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DVD Review: I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store

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I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store

2009 MVD Visual

Ray Van Horn, Jr.



In my interview with Frank Delgado of the Deftones last month, I put before him the topic of today's swift killing off of American record stores. I might've caught Delgado off-guard, who'd been professional and straightforward in his answer delivery, because I

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detected a nostalgic tone in his voice on this subject. Like most diehard music fans, he cited how much the record store served as his personal social hub. Delgado noted he didn't spend his growing up years in sports; they were nurtured in record stores. Delgado can probably take it harder than most people record stores are dying by the month since he uses turntables and sequencers as part of making his daily bread in the Deftones. Hard to imagine others being displaced by MP3 other than record store employees. Ironically, this interview with Frank Delgado was conducted on the day Peter Steele passed away, something I mulled over a few days after-the-fact.

While Delgado did make the defense for the current wave of online streaming and downloads as effective marketing tools, the underlying point was made before he even yielded to modern times.

Whether you accept it or not, we're entrenched in digital warfare. Guerilla filmmaker (and obvious record store junkie) Brendan Toller turned his cameras loose in the underground to back up what Delgado and thousands of loyal record store patrons have lamented the past few years. This writer has likewise written a biased essay or two over the demise of traditional record stores and Toller's documentary *I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store* hits a mark most of us have been itching over as MP3 has turned the tide of music presentation and stupefied it into a faceless commodity.

Okay, granted, the self-effacing huckstery of corporate labels and Clear Channel have created a climate where *something* had to be done. Who the hell can stomach the same 20-30 songs on repeat every goddamn day until Uncle Payola decides when it's time to shift the playlist? Amazingly, a large percentage of the American sheep playing whiny waifs tweaked by voice scramblers on their FM dials lack the freewill to say no to it all. Forget satellite radio and the web, which is filtering hundreds of thousands of artists and artists-in-training for their edification. Music fans may embrace the immediacy offered by the internet, but the *true* music fans will tell you it's colder than a box of freezer pops compared to lollygagging blissfully in a record store.

Power to the people and all, yet the price paid for privateering albums over the internet is costing us our culture as music heads. Is it really communing if you're gunslinging anonymous insults in online chat rooms? At least hoity toity art farts behind cash registers have the balls to sneer and deride others face-to-face. Sure, such elitism has chased more than a handful of clientele into the protective blankets of

Wal Mart and Target, who certainly offer value in price, if not a deep selection. Of course, it's much easier to pick up a can of coffee, a pack of diapers and the reissue of *Exile On Main Street* than it is to drive miles out of the way to pick it up in an indie shop, usually positioned close to if not within urban zones.

Still, if you give a damn about music at all, the independent music store (and sadly, even the mall chains which used to get fat on our coffers but have been whittled down to a meager handful of stores and forced to get real like anyone else) offers an intrinsic value, and we're not necessarily talking about music appreciation.

I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store examines the sociology of record store couture with some hard industry facts to back up its lamenting love letter vibe. Guided on the testimonials of such personalities as Ian MacKaye, Mike Watt, Thurston Moore, Lenny Kaye, Chris Frantz, Legs McNeil, Glenn Branca and Pat Carney of the suddenly-boomed The Black Keys, *I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store* isn't so much an hour 17 of bellyaching how the underground has been screwed by the majors, though you *do* get handfuls of it from store owners to record owners. And yet it *has* over the years, which is why Barnes and Noble became the elite place to buy music, albeit at a premium. Yes, I love Barnes and Noble and have done a considerable amount of music shopping there since their abundance of world music *was* one of the industry marks to beat. Still, lately I've seen Barnes and Noble's CD racks dwindle drastically as I've since filled in the gaps of my Bob Dylan collection from them, which are now reduced in price. Why is this?

According to *I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store*—and it's a valid point—the mass overpricing of records has forced cash-strapped America into finding alternate (and cheaper) means to find music. For some, it's a matter of traveling inconvenience, no different than hopping a couple of planes to England to procure some of Yorkshire's finest tea. If a CD costs as much as a quarter tank of gas and the factor of it being *in* the store is an unknown, then why bother? People would rather pay the shipping charges online for a \$10.00-11.00 CD, which equates into the same money big labels hawk their merch for in big chains. Is it any wonder iTunes is running away with a cash cow herd, mooing money all the way into rebooted pastures? For all of these semantics, though, the same people at-large have no qualms paying \$5.00-6.00 for drinks in trendy bars, dropping a couple hundred when the night's drinking is done. Bars

flourish in rough times. Record stores, not so much.

Let's face it; not everyone in the world likes to go into a store and be confronted by other people. Even I have moments where I just want to be left alone to take a stack of albums over to the headphones and sample them in private. Still, our society today has grown self-contained and paranoid and there's hardly room for the record store in their lives. Far easier for most to sit half naked in front of a computer and smoke or drink in peace without laws prohibiting them from doing it in the open air and surf for music. For them, preferable to dodging less-than-busy store employees who badger them every five minutes with queries ringing to the tune of "*Can I Help You Find Something?*" The interactive capacity necessary to communicate is just too much for the average person today. Add to that, a lack of time in everyone's schedules, and we're growing more robotic by the hour. It's why metalheads pass one another on the street yet refuse to stop and chat with one another. Elitism prevails, the clock always press down, yet social awkwardness in today's world is more to blame and you can put *that* on the fiber optic trails of the world wide web.

