

Last Shop Standing examines rise and fall of independent record shops (Photos)

DVD REVIEW | APRIL 15, 2013 | BY: PETER ROCHE |

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Set for this Saturday, April 20th, Record Store Day 2013 will give independent music retailers another much-needed sales boost by offering dozens of CDs and vinyl 7" and 12" inchers aficionados can't get anywhere else.

Also releasing for Record Store Day is a new hour-long documentary about the "holiday" itself and the resurgence in mom-and-pop music shops. Inspired by Graham Jones' 2010 book of the same name, Last Shop Standing: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of the Independent Record Shop follows the author around the UK as he chats with proprietors about the cultural significance of standalone rock and roll retailers.

View slideshow: [Last Shop Standing](#)
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standing)

Divided into three sections—Rise, Fall and Rebirth—the Pip Piper-directed film takes viewers on a virtual tour of nearly thirty record shops, whose owners explain what got them in the business and how they survived after big box stores commandeered their customer base and downloading supplanted weekend splurging at neighborhood LP shops.

Jones also interviews musicians Paul Weller (The Jam, Style Council), Billy Bragg, and Richard Hawley (Longpigs, Pulp) about the “education” they received while growing up around indie shops. Smiths guitarist [Johnny Marr](http://www.examiner.com/topic/johnny-marr/articles) (<http://www.examiner.com/topic/johnny-marr/articles>) also chimes in on his first trip to the local retailer:

“I knew when I hit the bottom of the stairs that this was where I would be every weekend...for the rest of my life!” Marr recounts his teenage epiphany.

“I walk in looking for one thing, and my brain turns to mush,” says Hawley. “I always walk out with 10-20 things other than what I came in for!”

Speaking with store managers like Keith Hudson (CE Hudsons), David Minns (Borderline Records), and Spencer Hickman (Rough Trade East), Jones learns that the birth of the modern record business coincided with the advent of rock and roll in the 1950s. Until Elvis Presley and Bill Haley came along, vinyl discs were limited to the 78’s sold in department and electronics stores. Turntables were just another piece of furniture back then, and records little more than something to play on them in the parlor. But “Heartbreak Hotel” and “Rock Around the Clock” struck home with the youth market, whose awestruck teens started snapping up singles by the box load.

The Beatles and Rolling Stones spearheaded the British Invasion in the ‘60s and revitalized the record industry while inspiring countless imitator bands. No longer were outside songwriters, players, and promoters needed to transform singers into stars; The Fab Four showed it was

<http://www.examiner.com/review/last-shop-standing-examines-rise-and-fall-of-independent-record-shops?cid=rss>

RATING FOR LAST SHOP STANDING DVD



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Last Shop Standing: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of the Independent Record Shop

Photo credit: Last Shop Standing

possible for a self-contained musical unit to write and perform its own material without major label assistance / interference. The huge demand for Lennon / McCartney hits like “Love Me Do” and “Please, Please Me” kept store owners scrambling to keep shelves stocked, and many entrepreneurs took the Beatle boom as a portent that popular music titles couldn’t be relegated to small department store display cases anymore.

The Seventies and Eighties became the golden age of music retailing, and it wasn’t uncommon to see multiple shops vying for teenage dollars on the very same street. Folk, progressive, and arena rock burgeoned behind major releases by acts like James Taylor, Yes, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and Aerosmith. But several pundits cite the emergence of punk in the late ‘70s as another turning point for the industry.

“Suddenly any band could make a record...right in their basement,” Jones observes. “Big labels became unfashionable.”

Bragg says he wasn’t hip enough to land a record store job in the early days, so he took a gig at a hardware store “weighing out screws and selling people wallpaper.” But he blew all the money he earned at the music shop downstairs. Weller likewise recalls patronizing his local indie store, where he and his friends would cram into a listening booth and sample the latest sounds until they were kicked out.

“Honest Jon” of London remembers the fateful day in the late ‘90’s when a customer showed him a new device on which he’d electronically stored his entire music collection.

“It was the first time I saw an mp3 player,” Jon says. “I knew right away there’d be hard times ahead.”

