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RECORD STORE DAY REJOICES WITH LAST SHOP STANDING

Documentary explores the rise, fall and rebirth of UK indie record stores in celebration of music's biggest holiday

GRAMMY.com

John Sutton-Smith

As many seasoned music fans will remember, the experience of spending hours flipping through racks of vinyl are long gone, let alone the seemingly exotic experience of sitting in a glass sound booth listening to untouched vinyl before deciding whether to purchase. One of the last record stores with listening booths was Los Angeles' Wallichs Music City. Considered one of the world's largest specialty record stores, Wallichs Music City operated on the corner of Sunset and Vine in Los Angeles from 1940–1978 and was one of the first stores to seal albums in cellophane and put them in display racks.

Of all the unintended consequences of the digital revolution, perhaps the most impactful has been the partial demise of small neighborhood community stores, with record stores perhaps the hardest hit among them. As music slips further into the digital cloud, artists and fans alike continue to celebrate the community of independent record stores across the world with Record Store Day.

Launched in the UK in 2007, Record Store Day is held annually on the third Saturday of April and has become arguably the biggest music holiday in the United States, supported by artists with special limited-edition releases along with in-store appearances. The bittersweet record store saga has been poignantly captured in the new documentary aptly titled *Last Shop Standing — The Rise, Fall And Rebirth Of The Independent Record Shop*. The film charts the growth of music retailers in the '60s and '70s through the demise of vinyl and the rise of the CD, to the age of mass piracy, digital downloads and streaming. Released in the UK in 2012, *Last Shop Standing* is now available on DVD in the United States and is the official film for this year's Record Store Day, taking place April 20.

Inspired by Graham Jones' book of the same name, the documentary chronicles with insight, sadness and humor the rigors of the music retail scene in Britain, and why nearly 2,000 record shops have already disappeared across the UK. The creative team behind *Last Shop Standing*, a collaboration between award-winning feature film company Blue Hippo Media and Proper Music Group Ltd., captured recollections from more than 20 record shop owners, music industry leaders and musicians, including Billy Bragg, Clint Boon, Norman Cook aka Fat Boy Slim, Richard Hawley, Johnny Marr, Nerina Pallot, and Paul Weller, as they describe how record stores became and still are a part of their own musical education, and a place to cherish and discover new bands and new music.

"I used to spend my lunch hour on Saturday sitting in the listening booth," Bragg says in the film.

As the film reflects, record shops were always more than retail outlets; as part of the culture, they supported new bands and local talent, and provided a place for musicians and music fans to congregate.

"They became a meeting place, almost like community centers really," says Weller in the film. "Thank God there's still some around."

Cook adds in the film, "I used to be there every Saturday morning, as soon as I got my pocket money."

"It's like a library for your ears and your eyes," describes Marr.

Jones' book documents the decline of a business blighted by corruption and corporate greed. Undertaking a tour of the last remaining independent record shops in Britain, he collected a wealth of entertaining stories that explain why the best are still standing, and what happened to the rest. As *Last Shop Standing* ominously states, "In the '80s there were 2,200 independent record stores in the UK, and by 2009 there were only 269 left," while also pointing out that more than 500 stores were shuttered during the making of the film.

Where did it all go wrong? Why were three shops closing a week? Will there be any shops left standing in the face of the ever-growing digital age? While the film addresses these questions, the actual answers are debatable. However, *Last Shop Standing* is ultimately a celebration of the musical camaraderie and entrepreneurial ingenuity that has enabled many record stores to keep operating successfully against the backdrop of many changes in the music industry, the biggest recession in years and the explosion of choice in music delivery.

(John Sutton-Smith is a music journalist and TV producer who helped establish the GRAMMY Foundation's GRAMMY Living Histories oral history program, currently comprising almost 200 interviews.)

April 18, 2013 - 3:30pm

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