Of course, most people simply aren't going to be familiar with bands such as Pelican, Rum Diary, Minor Threat, Emperor or even long-passed artisans such as Nick Drake. The independent record store is a safe haven where people who know the language can convene and not feel less of an idiot savante because they prefer Black Flag to Rhianna. If the indie store doesn't have the latest Fu Manchu in stock, keep the faith; it's likely on back order. It *won't* be at Wal Mart, take that to the bank. Sure, you can save yourself the trouble and click it home from CD Universe, or, if you're not of the generation where lingering anticipation of new product was part the bond between musician and consumer, you simply drop anchor with Apple and download to your heart's content.

Where's the interpersonal aspect, though? Can binary code recommend you Bat For Lashes or Red Sparowes albums? Hardly not. Don't get me wrong; I shop online as much as I do in the real world because I'm just that damned obsessed about music and always on the hunt for a cheap deal. However, *I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store* hit me very hard even though I'm fully aware of the pandemic plaguing the American record store. I've seen some of my favorite hidey holes vanish firsthand, many of them recently. Even at Barnes and Noble I crossed paths with a gentleman complaining it was the only music store in the mall, wondering where he, like many who consider

the physical act of leafing through albums therapeutic were going to go in a few years. Good question, sir.

I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store informs us over 3,000 record shops in the country have closed down. Alarming not so much to big chains who stand to reap ostracized customers into their limited emporiums, a point Brendan Toller hammers home in his documentary with his cameras blurring through frosty Wal Mart and Target stores. Rare is the smocked employee running the entertainment section register who knows about Thrice, Paris Combo or Rosetta, much less care. You can guarantee, however, the former occupiers of Trash American Style in Connecticut not only know these acts, they probably have direct access to all known bootlegs.

Or should we say, *had*.

It's sad when the footnote to a story is its beginning. *I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store* delivers a ten minute eulogy before the main title flashes up and while the conclusion does offer a glimmer of hope issued to the DIY-minded, you're already wishing *High Fidelity* had never been filmed. Or you wish it had been played on every channel in the Cableverse just to show the population at-large how important the indie music store is on a cultural level, much less the in-town money it generates.

Brendan Toller makes this very point and continuously puts record store owners and their patrons before his lens. The downtrodden facades are galore, the raised middle fingers aplenty. Stories of music shops being forced out of their spaces to make room for richer merchants who want to expand their spaces truly cut to the nerve. The punchline to this dreadful mistreatment follows with anecdotes of Big Dog business owners subsequently going out of business themselves. Whose interests were served when a gaping space in a strip mall glares like a cavity? Never mind a store like Trash American Style reliably occupied their space for a couple decades and with them, their customers. Perhaps its the stories of bounced checks in harsh times which led to the decision of their eviction, yet the telltale conclusion to be made is economics rule, not art communities nor their benefactors. Sad when the former employees are booted to the streets to find work at Trader Joe's or in some cases, nowhere.

Toller treads close to Michael Moore territory with his flashpoint quasi-propaganda, political cartooning and payola vamping. However, Toller smartly threads a story and quickly hustles his indicators to why this crisis is happening. Damn Fraunhofer Gesellschaft to hell if you're a record purist, yet Toller is savvy enough to flesh out *all* contributions to the accelerating death of music stores and he's even smarter to keep his film trimmed beneath an hour twenty so it never feels like melodrama. Quite the contrary; you're sucked into what Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth has to say and you find it romantic how Lenny Kaye first met Patti Smith and invited him to the record store he worked at and they danced after-hours in private before starting their band. You're especially glued to Minor Threat/Teen Idles/Fugazi legend Ian MacKaye, particularly how he has made Dischord Records the DIY model for all. His blueprint is so soup-to-nuts you have to scream why others don't use a similar business model.

Music stores are founded on the doctrine that music is life and it freaking hurts to see it devalued by a society which has become singles-oriented versus album puritanical. Okay, there's been too much crap shoved under their noses you can't blame people in general, yet the entire ethos of music production and distribution has turned sour like a jar of pickles left under the sun for too long.

Unfortunately, people today forget the value of *The Midnight Special* and *Old Grey Whistle Test* in terms of bringing music to the face, moreover an awareness of music. Then again, why should they care when television is formatted to send its faces packing if it doesn't win a popularity vote, their dreams squashed under artifice, judged and dismissed like cattle stock? *American Idol* is a sham because its only principal is to use a cheaper method of demographic hedging in order to sell records nobody will want in five years like N-Sync and TLC. Where's the chance, where's

the development, where's the spontaneity? Gone, like 3,000-plus record stores.

As this film points out, it's the resurgence of vinyl which will keep the remaining shops in business, but even wax platters are heavily marketed on the internet and generally looked upon as yard sale fodder by the general public. For the aspiring band, the key to survival is to take their vinyl on the road and put them up for sale at shows next to their concert shirts. It sure isn't going to come from their labels.

I'm not a bite-the-hand-that-feeds kind of guy since the music industry has been largely good to me. However, I must point out in conclusion that a good music store is like your bedroom amped by the power of infinitum. I sure as hell didn't like my folks crashing in on my room when I lived under their roof, even if I've always loved them with all my heart. Is it any wonder we're collectively taking offense at the calamity presented before us, one record store at a time?

Rating: ****

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