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Saturday May 1st, 2:00 - 6:00 pm : Public preview

Saturday May 1st, 7:00 – 10:00 pm [...]

[I Need That Record Store: Retail as Club Membership](#)

by Kurt Gottschalk

I first heard about it when I was about 12 — a store where Kiss albums could be procured for about a dollar less than at the mall; a store that, strangely, wasn't *in* the mall. It wasn't far, but it did mean asking my having to make another trip.

Things seemed different at this new store. It wasn't as crowded, but people were talking to each other and the guy behind the counter even asked me about what I liked. Before long a relationship had been established — between myself and Danny and John, two of the clerks clerks, but also between myself and the store. I went in every weekend with my \$5.86 — almost 25% of the paycheck from my after-school job — and bought what they told me to buy. I might object that things seemed too weird (David Bowie, Devo), but I'd always oblige and ultimately never felt misguided. (On some weeks I'd save a few dollars by perusing the cut-out bin, unknowingly buying into a mob ring by doing so. I didn't know about that underworld relationship until years later, after reading William Knoedelseder's excellent *Stiffed: A True Story of MCA, the Music Business, and the Mafia*.)

The difference between the store at the mall and the store down by, well, another shopping plaza became central to my adolescent identity. Danny and John not only crafted my musical development, taking me by the hand and guiding me through art rock and into punk and new wave, but they became the figureheads for what would become my circle of friends in high school. In a small, conservative city in central Illinois, even listening to Elvis Costello or The Clash put one on the outs. Weirdos certainly weren't heteros (somehow "Devo" even became slang for "gay"). I met other young music obsessives Danny and John had been grooming, and we disciples came to be friends. We would exchange info, tape each other's records and try to form bands together. The store at the mall no doubt did more business. They had all the Top 40 albums on the wall and the latest hits on the sound system. But they weren't there to have conversations or to tailor recommendations. And they certainly weren't there to recognize the kids with the burning curiosity and help them along their ways. They were there to move product.

That store at the mall might be something like what internet record shopping is today. Certainly there are those who would argue that any number of online-community models replicate the brick-and-mortar experience, and in truth my interest here is more in exercising a bit of nostalgia than in proving them wrong. People who started purchasing recorded music only after the Santana / Matchbox 20 merger have their own ways of learning and acquiring. And they have their ways of begging, borrowing and stealing, if on a larger scale, just as we had ours (a Buddy Holly cassette held in one hand at JC Penney, a George Jones in the other while the coat is put on, the tapes left midway in the sleeves because I just *had* to know what they sounded like). But for those who came of age fondling vinyl, the record store was a shrine, a temple for the merchandising of art.

I went on to work both sides of the divide, or all three if you count a life spent haunting stores. As a co-founder of the online store Squidco and, currently, a member of the collective operating the ESP Records storefront in Brooklyn, I've worked the culture of both internet and physical stores. Online stores may be more convenient, and are sometimes cheaper, nothing matches the clubhouse of the actual shop.

That club feeling is a big part of what Gary Calamar and Phil Gallo's *Record Store Days: From Vinyl to Digital* (Sterling Publishing) is about. The book is a well deserved glorification of the independently-owned

shop, full of photos and stories about record store proprietors. It makes for a bit of a sad celebration: in large part it comes off like being at a wake where no one talks about the cause of death. Avoiding the sad state of record sales until 175 pages in makes the book seem a bit hollow, although the story of the dying industry in the face of internet file-sharing is discussed and written about so much that it might be just as well. When Calamar and Gallo finally do get to the state of the industry, they handle it succinctly. It's not an economics textbook, and they do a reasonably good job of covering the issue and getting out again. And while the business end of the record business isn't really the thrust of the book, the authors do also include a good and concise discussion of the controversies around Soundscan, the point-of-sale data collection system that replaced the copies-shipped method of charting record sales in the 1990s, causing a major shift in the Billboard charts.

The rest of the colorful volume is full of love letters and mash notes, all torn from the diary of defining cool by commercial means and related by merchants and musicians. Susanna Hoffs remembers naming her band The Bangles so she could be among her favorites in the "B" section (it's my favorite section as well, although Hoffs may not have been shopping for Derek Bailey and Anthony Braxton). Robyn Hitchcock reveals the "fetish element" of collecting punk singles for the picture sleeves. And my fellow WFMU DJ Michael Shelley recalls mirroring my JC Penney act, going to the New Rochelle Mall to pocket Nick Lowe and XTC 7" (New York clearly had cooler malls than Illinois).

For the most part, the book reads like a bunch of guys hanging out at a record store swapping stories, which in a sense underscores what the local store is all about. A more incisive look at the ins and outs of making and selling records, can be found in the documentary *I Need That Record! The Death (or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store*. Brendan Toller's film, available on DVD from MVD Visual, is a good history entertainingly told. In 77 minutes, Toller covers the disappearance of local stores and ties that to a corporatization that reaches back to the radio payola scandal of the early 1960s and up to the current day, where Wal-Mart represents 20% of all national record sales.

As succinctly put by Legs McNeil, former editor of both *Punk* and *Spin* magazines, "When you've got accountants running the record labels, you're not going to have very good music." Or, as Glenn Branca says in a boisterous interview, "Criminals, thieves and bastards are attracted to making money."

As with *Record Store Days*, *I Need That Record* does a good job taking a national focus, representing New England to California and the oases in between. Toller is a dynamic storyteller, using cartoon graphics, film and animation clips, and old TV spots (including some vintage MTV) to frame a complicated story where the villains aren't always apparent and the crimes not completely clear. The case Toller makes against corporate control of distribution of what is, after all, supposed to be art is ultimately quite scathing.

The future of the music industry remains, of course, a gapingly open question. But at least for the generations who didn't grow up buying and listening to music on a computer, the record-store clubhouse hasn't been replaced. As Rand Foster, proprietor of Long Beach, CA, store Fingerprints, tells Calamar and Gallo, "The important part of retail is the culture you're selling. It's the museum element that stimulates people."

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