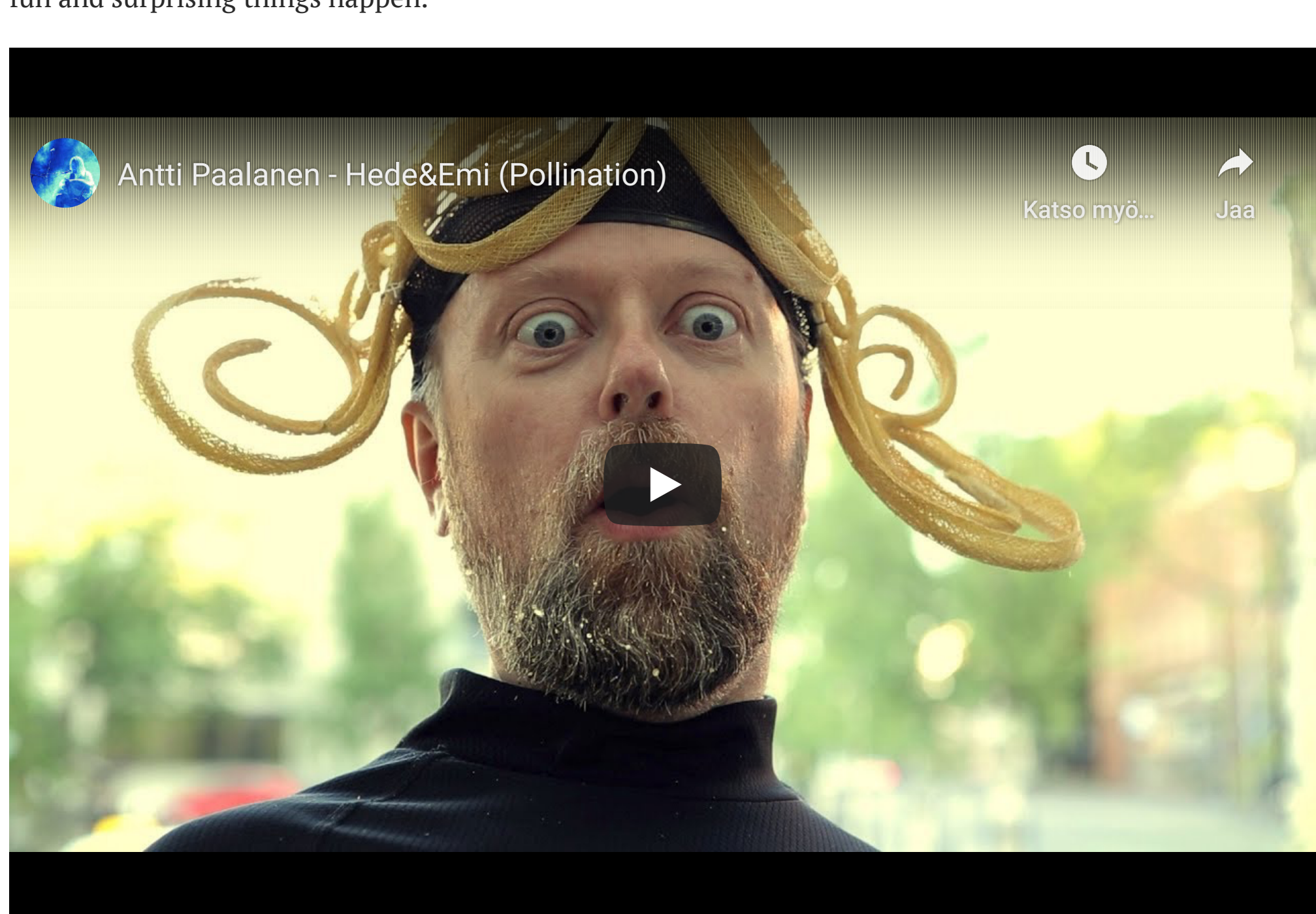
**Antti Paalanen** laughs when he recalls the filming of his most recent music video, *Hede & Emi (Pollination)*. The bee man is, of course, played by himself.

