The Life, Death and Afterlife of the Record Store

A Global History

Edited by Gina Arnold, John Dougan, Christine Feldman-Barrett & Matthew Worley

BLOOMSBURY

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Introduction

Gina Arnold, John Dougan, Christine Feldman-Barrett,
and Matthew Worley

I have watched independent record stores evaporate all over America and Europe. That's why I go into as many as I can and buy records whenever possible. If we lose the independent record store, we lose big. Every time you buy your records at one of these places, it's a blow to the empire.

—Henry Rollins

Record stores keep the human social contact alive, it brings people together. Without the independent record stores, the community breaks down with everyone sitting in front of their computers.

—Ziggy Marley

The digital economy of the early twenty-first century has proven disastrous for many long-standing bricks-and-mortar businesses and perhaps the most beleaguered of these retail casualties is the record store. Doubly impacted by the technological changes to music dissemination and shifting market habits incurred by internet commerce, the record store is increasingly an obsolete construct. Among the first to shutter were the large chains (e.g., Sam Goody's, Tower, Virgin, HMV, among others), megastores ill-equipped to respond to changing consumer interest in a "clutter-free" future wherein the ownership of physical media would be supplanted by the streaming economy's impermanent access to digital files. Now, vanishing with increasing regularity are independent record stores. Once gathering places for like-minded consumers and nascent band members that provided a forum for innovation and creativity and a fulcrum for social change have been transformed, with some exceptions, into reliquaries where obsessives and eccentrics collect expensive, limited-edition vinyl artifacts. The demise of the local record store is a harbinger of the kinds of problems inherent in such a seismic cultural shift.

This book explores, from a variety of perspectives and methodologies, how record stores became such important locales. As an agora, a community center, and a busy critical forum for taste, culture, and politics, the record store prefigured social media. Once conduits to new music, frequently bypassing the corporate music industry in ways now done more easily via the internet, many independent record stores, in direct opposition to rock radio programmed by corporate interests, championed the most local of economic enterprises, allowing social mobility to well up from them in

unexpected ways. In this regard, record stores speak volumes about our relationship to shopping, capitalism, and art. The editors of this anthology believe that record stores are spaces rife for examination because their cultural history is in some ways the story of the best side of capitalism seen in microcosm. To that end, three analytical motifs are utilized: cultural history, urban geography, and auto-ethnography to find out what individual record stores meant to individual people, but also what they meant to communities, to musical genres, and to society in general. What was their role in shaping social practices, aesthetic tastes, and even, loosely put, ideologies? This collection of stories and memories and facts about a variety of local stores not only recenters the record store as a marketplace of ideas but also explores and celebrates a neglected personal history of many lives.

The focus of this volume is on the culture of record stores from roughly the mid-twentieth century through the early 2000s, stores that, in some instances, were essential to the development of local music scenes. Related to this is the record store as subcultural space, how these clubhouses for music fanatics were, at times, genre-specific sanctuaries for "outsider communities" such as punk, metal, soul and R&B, and hip-hop. Independent record stores have often served as a public sphere for such "outcasts," providing a space for them to gather where, to paraphrase Jürgen Habermas, opinions take shape and are circulated, and decisions are made without violence and, from the mid-to-late twentieth century onward, private places where misfits could meet up with other misfits. These accounts fall under the heading of auto-ethnographies in which participants reflect upon the centrality of a specific record store and its impact on a city's cultural vitality. As important cultural spaces, record stores have been portrayed in the fictional films *Empire Records* (1995), *High Fidelity* (2000), *Hearts Beat Loud* (2018), *Mixtape* (2021), and documentaries *I Need That Record* (2008), *Sound It Out* (2011), *Last Shop Standing* (2012), and the Tower Records story *All Things Must Pass* (2015), as well as in books like Graham Jones's *Last Shop Standing* (2015), Eilon Paz's *Dust & Grooves: Adventures in Record Collecting* (2015), Marcus Barnes's *Around the World in 80 Record Stores* (2018), and Garth Cartwright's *Going for a Song: A Chronicle of the UK Record Shop* (2018).

More recently, this idea was made surprisingly literal in the 2022 animated movie *Minions: The Rise of Gru*. In the film, which is set in the early 1970s, a group of supervillains called the Vicious Six have their lair in the basement of a downtown record store called Criminal Records, and it's difficult to imagine a setting better designed to tap into baby boomer memories. Like real record stores of that era, the aisles are lined with racks of LPs, with prominently displayed covers of popular FM rock radio staples like *Frampton Comes Alive*; the whole place is presided over by a snotty clerk called Nefario, who only allows favored customers into the inner circle of villainy if he utters a secret password and plays a Linda Ronstadt 45 on the stereo . . . backwards.[1]

Minions: The Rise of Gru is aimed at the under-ten set, but there is no getting away from the sensation that its true audience is not their parents but their grandparents. Moreover, implicit in the setting is everything this book posits. Record stores in the 1970s *were* lairs of a sort, not for supervillains but for society's gentler outcasts, which

is to say anyone who needed to escape from the tight bonds of mainstream culture. The life story of Mark Trehus, for example, epitomizes the phenomenon: herein he relates his postwar upbringing with distant, alcoholic parents, a descent into drugs in the 1970s, then a rebirth through the medium of rock music, vinyl LPs, and the purely American joys of owning a small business. Mark's personal "Criminal Records" was Oar Folkjokeopus in Minneapolis, and it doesn't really deviate that far from the one depicted in *Minions: The Rise of Gru*. The same goes for record stores located in the heart of Berlin and Brisbane and London and Tehran, as well as all the other record stores in all the other cities explored herein. These spaces served as sleeper cells of a sort, where rebellious youth, sickened by the mainstream, could gather with the like-minded. In many of the locations outside of America, record stores served an even more explicitly political purpose, whether as an escape from fascism, communism, racism, or religious fanaticism, but all of them served a similar purpose, allowing their devotees to hide in plain sight.

