



# TECHNOLOGY KILLED THE RECORD STORE



LAST WEEKENDS: THE INTERNET COULD SPELL THE END OF THE RECORD SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

HOLLY WASKO

## WILL COLUMBUS RECORD SHOPS SURVIVE THE DIGITAL AGE?

BY STEPHEN SLAYBAUGH

In the past year, the Record Industry Association of America has been mounting an attack against music piracy, recently launching a campaign against the downloading of music files by subpoenaing internet service providers for the real identities behind the user names they've identified as major culprits. With last month's hiring of Mitch Bainol as its president, a man with congressional ties but no prior experience in the music industry, the RIAA has firmly established its position in what it sees as the most important issue to face the industry in the last decade.

While the effectiveness of the RIAA's tactics or the true damage piracy has had on the recording industry can be debated (the RIAA always fails to mention that the decline in sales between 2001 and 2002 also coincided with the greatest price increase of the last five years), there is no denying the effect that technology—CD burning and Internet retail, in addition to downloading—has had on the way people obtain music. Once upon a time, if one wanted to listen to a band's latest album it meant a drive down to the local record shop. Now just about any song by any artist can be had with the click of a mouse, either legally or illegally (according to the RIAA's definition of legality).

So where does that leave the local record shop? "Basically, it's over," says Dan Dow, owner of Used Kids Records. Dow's shop, an OSU campus institution for 17 years that sells mostly used CDs and records but also new CDs, has been affected dramatically by the changing times. Of the 60 million

Americans who illegally download music, college students make up the greatest percentage. Dow estimates that his used CD sales are half of what they were just a year ago. While he cites the poor economy and the decline of the campus area as contributing factors, he's certain that downloading, CD burning and online shopping are largely responsible for the decrease in sales.

"The casual music buyer has basically been eliminated, especially on campus because they have the technology in their dorm rooms," Dow says. "We're not seeing the amount of traffic and people buying used CDs that we saw just six months ago. If the students don't have a reason to cross the street, they're not going to."

What's kept Used Kids afloat is an increase in vinyl sales in the store as well as collectible and special items sold on Ebay. In fact, Dow now employs two full-time staff members dedicated to posting listings on the online auction house. Though he still puts the majority of the stock he gets on the store's racks, he envisions his business continuing to head in Ebay's direction. Once CDs cease to be produced, which he predicts could occur as soon as in the next five years, his shop may become more of an antique store, selling collectibles to the infrequent visitor, but mostly over the web.

"The whole idea that you own music physically is going to be an antiquated concept. There's going to be nothing we can offer the casual music listener in the future, unless they start becoming collectors and want to own something physical. New CDs are not getting bought and I have to look at

that as far as my future goes. If people aren't buying CDs now, they're not going to be selling them to me later. At some point, the faucet is going to be turned off. I can't see us becoming buymusic.com or something.

"We're record clerks; we don't have many skills. I suppose with the Internet I'll be able to employ five of my closest friends, but I don't know how they'll feel about sitting at the computer all day and packaging artifacts when they're used to sitting around listening to music and talking to their buddies."

But two of Columbus' newest record stores don't see things the same way. Further north in downtown Clintonville, at Kyle Siegrist's Lost Weekend Records business is thriving. Selling primarily used vinyl with some small racks of used CDs and cassettes, Siegrist has been unaffected by downloading and the like.

"If anything, I think it's had the opposite effect," he says. "I think people still want records. They sound better (if you take care of them), they look cool and you can't download a physical album."

Siegrist bought the store, formerly Tongue in Groove Records, in January and business has been steadily improving. While he originally planned to be open on just Thursday nights and weekends (hence the name), he has now expanded his hours so that the store is open every day except Mondays. Though he does some selling on Ebay, just about everything goes out on the store's cramped floor. More importantly, he wants to create an experience that one can't get on the Internet.

"I want the store to be a gathering spot for the community," he explains. "With the Internet, you get the music but you don't get a place to hang out. A store can be part of a scene where people come to exchange ideas."

Dusty White had a similar concept when he opened Sound on Sound three months ago further south on High Street, just before Norwich. The small shop, featuring brightly colored walls and delicately curved shelves for CDs, even has a television set up with Nintendo to encourage patrons to stay awhile.

"When I started working on putting things together I spent a lot of time thinking

about aesthetics and making the store look different than any other stores on the street," White said. "I wanted it to feel like a living room/art gallery."

"Ultimately we want people to just hang out here and have fun," White's partner, D. Goosbey, agrees. "If you buy something, awesome, if not, did you have fun?"

Further to this effect, White and Goosbey are planning to hold early evening events with DJs when school is back in session. As they see it, there's still room for record stores in town to fill a niche not being served, both as a social outlet and with the music they sell. Stocking new CDs and records by artists on independent labels, White's impetus for opening the shop was that he wasn't finding what he was looking for at the city's other record stores. He sees the market for such releases to only be growing and the music industry's cries that it's losing money not put in the right context often enough. (The RIAA estimates that sales were down \$900,000 in 2002 from 2001.)

"If you sell 8 million copies of your first record and then your next record only sells 4 million, sure that seems dismal. But you've still sold 4 million fucking records!" White exclaims. "Is that a failure? Because there's been enough of those 'failures' across the board, sales look like they are down in the last year or so. But the kind of stuff that we're selling is doing fine and, if anything, is growing."

While White admits that opening the shop was something of an experiment, he still sees a future for selling music through traditional means. "People are always going to want a physical product that they can hold in their hand," he says. "It's just the nature of man. If you have a file, it's a lot less tangible. People are always going to want tangible things on a shelf."

Though he admits that those physical carriers may disappear once a new generation grows up listening to music via computer files, he sees the collectors market going in a different direction.

"I'm waiting for the cassette renaissance," he says. "Rare cassettes are the next thing." ❊

E-MAIL [stephen@columbusalive.com](mailto:stephen@columbusalive.com).