“Parts of the video were shot at a local kebab restaurant. The customers were wondering what the hell was going on! They thought that there was a bachelor party going on or something.”

The accordionist speaks of his artist persona as a separate character, detached from himself. This allows an otherwise tranquil and earthy man to do crazy and unorthodox things as an artist.

Such as fooling around on the streets in a bee suit.

“When I perform, I try to exclude all the barriers in my mind and focus on just being present. That makes fun and surprising things happen.”



## Straight A:s – Alavus, AC/DC and Avicii

The scenes in the music video are accompanied by a bombastic piece of music that reminds of the stadium-sized dance anthems by **Calvin Harris** or **David Guetta** – but played with an electronic two-row accordion.

That is a prominent sound on Paalanen’s fourth solo album, *Rujo*. His music has grown gradually more electronic and experimental.

“I’m really digging this modern electronic dance music”, he says and lists names like **Avicii**, **Martin Garrix** and **Alan Walker** as favorites.

He finds a lot of similarities between the electronic tunes and the aesthetic of his main instrument, the two-row accordion.

“The focus is on the beat. After all, the accordion is a dance music instrument. And because of its mechanics, the accordion makes a different sound depending on if you’re pulling or pushing the bellows. That made me try to play different, repetitive riffs, similar to the way EDM producers build their compositions.”

*When I perform, I try to exclude all the barriers in my mind and focus on just being present. That makes fun and surprising things happen.*

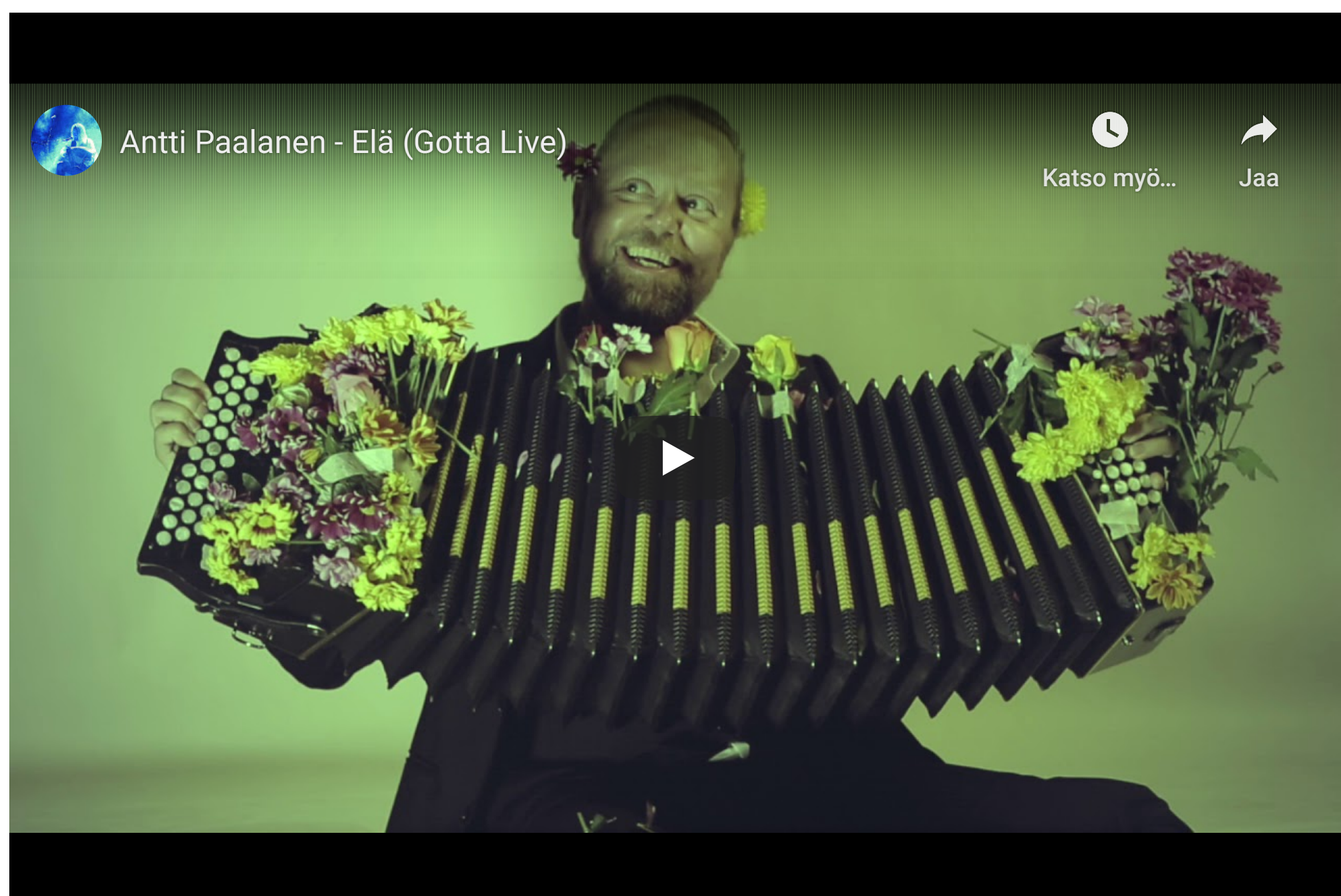
Riffs are something Paalanen is familiar with. In his youth in Alavus, a small town in Southern Ostrobothnia, he was big into in heavy metal.