* * *

The history of the record store as cultural nexus ostensibly begins with the opening of Spillers Record Shop in Cardiff, Wales, in 1894. Officially recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's oldest, Spillers sold cylinder recordings and phonographs a mere seventeen years after Thomas Edison introduced the world to the technology that enabled sound to be recorded and played back. Edison's invention was altered and improved a decade later by Emile Berliner who patented the gramophone, a device that would become the first commercially successful machine to play another Berliner invention, the flat disc, items Spillers soon added to its inventory. Today, the store is thriving with patrons of all ages forming queues in the early morning for the limited-edition vinyl releases on Record Store Day. "Over-the-counter music sales have consistently been holding their own since I took the business over from my dad in 2010," notes owner Ashli Todd. "But I have absolutely no desire to expand or to do anything massively lucrative, other than sustain the viability of Spillers for more years to come. I just want to run a lovely, sustainable record shop in Cardiff for the people who value that."[2]

In the United States, the emergence of record store culture dates to 1932 and the opening of George's Song Shop in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Founded by brothers Eugene and Bernie George, it remains the nation's oldest record store that, remarkably, survived during one of the worst periods of the Great Depression, one that saw significant declines in industrial production and gross domestic product, as well as a skyrocketing unemployment rate that, by 1933, had reached 20 percent. After Eugene died from a stroke in 1962, his nineteen-year-old son John took over ownership and runs the shop to this day. The five-story location stocks over one million records and compact discs and its signage proudly proclaims, "If we don't have it, nobody does." While the city of Johnstown has seen a precipitous decline in population since the 1960s (in 2017 it was the third fastest shrinking city in the United States) George's Song Shop, now over ninety years old, remains, thanks in part to the resurgence of

vinyl sales. "It started with the young people," George says. "Anybody that walks in here under 35 years old, they're looking for records. If they're older than 35, they're usually looking for CDs."[3] There is, however, no talk of retirement. "[This store] has been in my blood all my life," he notes, "I could retire today and not have to worry about anything, but I don't want to, I just love coming to work. I don't want to give it up even though I'm getting up there in age, so to speak. I feel pretty young, and I'll go as long as I can."[4]

The long history of places such as Spillers and George's Song Shop, while noteworthy, is, increasingly, the exception rather than the rule. The recent closure of Boston's Skippy White's Records (2019) and the possible closure of Nashville's Ernest Tubb's Record Shop (2022)—venerable stores combining for 135 years of business—represent not just the loss of bricks-and-mortar retailers but, more significantly, the loss of shared cultural spaces. Fred LeBlanc (Skippy White was his radio DJ handle) opened his shop in 1961 selling primarily soul, funk, gospel, and R&B records. A French-Canadian from Waltham, Massachusetts, whose last remaining store was in the heart of the city's Roxbury neighborhood, White's "decades of devotion to the music and musicians he loves has earned him almost unrivaled respect and love from Boston's black community."[5] And while the business had been eroding for quite a while, octogenarian White admitted that even the public's rekindled love of vinyl arrived too late after bricks-and-mortar retailers were decimated by digital sales.

> It used to be that if you wanted to find out what was happening, the latest in what was going on, you [went] to the record store to find out. That's what was happening, all those many years . . . a place where those who love the music can pour over the details, the stories, where these conversations can lead to new discoveries.[6]

Despite being known as "Music City USA" Nashville had a dearth of record stores when Ernest Tubb opened his in 1947. As was the case with Skippy White, Ernest Tubb's specialized in selling only two kinds of music: country and western. The iconic shop, which relocated to downtown Nashville's Lower Broadway in 1951, predated the existence of the city's famed Music Row and many of the celebrity-themed honky tonks which now line both sides of the street. Enhancing the shop's reputation as one of the country's most important specialty record stores was its hosting the Midnite Jamboree, the informal, intimate post Grand Ole Opry show that, for over seventy years, featured legendary performances by hundreds of country stars including Hank Williams, Sr., Patsy Cline, and Loretta Lynn. According to music historian Bill DeMain, "Along with [revered honky tonk] Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, Tubb's is one of the last remaining connections that Nashville's Lower Broadway has to old country music."[7] The store's precarious future is partly the result of it "aging out" its current location. Tourists crowding the nearby honky tonks are disinclined to shop for records, an economic reality exacerbated by Nashville's relentless gentrification of the past twenty years making the building and the lot on which it stands extremely valuable real estate—just not for a record store. Recently, however, the store and lot on which it stands was sold to a small group of local investors that included Tubb's grandson Ernest Dale Tubb III for the astronomical price of $18.3 million ($2,000 per square foot, more than

triple what the property sold for in 2020) forestalling its imminent demise. While, as of this writing, there are no definitive plans on how the site will change and function (it cannot be demolished or the exterior changed significantly as it's a protected historical building), current speculation is it will be more than simply a record store—it might become a museum/venue that, however, continues to sell two kinds of records: country and western.[8]

Skippy White's and Ernest Tubb's and several other stores, once significant cultural landmarks of their respective communities for more than forty years, are now places that are gone. The buildings now repurposed or razed by the wrecking ball, their histories slowly slipping below the horizon of recognition. The latter happened in March 2020 to middle Tennessee's most important record store of the mid-twentieth century, Randy's Record Shop in Gallatin, Tennessee, a store that Greg Reish, director of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University notes, "[was immeasurable in] helping to establish middle Tennessee as an epicenter of the American popular music industry in the postwar years and launching the careers of numerous country, bluegrass, rock 'n' roll, gospel, blues, ragtime and pop artists."[9]

