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Last Shop Standing



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Written by Sean Marchetto

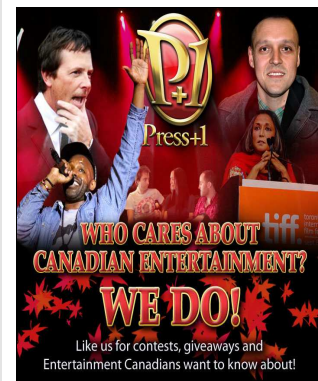
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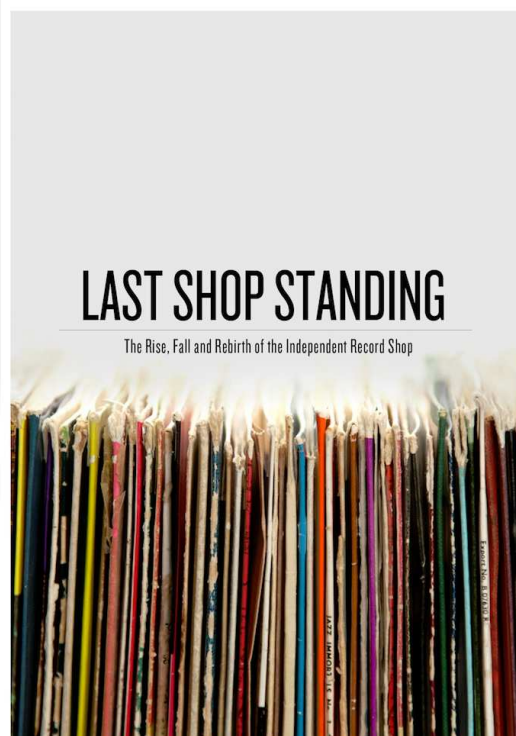


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"Surprisingly, and contrary to what we hear in North America, many of the shop owners do not pin the downfall of the record shops on the rise of mp3s and illegal downloading."

Last Shop Standing
Graham Jones
Distributed by: Blue Hippo
Runtime: 49 minutes
Release Date: April 20, 2013



Reviewed by Sean Marchetto

Last Shop Standing is a documentary chronicling the rise, fall, and apparent rebirth of independent record shops in Britain, based on the 2009 book of the same name. Featuring interviews with dozens of shop owners, as well as British rock stars like Johnny Marr, Paul Weller, Fatboy Slim, and Billy Bragg, it was released last year as part of the celebrations surrounding Record Store Day, and is being made available on DVD for this year.

According to the film, British music specialty shops grew out of general goods stores with the onset of rock 'n' roll. The tremendous popularity of Elvis Presley meant that shops went through hundreds of Presley records a week, not only

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because he was popular, but because 78s were brittle and often broke. As Presley was joined by Bill Haley and Chuck Berry, the viability of a stand alone music shop seemed possible and was cemented with the arrival of the Beatles, who by contrast, sold half his many singles on the sturdier 45s. A few of the shops that Jones interviews for *Last Shop Standing* are from this period, and sadly one, Hudson's, actually closed during the course of filming, after having been open for over a hundred years. However, the bulk of the record stores featured in *Last Shop Standing* owe their birth to the punk era and the primacy it placed on localism. Many of the local punk records were sold directly to local music shops, and quite a few of the more successful shops are known in North America for their record distribution practices, namely Rough Trade, Beggars Banquet, Rounder Records, etc.

According to the shop owners, the 1980s and early 1990s, were seen as the golden era of music retailing as the development of the British equivalent of the Billboard Charts took place under Gallop Polling. Major corporate record labels courted the small independent shops in an effort to gain sales and chart position, often by giving away records to the stores and in some cases offering services like free bookkeeping. As one owner put it, "If it sold enough in the shops, it entered the charts at a good position. If it had a good position, the large chains like Woolworths and HMV carried it. If the large chains carried it, the radio figured they ought to play it because people wanted to hear it."

Surprisingly, and contrary to what we hear in North America, many of the shop owners do not pin the downfall of the record shops on the rise of mp3s and illegal downloading. Although illegal downloading caused many of their customers to fade away, they nevertheless felt this desertion was the result of the erosion of goodwill caused by the introduction of CDs, sold to the public at 25 pounds a piece (roughly \$40 CDN) while costing less than 2 pounds (\$3) to manufacture. Instead, they blame the demise of the independent music store on the adoption of albums as a "loss leader" in grocery stores, where music was discounted to below cost in order to entice shoppers into the grocery store. Napster and iTunes might have signified the beginning of the end, but this was the killing blow. Prior to the arrival of CDs in grocery store discount bins, Britain had over 2200 independent music stores; afterwards, less than two hundred remained. Shop owners could simply no longer compete on price.

While *Last Shop Standing* argues that the independent record shop is undergoing a resurgence, spurred on in part by celebrations like Record Store Day, I think it's perhaps too early to tell. Similarly, although some shop owners are quick to point to the return of long playing vinyl records as a fetish item among music enthusiasts, it seems telling that the most successful shops have been those that diversified in some way. Rough Trade and Beggars Banquet distributed independent records throughout the UK and North America and appear in the film to be doing well, while other successful shops seem to have gotten through by also selling musical instruments and paraphernalia. Some now feature live bands on a weekly basis and the documentary closes with an intriguing "Pies & Vinyl" shop that sells slices of pies and records.

Thus, while it might be too early to pop the champagne, what does seem apparent is that after a decade of decline, we are in a fascinating period of evolution and British music lovers have a wide variety of shopping choices open to them.

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Some good insights Erin. Thanks for the review!