“I have two older brothers who brought home the hottest metal records. So that’s the music I grew up with in the late eighties. Bands like **Iron Maiden** or **AC/DC**.”

He says he’s had an urge to make his music grittier, yet danceable.

“I guess my metal background can be heard in the roughness and the energy. The EDM-vibe comes from the beat and the sounds.”

Still Paalanen is not trying to “combine” anything intentionally. He rather leans on his intuition.



## The rock stars of folk

Today’s folk music icons are not the old master fiddlers or accordionists of yesterday. The youth into this kind of music admire the new experimentalists who rely on striking music and rock-esque visual aesthetic.

Such experimentalists include the jouhikko master **Pekko Käppi** and the wild accordion-techno-rap ensemble **Suistamon sähkö**. And of course Antti Paalanen.

“In the time of social media visibility is the crucial tool: the artists have to distinguish themselves with original looks and music videos. It’s something I’ve been thinking of a lot lately.”

But even Paalanen has his folk rock heroes. He wants to remind that his generation is not the first one to make this kind crossover music. Especially the Swedish scene was prominent in his youth.

“Hedningarna, Hoven Droven, **Ale Möller**... I saw Nordman in the late 1990s in Tampere, that was a shaking experience. In Finland we have **Kimmo Pohjonen**, and also (domestic rock legend) **Ismo Alanko** has made experiments with folk music. I position myself as a part of this evolution.”

*The focus is on the beat. After all, the accordion is a dance music instrument.*

Kimmo Pohjonen is the grand master of Finnish experimental accordion, who revolutionized the five-row chromatic button accordion. Paalanen is now doing the same revolution to a two-row.