"Nostalgia," writes essayist Joe Bonomo, "means a desire to return home, and the special, irreplaceable pleasures there, even if that home is defined by its absence."[10] For generations born in the mid-twentieth century or later, records and the music on them have been the prism through which individual identities and communities were created and expressed. For all the stories of record shops closing, there are still steadfast independent entrepreneurs opening small shops sustained by the recent dramatic increase in vinyl sales and the coveted, exclusive limited-edition releases featured on Record Store Day, an event aiding in the transformation of the twenty-first-century record store into a postmodern haven for vinyl connoisseurs both young and old. From coast to coast, in US cities large and small, record store culture is being maintained and, in some instances, flourishing as retailers maximize their e-commerce presence on social media giving their local stores a national profile. This includes "how-to" videos for those interested in opening a store with little or no retail experience.[11] This is also true globally, with important record stores functioning as de facto community centers supporting local and regional music scenes in places such as Lagos, Nigeria; Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Kingston, Jamaica; Beirut, Lebanon; Havana, Cuba; and Reykjavik, Iceland. And while a sense of loss, itself the residue of collateral damage rendered by the inevitability of change, is the leitmotif of this anthology, the hope is that, in sum, this will be not necessarily an encomium to a bygone era but a nuanced understanding of what has been lost and what significance there is in what remains.

Notes

1 To promote *Minions: The Rise of Gru* in London, a pop-up record store called Despicable Discs opened in Foubert's Place which claimed to "[bring] a '70s explosion back to Carnaby [Street] . . . the one-stop vinyl swap shop will see visitors exchange their own groovy records from the 1950s, '60s, and 70s with all records

donated to Oxfam." https: www.shaftesbury.co.uk/en/media/press-releases/2022/shaftesbury-announces-the-opening-of-minions--the-rise-of-gru-re.html (accessed July 30, 2022).

2 A. Todd, "Remixing the Record Store," wales.com/en-us/economy/investment/remixing-record-store (accessed June 30, 2022).

3 L. Harris, "America's Oldest Record Store Is Just as Hip Today as When It Opened in 1932," parade.com/661040/lharris-2/Americas-oldest-record-store-is-just-as-hip-today-as-when-it-opened-in-1932, April 21, 2018 (accessed June 15, 2022).

4 Ibid.

5 B. Coleman, "Boston's Skippy White: A Vinyl Life," medium.com/@briancoleman/bostons-skippy-white-a-vinyl-life-3cd10422dbe April 16, 2018 (accessed June 23, 2022).

6 Christopher Gavin, "Skippy White Has Been Selling Records in Boston for Nearly Six Decades. But It's Time to Close up Shop," boston.com/news/local-news/2019/12/19/skippy-whites-records-closing, December 19, 2019 (accessed July 3, 2022).

7 "Ernest Tubb's Record Shop Is Closing," YouTube.com/watch?v=uvWL-gzRKIM (accessed July 11, 2022).

8 Ernest Tubb Record Shop Property Sold, Hope for Preservation Renewed, SavingCountryMusic.com July 29, 2022. https://www.savingcountrymusic.com/ernest-tubb-record-shop-property-sold-hope-for-preservation-renewed/?fbclid=IwAR34dtX14eF9PEq4C7yZ1kr-4VMbV2zxxmf29XOrhKmrT8hDuUEzlGL47Hw#l6793al3k4hjewws6t8 (accessed July 30, 2022).

9 Randy's Record Shop Demolished, theportlandsun.com April 25, 2020. https://www.theportlandsun.com/news/randy-s-record-shop-demolished/article_30e280e6-84fb-11ea-87ee-4be4f7e1de27.html (accessed July 30, 2022).

10 J. Bonomo, "Muscle Memory," nosuchthingaswas.com/2018/02, February 23, 2018 (accessed July 5, 2022).

11 A YouTube search of "record store videos" will lead the curious down a very deep rabbit hole of information from the video series Let's Go to the Record Store, HiFi America Record Store Tours, and the UK's Behind the Counter, as well as videos from individual stores such as Amoeba Records (three California locations), The "In" Groove (Phoenix, AZ), Noble Records (Charlotte, NC), NTX Vinyl (Dallas/Fort Worth, TX), Too Many Records (Portland, OR), Spin Me Round (Easton, PA), among many others.

Prologue

The Record Store That Saved My Life

Mark Trehus

The event jumpstarting this collection was the closing of Minneapolis' Treehouse Records (formerly Oar Folkjokeopus, more commonly known as Oar Folk) in 2017. I'd posted a link to Facebook about the store's final days which started a conversation with Gina Arnold and Christine Feldman-Barrett, the three of us, in one manner or another, having had a connection to the store. It was Christine who suggested we put together an edited collection on "record store culture" past and present. Gina and I agreed, and we thought, after we'd recruited fellow coeditor Matthew Worley, it would be a fun and important project.

Early into the call for chapter submissions, Mark Trehus contacted me about Oar Folk's/Treehouse's inclusion in the anthology. It made perfect sense insofar as his story was unique; he'd been a customer, employee, and, eventually, owner of the location that had occupied the corner of 26th and Lyndale Avenue in South Minneapolis for nearly fifty years. The store's distinctive name was the result of previous owner Vern Sanden who decided to create a quasi-portmanteau of two of his favorite albums: Skip Spence's Oar and Roy Harper's Folkjokeopus. When Mark assumed ownership in 2001, he renamed it Treehouse (earlier having a record label of the same name), but the store never lost the spirit, dynamism, and cultural impact of the original Oar Folk, a record store that, from its inception in 1973, "was a key portal to new music for adventurous fans and musicians in the Twin Cities."[1]

Mark recalls Oar Folk as a "postgraduate rock and roll maniacs' school. The tuition was paid for with my weekly paychecks and the receipts were evidence of edgier record purchases." From the moment he bought the first Modern Lovers album there in the mid-1970s, he was linked to the store, the long-term relationship (and subsequent employment and ownership) cemented after years of addiction ended with sobriety in 1985. It's a story best told by Mark, one that unfolded via email and phone conversations between us in 2021–2, with some material excerpted from Cyn Collins's book Complicated Fun: The Birth of Minneapolis Punk and Indie Rock, 1974-1984. "I was on that corner for 32 years," he notes pensively, "that's a long time."

