

# Last Shop Standing

Record Store Day's documentary tracks the rise, fall and survival of the record store



Spencer Hickman of Rough Trade Records in East London, England, appears in the documentary, *Last Shop Standing*.

ALL PHOTOS FROM 'LAST SHOP STANDING'

**BY MICHAEL SIGMAN**

**T**WENTY YEARS AGO, THE UK BOASTED A THRIVING record-store culture, with over 2200 indie shops and as many as three on a single block in a single small village.

The sad but thoroughly enjoyable documentary *Last Shop Standing*, directed by Pip Piper and produced and narrated by indie exec/music maven Graham Jones – based on his 2009 book of the same name – surveys the rapid rise and dramatic decimation of this phenomenon. By 2009 only 269 shops remained. The film makes the case that there is now a “rebirth” of indie retail activity, but the fact that there are now some 300 stores says this is more about survival than revival.

The film charts the rise from the rock & roll boom of the '50s and '60s and goes through the spectacular growth during the '70s. Then, the nosedive that begins with the arrival of the CD in the '80s and disastrously continues into the Napster culture of “free.”

Through it all, the doc captures the warmth the exuberance of proprietors who have devoted their adult lives to their shops, in some cases since 78s reined. We also hear from 20-somethings who now dispense their obsessive, encyclopedic pop smarts from behind the counter, *High Fidelity*-style.

There are tales, told with relish, of “chart fixing,” where label promo men got credit for extra sales – the mere reporting of which secured more radio play



(From top): Billy Bragg, Nerina Pallot, Graham Diskery and Jo Good appear in the film.

and higher chart positions – by giving away tons of records to shopowners, who would then sell them and pocket all the profits. Some stores who had nothing at all to do with supplying information to the chart compilers went for years without having to buy any new records.” (In America, the colorful term “payola” (pay + pianola) involved paying for radio play to boost sales. In both cases, the goal is to manipulate the charts to become self-fulfilling.) Quite an ironic twist, since the major complaint about online music – the Napster ethos – is that it gives away music for free with nobody making a profit.

It's been more than three decades since the release of *Spinal Tap*, the incomparable rock mockumentary that revealed so much truth about rock bands and the music biz that devours them. Since then, documentaries have become where it's at for many filmmakers and fans, and it seems like a new pop music-related doc is released every couple of days. Are they better than their fictional counterparts because documentarians have become better story tellers? Have we all become postmodernists for whom the distinctions between truth and fantasy are less and less clear? Is it part of punk's DIY ethos?

Even *Tap* director Rob Reiner didn't call a quirky character Quirk. But in the real world, Paul Quirk, who runs the Entertainment Retailers Association – the self-proclaimed “Voice of Entertainment Retailing” – argues that record companies missed the boat when they replaced vinyl with CDs.

**continued** ➤



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When Jimmy Shannon, proprietor of The Diskery in Birmingham, announces that he is going to spin some "poultry music," his eyes light up. "Chicken Rhythm" by the late American jazzman/scat singer Slim Gaillard is unlikely to be found in a supermarket — not even in the poultry aisle. Shannon, a devotee of music that, he says, "could make your ears bleed," remembers "A butcher named Dave who used to come in because he was into chickens." Jones has his own gustatory metaphor, telling *Billboard's* Phil Gallo, co-author with Gary Calamar of the terrific 2010 paean to record stores *Record Store Days*, "You're never going to see supermarkets rack vinyl next to the baked beans."

Other musicians reminisce about the wonders of youthful hours passed at the local record outlet. The great Billy Bragg recalls his early years plumbing the organized chaos of a shop that featured records in Sanskrit. Johnny Marr remembers that when he saw the ocean of discs in his first record store, he knew that was "Where I'm going to be every weekend for the rest of my life." Paul Weller emphasizes that we need to educate, to encourage people to play music, not just listen.

Honored is the sensual, holistic experience of record-buying — the smell of vinyl, the feel of a record as you flip it, the rich analog sound. The conclusion: You can't fall in love with a CD." Or a download.

Jones researched his book four years ago by visiting some 50 record shops around the UK, where, he says, "The mood was doom and gloom." Going back to 20 locations three years later for the film, he said, "There was a sense of optimism among the shops, who look after their customers and serve as a meeting place for music fans." But even the optimistic Jones says, "I think over the next few



*Last Shop Standing* also features (From top): Martin Mills, Pip Piper and Norman Cook.

years record stores will remain around this level." The challenge is whether the stores that remain can play a lively role and avoid being relegated to novelty or museum status.

There's only so much organizing these inherently individualistic if not anarchistic proprietors will stand for. Mill observes that by definition the magic is impossible to replicate — the last thing you want is for chainification to break out. And so owners have had to become agile jacks of all trades to keep up with changes in the way music is delivered. Some play the role of concert promoter (lots of in-store appearance by bands), critic (putting brief reviews on album jackets), ticket agency (selling concert tickets), social networking/Internet hub (selling music worldwide via email, Facebook, Twitter and other Internet services) and general music shop (selling instruments and paraphernalia).

The optimism of the film is tempered by the sadness inherent in the roll call of some of the 540 record shops that have closed in the last four years alone. Most heartbreaking is the closure of Hudsons, which began operations in 1906.

*Last Shop Standing* was the official film of the sixth annual Record Store Day, April 20th — a day of special events that draws together so many thousands of fans one retailer likens it to "Ten Christmases put together." On that day, the documentary was released on DVD and screened at scores of indie stores all over the world, from the UK to the U.S. to China.

Fittingly, *Last Shop Standing* closes with the James Clark Five's "Sexbombe Uber Alles" (James Clarke Five), which declares, "Oh Lordy, I guess I'll never get to heaven cos/Oh Lordy, I stay up way past eleven." The tune has just been released as a single and Jones says he's been inundated with requests.

Jim Kaplan, publisher of the august paper you have in your hands, is encouraged.

"Five years ago," he says, "when the economy went to shit, things started getting good for record stores. The number of indie stores in Southern California has grown from 60 to 90 during that period. Portland, with a population similar to the San Fernando Valley, has about 25 indie record stores to the SF Valley's five." [RBT]

## LAST SHOP STANDING

The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of the Independent Record Shop