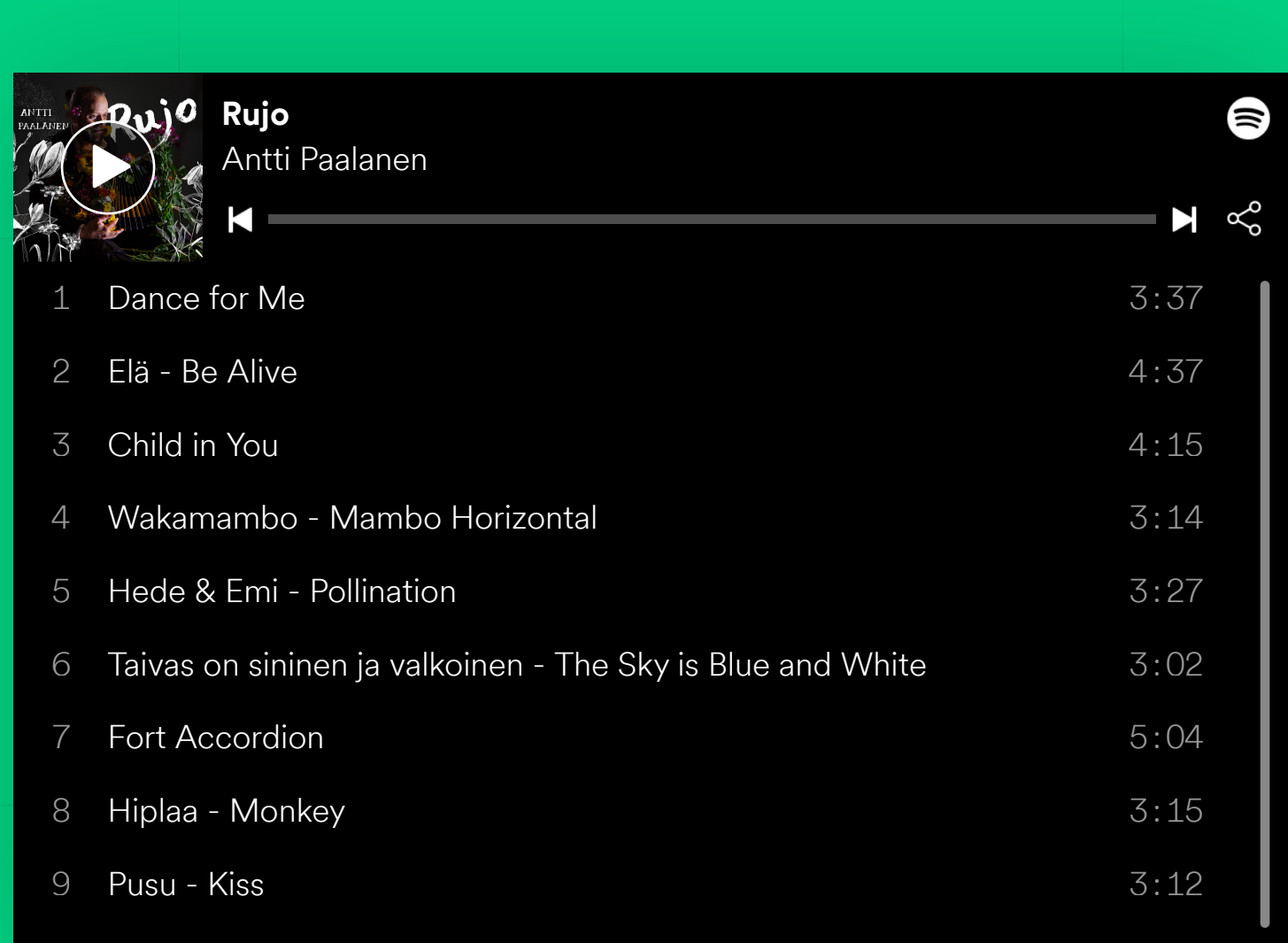
“Let’s regard the status of the two-row: What kind of music is usually played, and where can you hear it? It’s a rather closed environment!”

The five-row tradition is a whole different ball game, Paalanen remarks. That instrument has gained a lush tradition in popular music, jazz and even classical.

“People have thought that the two-row is suitable for only traditional music, such as polkas and waltzes.”

Of course also Paalanen hails from that tradition as well. But it doesn’t stop him from having a stage like a rock star.

“It probably comes from that same heavy metal background. Performing solo on stage lets me live in a rock and roll heaven – at least inside my own head!”



ALBUM

## Antti Paalanen: Rujo

(Rockadillo Records, 2019)

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