—John Dougan

I was born in Minneapolis in 1955 the eldest of three boys. At the age of four, I discovered my mother's modest collection of 45s and was drawn to the rock and roll sounds of Elvis, Bill Haley and the Comets, and the Big Bopper. I was fascinated with the process of stacking those seven-inch platters, pulling the arm over the top securing them on the spindle, flipping the switch, watching as one record dropped from the stack onto the turntable, the tonearm swinging over and briefly hovering above the entrance groove, dropping the needle onto the disc—and presto! Big Bopper's "The Purple People Eater Meets the Witch Doctor" came out of those tinny-sounding, cloth-covered speakers. The die was cast.

My father was a high-functioning alcoholic, never missing a day of work as a purchasing agent for a computer company, but he usually checked out after dinner with home projects and other distractions like magazines devoted to his passion for flying and his Colt 45 malt liquor. My mother was a clinically depressed stay-at-home Mom struggling with bipolar disorder, who was often drunk when I came home from school. My parents' favorability barometer during my upbringing was measured by my academic achievement. Staying out of their way and not engaging with them was how I learned to survive. I felt alone and defective.

I was a gifted student, but as time went on, I rebelled, and my priorities changed. The Beatles appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964 altered the way I looked at the world. Soon I graduated from throwing snowballs at cars and stealing cartons of cigarettes from the supermarket to shoplifting records from large department stores. Bullied by older kids in the neighborhood I was desperate for acceptance. Weekend drinking and sleepovers at the homes of my friends turned into daily pot and frequent LSD use by the time I reached high school. I wanted to be removed from the plasticity and shallowness of my empty, dull, suburban existence. I wanted to live in a different reality without the pain of a dysfunctional life at home. Drugs and music were my escape, and I was addicted to both.

By ninth grade I began to frequent rock concerts all the while accumulating an increasingly large collection of LPs. Discovering new music became the principal focus of my existence. My musical palette expanded as I soaked up every live show I could attend—from B.B. King to the Bonzo Dog Band. Tony Glover's midnight radio show on KDWB in Minneapolis and Beaker Street with Clyde Clifford on KAAY in Little Rock, Arkansas; distant sounds transmitted in the dead of night provided an ongoing education in the musical counterculture. I felt different from those who seemed to have prescribed destinies and for the next decade I remained directionless. I tried college, but it didn't stick. After a harrowing brush with the law, I needed to find a more legitimate way to pay the bills besides selling drugs. I couldn't conceive of a life that didn't embrace the counterculture. Rock and roll had always been a refuge, but I now looked to it for salvation.

* * *

Oar Folkjokeopus was more than just a record store. It was a clubhouse for music fanatics. It was a place where people came to listen to music and talk about their

favorite stuff. The exchange of information that happens at record store was essential to building the great community we had here.[2]

—Peter Jesperson, former manager of Oar Folk and the Replacements

Shopping at Oar Folk could be intimidating. My future roommate, Hüsker Dü drummer Grant Hart, referred to it as "a place to be condescended to." My first interaction with the store was to phone it in search of a particular Patti Smith 45. Andy Schwartz, who would go on to edit the influential music magazine the *New York Rocker*, answered. I asked sheepishly, "Do you have the Patti Smith 45 with 'My Generation' on the B-side?" "Of course, we do!" he sneered, slamming the phone into its cradle, hanging up, confirming the brash attitude of the hipper-than-thou record clerk for which Oar Folk was notorious. Despite his brusque tone (or maybe because of it), I immediately headed down to this singularly different record shop on the south side of town and bought that record.

In 1977, Oar Folk was as much a clubhouse as it was a record store. New and used records made their way into the hands of eager listeners via the store's influential tastemakers and gatekeepers like Terry Katzman and store manager Peter Jesperson. Promotional LPs regularly came in, serving the frugal budgets of the shop's steady customers. I went to the store almost daily and plopped on the floor against the front counter to feverishly comb through the newest secondhand arrivals. Nearly everything in those days was uniformly priced: a near mint record might garner the seller as much as $1.75, which in turn would be priced at around $3.50. Older, used records were sold for as much as current promotional arrivals; rarely was there any price difference for these future blue-chip rarities. Records that Peter felt strongly about were bought in large quantities because he knew, as an influencer, he would sell them. When the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" came out, there was a line down the street of people waiting to buy it. Oar Folk was where you mingled with like-minded music fans and developed long-standing friendships. It was a clique of musicians, writers, artists, scenesters, and record buyers where everything revolved around what was new and cool or older and essential. There were no bongs or "head shop" gear sold here. Oar Folk was all about rock and roll.

Soon, Oar Folk and the Longhorn Bar (aka Jay's Longhorn, Minneapolis' version of New York's famed CBGB) were where I spent a considerable amount of my free time. My best friend Thor Lindsay (who would soon move to Portland, Oregon, and eventually start T/K Records with trust fund heir Tim Kerr) and I broke from the blue-collar, booze, and pot-fueled rowdy crew we knew from high school and started hanging out with the artists, musicians, and scene-makers comprising the small group of square pegs at the Longhorn. Here was a place where those who self-identified as misfits connected. And Oar Folk was the mecca to which the scene's musicians and record buyers were drawn; more importantly, these places were ours. Thor and I enthusiastically separated ourselves from the mainstream, trading in our bell-bottoms for ripped jeans, maligned and disparaged by the unenlightened philistines from the Northeast suburbs as a couple of punk rock losers. We wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Despite the rough shape I was in, by the early 1980s I'd managed to get jobs at other area record stores the Wax Museum and Harpo's. Peter had given me a job DJing between live sets at the Longhorn, but my dream was to work at Oar Folk. However, I was still too messed up, a fact that didn't exactly sway Peter (and, later, Jim Peterson) into hiring me. Hell, I wouldn't have hired me either.