Just as CDs replaced vinyl LPs, so did digital media claim a corner of the market at the turn of the century. Punch Records clerk Ammo Talwar explains how computer-centered distribution channels like Napster sapped his customer base. Record Collector magazine editor Jason Draper agrees that the convenience of digital music made people feel as if they’d been getting “stiffed” by the record industry for years. Computers gave people the power to “rebel” by downloading nearly anything they wanted for free.

Meanwhile, major labels tapped supermarkets and appliance outlets, where relatively little space was needed to display hit records. CDs became a “loss leader” item for places like Wal-Mart, who hoped to recoup a profit from customers who picked up other big-ticket items during their visit. Many retailers profiled by Jones suspect these chains acquired their product at a fraction of the cost they paid; they just couldn’t compete with such drastically reduced prices. Soon, those six record shops on Main Street were reduced to one.

“There was no road map for any of this, no example of how to learn from mistakes,” comments one store manager.

The music industry learned the hard way how downloading would affect their antiquated business models. Now run by accountants and lawyers instead of music enthusiasts, the major labels either couldn't see that culture was changing right under their noses—or simply ignored the technological shift because they didn't know how to deal with it.

“They were sloshing in money but didn't invest in the long-term,” surmises another retailer. “They invested in hype.”

View The Last Shop Standing trailer here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=qBTMe8p_Pxw (http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=qBTMe8p_Pxw)

Some indie sellers made the mistake of trying to compete with grocers on price, while the more savvy merchants diversified and offered a wider range of selections and top-notch service. One interviewee tells Jones it comes down to “the quirkiness of the person behind the counter,” whose passion for music usually equates—if not surpasses—that of the customer and whose knowledge vastly trumps that of the checkout girl at Target. Prudent shops catered to niche audiences like jazz, punk, and metal. They stocked musical instruments, sold concert tickets, and struggled to maintain an intimate rapport with their discerning clients.

Founded in 2007, Record Store Day reinvigorated the business with annual exclusives and in-store appearances by vinyl-adoring artists. Since its inception, the April “holiday” has become like “ten Christmas Eves stuck together,” offering rare treats for buyers while keeping retailers' cash registers ringing.

The Diskery's Jimmy Shannon believes the rekindled interest in vinyl was ignited in part by a generation of kids inheriting their parents' old LP collections. At Jumbo Records in Leeds, fresh waves of teens come in asking about turntables and decks. New bands buck old trends by releasing new music on vinyl instead of compact disc—and by packaging the sleeves with download cards so buyers can access digital versions for their portable players.

“It's about ownership,” says another clerk. “You can make a CD at home now, but you can't make a record.”

Marr and his fellow musicians agree. Hawley relishes the “ceremony” of removing records from their intriguingly-designed sleeves to play them on stylus-centric equipment, and having to get up to flip the disc halfway through. This ritual—along with the tactile, sensory experience of vinyl—connects listeners with their music in a way iTunes can't. Weller claims he still thinks in terms of Side A and Side B when sequencing songs for his albums.

Other notable shop owners include Diane Cain of The Musical Box (London), Mike Dillon of Apollo Music (Paisley), Mavis Slater & Chris Love of Acorn Music (Yeovil), Phil Baron of sister Ray (London), Ashli Todd of Spillers Records (Cardiff), and Derry Watkins of Resident Records (Brighton). The DVD features over an hour of bonus material—including an extended interview with Marr.

The official film of Record Store Day 2013, Last Shop Standing is an insightful survey of the music business from the perspective of independent retailers who had to adapt to changing tastes and

emerging technologies to survive, much less prosper, and makes several key arguments for vinyl's lasting impact and status as the format of choice.

www.lastshopstanding.com (<http://www.lastshopstanding.com>)

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Peter Roche, Cleveland Music Examiner

Pete Roche lives in Cleveland, Ohio with his wife and two kids. His work has appeared in Scene Magazine, The Plain Dealer, Experience Hendrix Magazine, North Coast Voice, Irish American News, and on both theclevelandsound.com and clevelandmovieblog.com. You may contact Pete with your comments...