

On the Record

Brendan Toller's documentary makes a passionate case against the digital revolution / by BRET MCCABE

The brick-and-mortar independent record store is a source of more clichés than misspelled signs at a Tea Party rally. And like all stereotypes, the one that have accrued around the record store are never flattering. Only “those people” still get their music at record stores, and “those people” can be any of the following: heshers, D.I.Y. art-punks, urban hipsters, bearded jazzbos, house DJs, new weird Americans, folk Luddites or any other so-called niche demographic.

As producer/director/editor Brendan Toller's documentary *I Need That Record: The Death (or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store* argues, though, the mom-and-pop record store is just as vital to the concept of Main Street as the grocer,

hardware store, dry cleaner or any other foundation of a healthy local economy. Record stores are part of what keeps America sustainable.

And the doc has found an audience, making its way through the fall 2009 and spring 2010 festival season, and in one week selling out the 700 copies that were distributed through independent record stores during National Record Store Day on April 17. The MVD Entertainment Group gives *Need* its official home-video release July 27. Not a bad debut for Toller's first feature project—which he made while he was still in college.

“This was my thesis project at Hampshire College, so I didn't have to totally worry about how to put food on the table and how to put a roof over my head or anything like that,” says the now 23-year-old Toller by phone from Martha's Vineyard, where he began a six-month stay this past May as he learns how to farm. “I could

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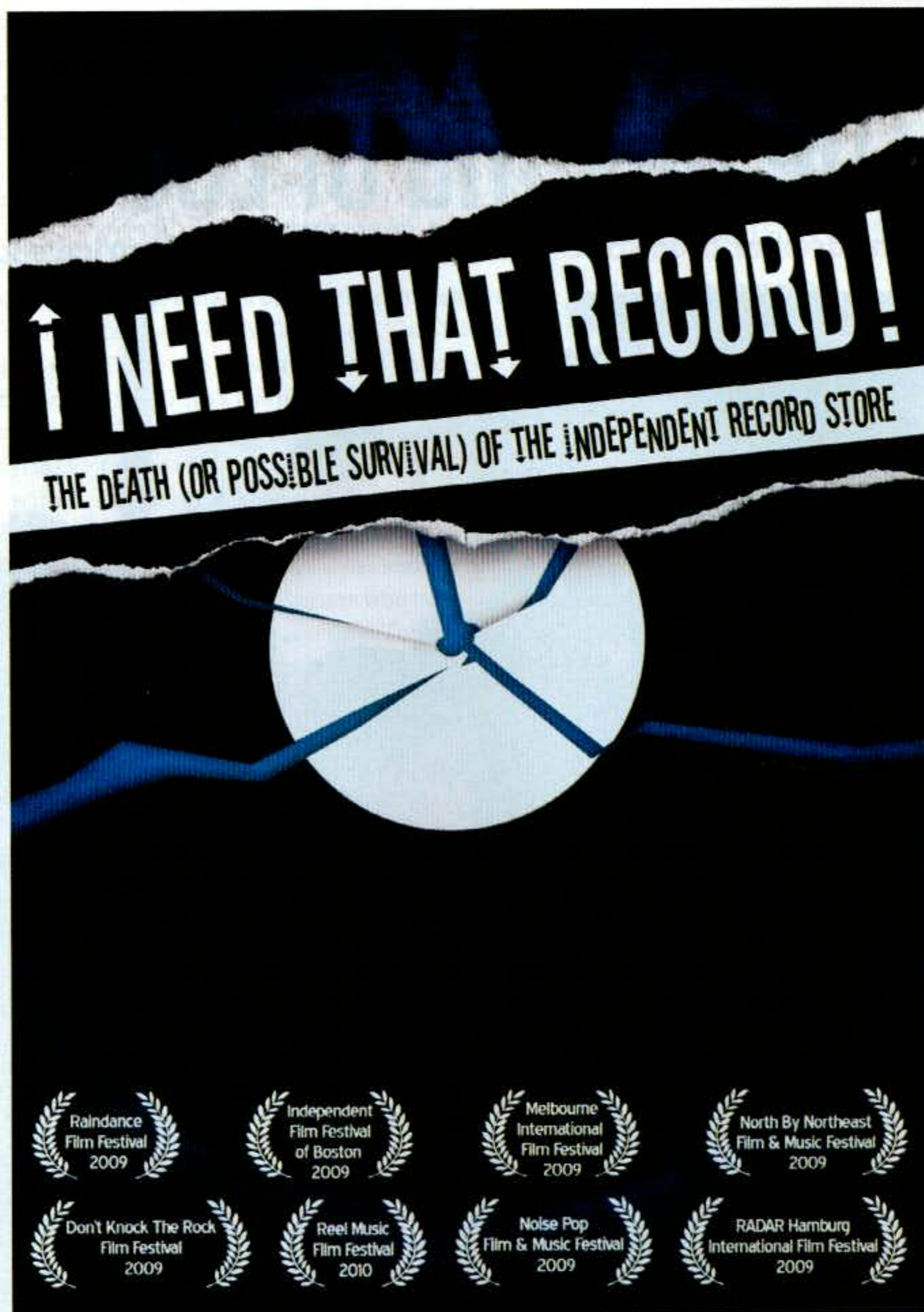
—BRENDAN TOLLER