In August 1985 I went into treatment. On October 7, 1985, a fire gutted Oar Folk. Vern Sanden had bought the store in 1973 from Wayne Klayman, who'd opened it in 1970 as North Country Music, its name taken from the Bob Dylan song "Girl from the North Country." Vern was a regular customer, older than Klayman, with previous work experience as an air traffic controller, not exactly the resume you'd expect for a prospective record store owner, but he loved music, especially 1950s rockabilly.[3] While it was Peter's tastes that shaped Oar Folk more than any other single factor, Vern was often behind the scenes, buying cool rockabilly, blues, and soul reissues for the shop. It was his vision that allowed Peter an outlet for his passion and knowledge, which in turn played an inestimable role in fueling the scene the store fostered.[4]

Not long after the fire, Terry Katzman and Jim Peterson left to open their own store, Garage D'or, with financial assistance from recording engineer Paul Stark, one of the cofounders of the indie record label Twin/Tone. It was located six blocks from Oar Folk, across the street from Twin/Tone's offices. Vern took a chance on me and my sobriety. I was hired along with former Uneeda Records owner Bill Melton to comanage the rebuilding store.

A rivalry developed between Oar Folk and Garage D'or. Other shops like Northern Lights and Let It Be had opened and record-buying options were multiplying as the scene splintered and spread. But nothing would fully replace the spirit and relevance of the pre-fire Oar Folk. The fire symbolized the end of an era, and the early 1980s glory of the Twin Cities music scene was starting to fade, with several stores competing for a share of the table scraps.

When Bill decided to leave the shop, I became sole manager. As the so-called grunge movement emerged in the late 1980s, Oar Folk was the first to pick up on bands like Mudhoney and Nirvana. I had also become immersed in running my own record label with my partner Johnny Dromette (né Thompson) who'd recently moved to Minneapolis from Cleveland. We released records from a band formerly "managed" by John (the Pagans), and Minneapolis upstarts Cows and Babes in Toyland. Because I also loved 1960s garage rock the racks were dotted with reissues and new releases from local and regional neo-garage bands as well as those from Australia and Sweden. We still championed old favorites like the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, and Pere Ubu, but we also carried a great deal of blues, R&B, soul, jazz, and country records. Although the pre-fire Oar Folk was an impossible act to follow, I did everything a selfishly obsessive music lover could do to maintain the store's relevancy. It wasn't always easy. Managing the store, the label, and my sobriety was a lot to take on.

The technological reality we faced during this time was the transition from vinyl to compact discs. While other record stores and aging head shops (e.g., local veteran indie stalwart the Electric Fetus) were abandoning vinyl to stock CDs, Vern and I

stubbornly held out for as long as we could. We finally broke down and went semi-digital, it was necessary for the store's survival. Plus, at that time, there was a lot of music that wasn't available on vinyl. But Vern and I loved vinyl, that's where our hearts were, and we stuck to our guns. Vern always had my back in that regard and I can't thank him enough.

Vern had been talking for some time about getting out of the record business and asked me if I was interested in taking over the store. The building's landlord, however, wouldn't offer me a long-term lease; he was preparing to sell the property, which included a commercial space next door and a duplex behind the record shop. I was faced with unemployment and an uncertain future. I'd arrived at a career crossroads. I was forty-five years old and had no marketable skills.

I decided to take the plunge and took out a second mortgage on my house, which covered about half of the purchase price. After being turned down by five banks, a local community bank finally gave me an additional loan. Cobbling together additional funds from family members, I'd managed to raise enough money to buy the properties. I was scared and nearly broke. What the hell was I doing? I didn't know the first thing about property management but had just purchased three run-down buildings in order to save my job. There wasn't enough money left for me to buy Oar Folk's inventory or the business per se and after some uncomfortable negotiations, I agreed to help facilitate Vern's going-out-of-business sale. On March 31, 2001, he left with his remaining stock and store name; on April 1, I opened Treehouse Records. I put my life savings of $15,000 into new inventory. With a drained bank account, a mountain of debt, and a handful of used records from my collection, I became a record store owner.

Within a year, Treehouse looked a lot like the old Oar Folk and the immediate community support was uplifting. I hired the latter-day Oar Folk assistant manager to help run the store, with part-time help filling in evenings and weekends. This went on for a couple of years, until I found out I had been carrying the hepatitis C virus for nearly two decades, a consequence of my prior drug use. The disease had progressed, and I had cirrhosis of the liver. After forty-eight weeks of debilitating twice-weekly Interferon self-injections and daily Ribavirin capsules (I had every side effect imaginable), I was unsteady on my feet, largely zapped of energy, and my long-term romantic relationship ended. During this health crisis, much of the daily work had fallen on my employees, and I took a far less active physical role in the store's operation.

Records started disappearing as supervision got lax. I didn't handle it well and things got messy. As the store owner, I'd instructed my employees to give me first crack at the used record spoils. Unfortunately, I'd underestimated the level of entitlement of some of my younger employees, who resented my addiction to the juicer fruits of the business. My longtime assistant manager, whom I relied on to handle the store's day-to-day operation, left to manage a sports collectables shop in a suburban mall. In the meantime, I'd lost touch with the mechanics of running the business. I'd also discovered that he was a "player's coach" who was more concerned with employee popularity than he was living up to the trust I'd placed in him. Still, replacing him and training someone new at this most specialized of record stores was a daunting proposition.

