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## Can't stop the shops

The rise, fall and rebirth of the indie record store  
Published April 18, 2013 by [Devin Friesen](#) in [Film Reviews](#)

Ah, the record store documentary. The allure of the musical object, how downloading ruined stores, the connections and community between record fiends, musicians and quirky or curmudgeonly clerks — these subjects were all a part of *I Need That Record!* in 2008. The only immediate difference between that and *Last Shop Standing* is the latter's British roots: instead of Thurston Moore and Ian MacKaye, you get Johnny Marr and Billy Bragg waxing nostalgic.



*Last Shop Standing* was inspired by Graham Jones' book of the same name, published in 2009 after 540 U.K. record stores had closed in the preceding four years. Jones himself is heavily featured in the film, interviewing all sorts of British record store clerks from stores that have been around for anywhere from six months to over 100 years. Asking "what happened?" and tracing the rise-and-fall history of the record store isn't exactly news at this point; Britain's record stores were hit just as bad as North America's, so frankly, those already on board might find the first two-thirds of the film a bit tiresome and repetitive.

However, the third act of *Last Shop Standing* ("The Rebirth") is welcome, offering a more optimistic ending to the standard record store documentary than any I've seen before, even if the film mostly boils down to talking-head variations on "the industry changed, so we did too." Instead of facing the future with cautious uncertainty, *Last Shop* tracks down stores that have survived the perpetual Death(s) of the Music Industry through constant adaptation, as well as newer stores that have opened, including a place called Vinyl & Pie, where the newest Actress LP is on display next to a rack of — you guessed it — pies!

So while *Last Shop Standing* isn't the most riveting or original piece of work on music-as-physical media, I'll give it a pass because the core of the film is very much the core of working at a record store. It's a film about passion — music fans and clerks doing what they do out of love, caring too much to let hardships — like major labels undercutting prices to huge chains, the phasing out of vinyl (and then later CDs), and downloading — get in the way. The pay sucks, the profit margins are slim, and people will continue to feel entitled to free music; however, the connections between people and music, forged through chance ("hey, what is this you're playing?"), curiosity ("what's this album sound like?"), and kinship ("thanks for the recommendation!") are irreplaceable.

One clerk towards the end of the film nails the fluctuating nature of the industry as she ponders the customers we clerks see once every year or two, incredulous as to where all the stores have gone — the people who ask, "Whatever happened to (store)?" To which the clerk responds, "Well, when was the last time you went there? There's your answer." It's an exchange I still experience every so often when people ask me what happened to Megatunes, or why they can't find certain types of albums in Calgary. Ideally, the record store and its community maintain a reciprocal link, offering guidance and suggestions — the record stores that have continued to survive exist because they satisfy an itch that other sources cannot scratch, but a truly great record store understands the human immediacy of music, providing an outlet for discovery not borne of marketing, but of pure musical passion.

Believe it or don't, but many grouchy clerks just want to sell you better music — it's partly why we work in record stores, after all.

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