just work—I sat down for about three months and just sort of read everything [about the music industry]. I was trying to read a book or two a day. Which is good. I made [the bulk of] *I Need That Record* in about eight months. It was just totally crazy.”

What he came up with is both a mash note of the independent record store and a grassroots response to the corporate takeover of all aspects of the American marketplace. In a brisk 77 minutes, *Need* mixes interviews with record store owners, musicians and writers—such as Glenn Branca, Ian MacKaye, Thurston Moore, Mike Watt, Legs McNeil and Noam Chomsky—and cut-out animation from Toller's friend Matt Newman. The film uses the 2006 closing of Toller's hometown record store, Record Express, as a leaping off point to examine the economic tangle that developed in the 2000s, a decade that saw the closing of more than 3,000 record stores across the country, including mega-stores like Tower and Virgin.

Toller wisely doesn't put all the blame on peer-





to-peer file sharing—Napster, after all, only lasted as an illegal service from June 1999 to July 2001—but adds digital downloading to a half-century of shady radio business practices, including the price-point crunching big-box stores exert on the marketplace. Walmart is now the leading music vendor in America, even though CD sales account for a tiny fraction of its overall revenue stream.

It's a common-sense observation to make. Instead of limiting record store closures merely to music industry factors, Toller recognizes them as small businesses, facing the same sort of market stress that all small businesses face right now. "I come from a very small town in Connecticut," Toller says of his hometown, Portland, population around 8,000. Portland hasn't been too affected by big-box sprawl yet, but in the towns surrounding it, "more and more the mom-and-pop or sort of independently-owned ventures are getting pushed out by these big homogeneous corporate things. They all have Home Depots, they all have Lowe's, they all have Stop & Shop. You can go down the list. Any small town in Connecticut might as well be anywhere in the U.S.A."

"So, I'm glad that people are picking up that [the movie] is not even just about record stores and not even just about the music industry," he continues. "There's corporate greed all around. It's affecting every part of our lives."

Need isn't a big downer, though. During the summer of 2007, Toller spent three weeks driving cross-country with two friends visiting independent record stores for the movie, and he found many record stores not only surviving but thriving, from Nashville's Grimey's to Boston's Newbury Comics,

making the documentary a well-balanced, mature and level-headed look at a beloved cultural institution, a subject far too easily romanticized.

And that totally professional approach is what whets the appetite for Toller's current project. Along with writer Justin Skrakowski, Toller is working on a documentary about Danny Fields, the music insider who had a pivotal hand in New York's downtown arts community since the 1960s. Fields managed/worked with the Ramones, the Stooges, the MC5 and the Modern Lovers, briefly shared an apartment with Warhol superstar Edie Sedgwick and was one of the first openly gay men in the industry.

In other words, Fields is a dream subject. "I have about 40 hours of footage with him, and we're just starting to do other interviews and it's amazing," Toller says. "I'm shocked that I'm doing it." ▼

I Need That Record makes its home-video debut July 27.