The decision to shutter the doors in 2017 was semi-spur-of-the-moment, even though I'd been thinking about it for a while. It had been a great ride. I had had the greatest job in the world, along with amassing an insane record collection. I hosted in-store performances by everyone from Dan Penn and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown to the Clean and Rodriguez. Oar Folk/Treehouse had been acknowledged by major media outlets as one of (if not the best) record store(s) in the Twin Cities, even earning a blurb in a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame program. Between my recovery groups and my companions immersed in rock and roll, I had the best friends in the world. Adding to this was my engagement to a woman I met at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, who loved me enough to trade in New Orleans for the frozen north to be with me.

But not everything was idyllic. I realized and accepted that I was a terrible manager/owner with poor supervisory skills. I had a great record collection, but life felt empty. I was struggling with depression, complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), a lack of equanimity, and too often lashed out at employees or on social media platforms, garnering many younger detractors. I no longer trusted my employees, as several had committed grand larceny. One came to work just to steal a large portion of my personal collection—worth thousands of dollars—that I'd temporarily stored in the shop's basement while moving in with my fiancée. I naïvely assumed that employees still abided by an unwritten code that rendered the thought of ripping off a mom-and-pop store unthinkable—especially one with the status and reputation of Oar Folk/Treehouse. I was wrong and was emotionally devastated by the betrayal.

Compounding this was the conflict I experienced as the liberal, pro-small business, iconoclastic, idealistic champion of a record store with history and integrity at odds with the positive impact gentrification was having on my economic bottom line. I had a real estate lawyer friend tell me not to fight the changes to the neighborhood because it was increasing my property value. But the part of me who wanted to maintain the integrity of the neighborhood and the store was far more important than what was going to pad my wallet when I sold the store and retired. The six-story, chain store-anchored apartment building blocking the sun from my south-facing windows was a constant reminder that I was losing that battle.

I'd arranged an in-store performance in May by Minneapolis punk rock legends the Suicide Commandos to celebrate the release of *Time Bomb*, their first album of new material in thirty-nine years. It was important to me that they do the last in-store appearance. The Commandos were the band that introduced me to a new era of rock 'n' roll and, subsequently, a new way of life. I don't remember exactly what I said as I was introducing them, but I blurted out that I'd be closing the store at the end of the year. There was a deep, collective gasp. No one was prepared for it, including me, but in an instant, I'd made it official. I was simply exhausted, burned out, and knew it was time to move on. Even though there had been some lean years, the store was operating in the black. I arranged a small New Year's Eve retirement party with live music, including a performance by my friend and musical idol Spider John Koerner. When it was over, I locked the doors of Treehouse for the last time.

After the store closed, I went into a funk. I thought, this is what I do, this is who I am. If the store ceases to be relevant, does that mean I'm irrelevant too? So, I let the

space sit with my old inventory for well over a year until my wife and my therapists helped me out of my rut and see that there was indeed life after retirement. I did some remodeling to upgrade the space and make it rentable. The last thing I expected was that someone would open another record store. I'd concluded that my business model was no longer relevant or sustainable in my rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. I thought it might become a coffee shop or an upscale deli. I did meet with a few people interested in renting the space, but their business plans weren't particularly compelling. Eventually, I gave in to a persistent woman who reimagined the site as a boutique incorporating the history of Oar Folk/Treehouse emphasizing its importance in local music history. The lease was signed just before the Covid pandemic hit. So far, the place remains shuttered. The build-out continues.

Retirement has been a revelation as my perspective on life has changed dramatically. However, I still have a deep, abiding love of music. My records are important artifacts, like paintings and precious antiques. I still have plenty of music in my personal collection: 50,000 or so albums and singles in my home, with several thousand more spread over five storage units. I am fighting a never-ending battle to consolidate the records, music books, CDs, and assorted ephemera and disperse the rest of it. I still frequent my neighborhood record shop. Music was, is, and always will be my life's passion. The candy store may be closed, but I still have a sweet tooth.

Notes

1 C. Collins, *Complicated Fun: The Birth of Minneapolis Punk and Indie Rock 1974-1984*, 67 (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2017).

2 Ibid.

3 North Country Music, https://twincitiesmusichighlights.net/north-country-music/ (accessed July 30, 2022).

4 Collins, *Complicated Fun*, 85.

Part I

Record Stores as Community

1

"We 'Bout It 'Bout It"

The Independent Record Store in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Jay Jolles

This past summer, when Hurricane Ida made landfall in New Orleans, barely eclipsed in intensity and damage by Hurricane Katrina, it claimed an integral part of New Orleans music history in its wake. The Karnofsky Tailor Shop, known more famously as the place that Louis Armstrong got his start—and his first cornet—was located on Rampart Street, a home to other historic jazz landmarks central to New Orleans.[1] The main commercial corridor in New Orleans, South Rampart Street is nestled deep in the swampy back end of the city in an area densely populated by Black New Orleanians as a result of the city's post-slavery racial order. In the 1920s, Morris Karnofsky opened Morris Music a few blocks away. It became the first place in New Orleans to sell jazz records.[2] While the Karnofsky building wasn't in great condition before Ida, it had been added to a list of properties and historical landmarks marked to be restored.[3] However, when it collapsed in late August,[4] the destruction of the Karnofsky Shop threw into sharp relief how the impacts of natural disasters are not just limited to infrastructure, demonstrating their potential to erode the cultural fabric of a city.

New Orleans is often hailed as the birthplace of jazz, cementing the genre as inextricable from the founding of the city. Yet, music more broadly is a fundamental aspect of the culture of New Orleans, with a litany of genres, such as sissy rap, bounce, and zydeco, finding storied local repute. While there exists a considerable body of scholarship regarding the relationship of the city to music, and vice versa, there has been little critical examination of the social spaces both produced by and enmeshed in the music. In the context of life in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, the genres considered endemic to the city worked to connote a sense of home subject to a particular diaspora in which the vernacular traditions integral to the New Orleans music scene were fundamentally altered. So, while scholars have long written about sound and place in conjunction, particularly when it comes to music, the recovery effort following Katrina complicated that calculus.

