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Last Shop Standing Directed by Graham Jones

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By Stephen Carlick

7 On the surface, record stores are about selling a commodity, but unofficially, they've always been about something far more important: community. *Last Shop Standing*, a British DVD documentary based on the 2009 book of the same name, is purportedly a look "behind the counter" of independent record stores. However, what it ultimately reveals is that the spread of music, from one fan to another, is a timeless phenomenon that might not be as easily squelched as doomsayers have long predicted. The film, divided into three "acts," begins with "The Rise" of record stores in the '50s: the proliferation of .78s, the rise of .45s and Elvis Presley, and the vinyl explosion that coincided with the popularity of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in the '60s. Then, dozens of record store owners and music personalities (among them former label salesmen, industry types and musicians such as Billy Bragg, Johnny Marr, Paul Weller and Richard Hawley) discuss the dawn of indie labels and shops during the late '70s punk and DIY boom. Among the dubious claims of many septuagenarian shop owners that they somehow predicted the ubiquity of Elvis and the Beatles is the repeated theme of the film: that these shops provided not just a product, but a place to gather, debate and discuss music, one where a culture would spread. Act 2, "The Fall" describes the bust record stores experienced in the early '00s. While the film might easily have singled-out and demonized any one cause, it wisely maintains a (relatively) unbiased tone that acknowledges the many reasons — labels purposely phasing out LPs for the "superior" sound of CDs, retailers like British supermarket Tesco (and, implicitly, stores like Walmart in North America) using CDs as loss-leaders, and Napster and the spread of mp3s and their portable players — independent record stores took such a harsh hit. The movie points out that, of the approximately 2,200 in '80s England, only 269 independent record stores were still around in 2009. However, the focus isn't the fall, but "The Rebirth" of the indie record store, and the film's third chapter reveals why shops have lived long enough to see Record Store Day (the DVD release date in North America) and the resurgence of vinyl. Nimble indies have been able to change with the marketplace, embracing music culture as much as possible: participating in Record Store Day, selling books and other paraphernalia, and putting on in-store concerts. Of course, it's still about vinyl, teaching youngsters how to use a turntable and revelling in the "ceremony" of purchasing, taking home and putting on a record, which, to some, is just consumerism. But anyone who considers themselves a vinyl

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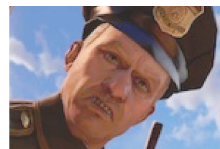
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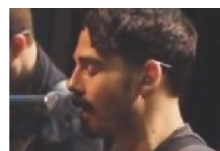
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junkie (i.e., anyone who would watch this film) knows the sound and feeling that only a record can provide, and understands exactly what Richard Hawley means when he admits that his "brain turns to mush" when he enters a record store, forgetting what he came to buy and leaving with an armload of other albums. *Last Shop Standing* isn't about the continued existence of music sales, but of music culture and the ritual of meeting as a community to experience an art form designed to bring people together. At 50 minutes, it's a nice little story that, despite years of foretold doom, still has no ending. The bonus features include a continuation of "Rebirth," the third act, in which the book's original author, and the documentary's host, Graham Jones, relates his positive experiences of meeting shop owners and setting up viewing parties for the film. "Shop Talk," a six-minute addition featuring extended interviews with record store owners, is a bit of fluff, but the message at the end of it — that the core of owners is stronger than it's even been znc that they're looking out for, rather than undercutting, each other — is one of hope for an industry that was forced to contend with the revolutionary Internet years before any other. (Convexe Entertainment)

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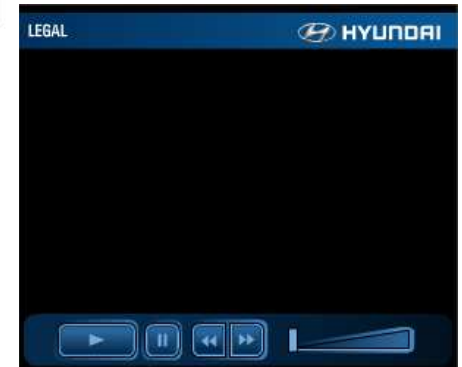
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