In this chapter, following Ana María Ochoa Gautier's notion of the "aural public sphere"[5] in which music, media, and discourse circulate, I argue that in New Orleans,

the independent record store is not merely a locus but rather an engine of culture that both establishes new and reifies old existing social and cultural ties in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Such a function not only works to elaborate upon the ways local record stores have long championed local interests but also demonstrates how the social spaces produced by the record store in cities or other locales which have experienced sustained large-scale collective trauma have the potential to serve as sites of and for memory.

Bounce: The Sound of Music Post-Katrina

The musical response—both locally and globally—to Katrina was swift and robust. Ranging from the charity songs produced by artists like Green Day & U2[6] to Lil Wayne's incisive critiques of the Bush administration reflected in "Georgia . . . Bush" and "Tie My Hands," the event and its aftermath worked to usher in a new era of music from and within the city. While the city is perhaps most widely and popularly known for its jazz legacy, there is an irony inherent in the fact that it is deceptively difficult to find modern jazz in present-day New Orleans. Most highly successful New Orleans jazz musicians, or at least the ones that one might associate with the city, built their careers elsewhere.[7] One of the city's signature genres, however, is a particular type of rap music known as bounce. A grassroots genre with an "instantly recognizable beat based on two drum machine rhythms—the "Triggerman" and the "Brown" beat—sampled and resampled for use in virtually every bounce song," has a long history.[8]

Bounce emerged in relation to "local themes, communal affirmation, and dance."[9] Sonically, bounce encapsulates the synergy of many elements of not only New Orleans music but also the music of the southern more broadly. Relying upon heavy brass instrumentation, "due, in part, to a sustained dialogue with brass band music," bounce is replete with call-and-response vocals.[10] Aside from its signature rhythm, perhaps the thing that makes a track's sound most legibly bounce is its emphasis on the local. According to Holly Hobbs, founder of the NOLA Hip-Hop and Bounce Archive, the genre is really "the music of . . . the working class and underclass of New Orleans."[11] Given the well-documented assessment(s) that the city's working and underclasses were the most disproportionately affected by Hurricane Katrina, it is perhaps unsurprising that bounce artists took it upon themselves to chronicle this especially painful chapter of New Orleans history. Artists like Fifth Ward Webbie and Mia X in particular lamented the Bush administration and FEMA reconstruction efforts in their respective songs, "Fuck Katrina" and "My FEMA People."

These tunes and many like them demonstrate the importance of hearing a local story authored in a local voice. In bounce songs, which is often referred to as "project music,"[12] there is often an emphasis placed on repeated chanting phrases. In particular, artists will usually shout out or "roll call" specific housing projects, New Orleans neighborhoods, or wards. While intra and interward violence in New Orleans has long been a source of deep tragedy and heightened tensions, "the pan-New Orleans unity expressed in bounce has strong historical roots. This unity expressed in bounce stands

in direct contradiction to the tensions and violence that exist in the city."[13] Bounce thus represents a space in which the sonic clashing of these wards, made manifest by the distinct signatures each ward puts on their particular style of bounce, catalyzes a space of creative fusion instead of violence. Primarily recognized as club music, bounce is just one of many genres produced in and associated with New Orleans that serves a functional purpose. Much like the music of the second-line tradition and its corollary the jazz funeral, the main purpose of bounce is to get listeners moving. Bounce thus "has the ability to bind normally antagonistic groups and mentalities through dance, an ability made possible by the sole intent . . . to make people feel good."[14]

Following Katrina, the return to the city was slow and hard-fought. But a year after the storm, popular bounce artist Big Freedia returned to New Orleans, working almost single-handedly to revive the club bounce scene by hosting weekly "FEMA Fridays" at Caesar's in the West Bank. According to Freedia, "It was the only club open in New Orleans at the time."[15] As a result, the centrality of bounce to New Orleans's post-Katrina rebuilding cannot be overstated. After the storm, New Orleanians were forcibly relocated across the country,[16] resulting in the nation's largest internal diaspora since the civil war.[17] Evacuees from the storm thus took the genre with them to other cities. Big Freedia was one such artist, first arriving at an army base in Arkansas before ultimately ending up in Houston.[18] In Texas, Big Freedia and other local artists found new venues and, by extension, audiences for their music. As a result, the popularity of the genre grew, and Big Freedia began featuring on tracks with artists such as Beyoncé, Drake, Kesha, and Icona Pop. While the mainstreaming of the genre in the last decade has meant commercial success for Big Freedia and artists like her, many of the neighborhoods from where bounce primarily emerged are still struggling to rebuild.

Even today, population numbers in New Orleans hover a bit below 80 percent of its pre-Katrina health.[19] Moreover, the reinvention of the city, fueled by disaster capitalism, predatory lending, and a hardscrabble tourist market, has meant rising rent and property costs, displacing longtime citizens and replacing them with younger white gentrifiers. As such, there has been rightful concern about appropriation of the bounce genre and the ways in which it has undoubtedly been complicated by the changing demographics of the city. Unfortunately, this is a fairly common phenomenon, especially when it comes to genres that are bound up in or inextricable from the struggle of Black artists in particular. As Hobbs notes, "Blues artists didn't get any money from blues, or very few of them did. It wasn't until later that people figured out, oh, this music is important and these artists should be preserved."[20] Despite this, or perhaps in spite of it, bounce remains a patently New Orleans genre, continuing to evolve within and driven by the work of independent record stores in the city.

New Orleans Record Stores and the Aural Public Sphere

In her work on aural modernity in Latin America, Ana María Ochoa Gautier writes that an aural region is "constituted by the mediations and (dis)junctures between different practices enacted by sonic transculturations."[21] In much the same way, New Orleans'

aural contour is made up of an amorphous collection of sounds and styles, bound together by the relationship produced among race, place, and functionality.[22] And while Ochoa Gautier argues that in Latin America, this sonic constitution ultimately plays a negative role in developing what has been a profoundly unequal modernity, in New Orleans it instead works to invert some of the problematic paradigms that can plague life in the city. As such, I take up Ochoa Gautier's concept of the "aural public sphere" to demonstrate how the independent record store in New Orleans works as an indispensable engine of culture that seeks to fortify cultural ties through the power of rap and bounce specifically.

In particular, I explore two independent record stores integral to the musical fabric of New Orleans: Nuthin But Fire Records alongside Peaches Records and Tapes. These two stores, of the many scattered across the city,[23] are the only ones that sell primarily—almost exclusively—rap and bounce records. In the long aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, these two record stores exemplify the ways in which record stores have the potential to function as what sociologist Ray Oldenburg terms "third spaces," locales that are "informal and often gathering places where patrons could shop, interact, and take part in a communal process."[24] Not only do these record stores serve an economic function in a city still reeling from financial distress, they have also become markers of the city's march toward normalcy, an ever-present reminder of the adaptable and industrious nature of the city's music industry.

Concurrent with the rising influence of new media vis-á-vis the rise of streaming and internet-based music dissemination and promotion, Hurricane Katrina drew members of New Orleans' hip-hop scene to engage in entrepreneurial activities—side hustles, if you will—in order to supplement income. Performers often invested in small-scale operations, such as pursuing ownership of a local record store as one of many options. In his work on the significance of Black-owned record stores in Durham, North Carolina, Joshua Clark Davis writes, "Black merchandisers envisioned the record trade as an arena in which African Americans could pursue a broader strategy of economic self-sufficiency and sustaining black public life."[25] The industrious nature of these entrepreneurs demonstrates, among other things, how the tentacular reach of these stores in other different but similarly oriented industries benefits from and contributes to the aural public sphere. Much like the independent record store owners in Durham, "Many record retailers," particularly in the rap and bounce markets, "were inveterate entrepreneurs and ran a range of businesses, including nightclubs, recording labels, and entertainment management and promotion companies."[26] While Clark Davis's work is chiefly preoccupied with the significance of record stores in postwar North Carolina, such insights are relevant to this project in that they shed light on a similar set of circumstances shared by record stores and their owners in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Nuthin But Fire Records is "a hub of the local scene," owned by Sess 4-5, a rapper well known for putting on some of the biggest rap music events in the city.[27] As a result, Nuthin But Fire has become central to the enduring legacy of rap music in New Orleans, particularly bounce.[28] Opened in 2006, right after Katrina, Sess accounts for his success through a market heavily dedicated to bounce. Nuthin But Fire creates

a sort of triangulation among brass band music, bounce, and the clubs, drawing attention to the particular desires for a particular kind of sound. Located on North Claiborne Avenue, Nuthin But Fire is nestled deep in the predominantly Black South 7th Ward neighborhood of New Orleans, a part of town scarcely visited by tourists. As such, Nuthin But Fire represents, like Clark Davis notes of the Black-owned Snoopy's Records in Durham, "a crucial nexus where African American enterprise, consumer culture, community, and of course, music" all meet.[29]

Much like Nuthin But Fire, Peaches Records and Tapes is "independent, NOLA owned & [we] 'bout it 'bout it."[30] These two record stores are devoted to driving support for local rap and DJs, with Peaches being the only independent record store in New Orleans specializing in the distribution of rap records. Opened for the first time in 1975, Peaches was long housed in the old Tower Records building in the French Quarter. That is, until Hurricane Katrina. After the storm, due to rising rent costs and the continuing downward trend of the physical music market, the future of Peaches became a lot more precarious. As Joshua Clark Davis notes, this phenomenon is unfortunately quite common, resulting in the disproportionate shuttering of predominantly Black-owned independent record retailers: "Generally speaking, the last decade has been unkind to music retailers of all kinds, but especially the independents, which include the vast majority of black-owned stores."[31] In lieu of closing completely, or filing for bankruptcy like the other seven original Peaches franchises, the New Orleans location moved to Uptown. While the relocation to its current address on Magazine Street prevented the total loss of an integral part of the New Orleans record store circuit, it fundamentally altered Peaches' role in the landscape.

Eddie Gaspard, longtime Peaches manager, said of the shop's forced move out of the French Quarter, "This was the meet spot. It was the hanging spot. Now it's gone."[32] Gaspard's commentary on the fate of the original Peaches location is indicative of its centrality not only to the music scene but also as a social space. By identifying Peaches as "the hanging spot," Gaspard draws attention to the shop as a site for community. Indeed, these record stores do not merely serve as distributors of records. They are also where many young rap artists get their start, and they therefore introduce many local rappers to the broader pastiche of the hip-hop music scene in New Orleans. "Local rap," according to LeMenestrel and Henry, has "been thriving since Katrina,"[33] which is marketed not only by a robust underground scene but through the local record stores as well. Though Clark Davis notes that independent record stores, particularly ones that are Black-owned, struggle to offer a robust "selection of competitively priced music," such a circumstance actually works in favor of Nuthin But Fire. While the store does provide a limited selection—they only carry local artist titles, particularly in bounce—they are one of, if not the only record store in the area to do so. And as such, their limited selection of titles is actually an asset, especially as the popularity of bounce as a genre continues to surge. This strategy squares with Clark Davis's assessment regarding the means necessary for sustaining the health of an independent record store—they remain in business either by "serving as boutiques for the most devoted of music fans or by selling considerable stock online, and often independent stores do both."[34]