

Record Store Day: Stripped to its core, Record Store Day is about the Music

By Jack Probst

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For most of its existence, Record Store Day has been an annual block party.

Vinyl addicts and casual music fans alike swarm indie shops across the country every year, lining sidewalks or crowding the edges of temporary stages as live bands perform and pint-pouring beer reps circulate to keep the festivities going. It's an all-day mini-festival put on by the locally owned houses of musical worship so many of us adore. The lure of an influx of new albums, all dropping on the same day — and free concerts — has been both a boon to profits in a struggling industry and an opportunity for music-loving employees to mix with like-minded customers.

But this year's Record Store Day, set for this Saturday, July 17, will be a quieter affair. There will be no sidewalk ragers soundtracked by local DJs or aisles packed shoulder to shoulder with shoppers thumbing through the racks. All the cans of free beer appear to be empty. Stores will sell a new batch of select albums, but most of the trappings of the party will be on hold for another year.

The changes are designed to address the safety concerns of an ongoing pandemic while preserving the thrill of finally laying your hands on records anticipated for months. Even the one-day bonanza has been split into two. This will actually be the second installment of Record Store Day this summer, the first drop having occurred last month as a way to further diffuse the crowds. In 2020, the day was split into three.

The irony of the muted celebrations is that we're in the midst of an incredibly successful period in vinyl sales. With concerts and most live music outlets off limits for months, people have spent more than ever to build up their collections during the COVID-19 pandemic. That first drop of 2021, on June 12, sparked the biggest week of sales ever for a Record Store Day week, with 1,279,000 vinyl albums sold, *Billboard* reported.

And stores plan to keep selling this week. The core piece of what many music lovers flock to indie stores for on Record Store Day — the exclusive and impossible-to-get vinyl — is still happening. For many, this is how they praise their favorite stores, and that's a good thing.

Throughout the 2000s, record stores were in trouble.

Primarily due to digital platforms such as iTunes, CD and record sales were declining. People just weren't buying physical media, which left many record stores across the country struggling. Mail order kept some businesses alive, yet others simply couldn't stay afloat and closed. It was a scary time for owners, clerks, music lovers and collectors. But that was about to change.

In 2007, inspired by the success of Free Comic Book Day for independent comic shops, Eric Levin of Criminal Records in Atlanta and Chris Brown from Bull Moose Music in Maine brought together a group of indie record store owners in Baltimore. It was time to get shops to start working together to create hype and awareness nationwide. During this meeting, they formed the basis for a yearly celebration of all things record store. Record Store Day was mapped out to unite fans, labels and artists in a massive celebration of the culture surrounding independent record shops.

In 2008, they put their plan into action. Stores across the country threw celebrations to praise independent record stores during that inaugural event. Among the festivities were live music, food, drinks and exclusive releases that can only be purchased at indie record stores.

It was a smart marketing move that helped remind customers of all the pleasures they were missing in the rush to downloads. But it was also a boost for those on the other side of the register, the employees who turned their music fandom into careers, or at least part-time jobs. Employees like me.

I was there for the first Record Store Day at Euclid Records in 2008. I still have the original flyer advertising the day's lineup. It was a smaller event than what future years would bring, but it was certainly the breeziest one I took part in. We had a handful of bands scheduled to play on our small stage, including the greatest band

to come out of Festus, The Bottle Rockets. Between bands, a handful of us DJ'd from behind the counter, blocking the listening stations for the day. It was the first time I had ever spun wax, and it was the day that the vinyl bug finally bit me hard.

That first event featured a very modest offering of releases. There were only ten pieces in the racks from artists like Pavement's Stephen Malkmus, The Teenagers, REM and Death Cab for Cutie. It was slim pickings compared to the drop you'll see in the racks on Saturday, which totals more than 150 exclusive titles, limited-run pressings, or upcoming releases you can grab early only at indie stores. This drop features releases from the Beastie Boys, The Cure, Fleet Foxes, St. Vincent and The Rolling Stones, just to name a very few.

I started working at Euclid Records in 2004, straight out of high school, and stayed there for ten and a half years. Looking back, I probably stayed about seven years too long, but that's the way of record stores. I was sucked into a musical vortex that, at the time, I didn't want to escape.

For years, it had been my dream to stand behind the counter surrounded by music all day. I took my career aspirations from seeing my uncle work at the Webster Groves location of Streetside Records in the '90s (Hwy 61 Roadhouse & Kitchen now occupies that building) and, of course, the quintessential, yet more than somewhat problematic, record-store film *High Fidelity*. I wanted to be John Cusack, and I wanted to own a record store.

What I didn't understand then, and what the many customers who asked if we were hiring didn't know, was that working in a record store is hard work. I'm not sure if you've ever picked up a box with 100 records in it, but those fuckers are *heavy*.

That being said, it generally was a lot of fun. My coworkers from that time became lifelong friends — creative folks who are obsessive music fans, unbelievable artists, amateur comedians and insanely talented musicians. I feel lucky to have been able to work with so many cool weirdos. So often, they're the ones who send you down musical paths you wouldn't have usually traveled.

There were also the customers. In my experience, there are three main types of customers a record store attracts: 1. The obsessive collector who is confused that

you don't know every catalog number and pressing on every album in the racks. 2. The music lover who wants to discover absolutely anything you hand them. And 3. The casual consumer who "can't believe they're still making vinyl."

Year after year, we saw more of all of them as Record Store Day became bigger and bigger across St. Louis. Our favorite customers, new faces from all walks of life and old friends would gather together in the store that we loved to watch bands blow the roof off the place all day.

It's still a favorite for employees.

"It's like Christmas. For me, it really is just a beautiful day," says Orlandez Lewis of Vintage Vinyl. "I've gone to record stores now for over twenty years of my life. It's a great day to see all creeds and cultures and ages just all come together for this silly little thing that's called music. It's really cool. That's one of the many things I love about it. Just the camaraderie and the togetherness of it all."

Nick Kuntz of Euclid Records says, "It's a day of celebrating our industry specifically, not other music retail, because they limit it to independent record stores. It draws people's attention in, and it captures their excitement for what we do. Not just product, but the stores themselves."

Euclid Records manager Aaron Mayfield adds, "I personally love Record Store Day, maybe not so much as an employee, but as just a lover of music. It introduces people to something that they have no idea about, which is awesome, and you can see the excitement, which I also enjoy."

Tim Lohmann of Planet Score, a Maplewood shop celebrating its sixth anniversary in October, says, "It brings a lot of people out. [Labels] put out records that might have been forgotten about, or people might not have heard, or maybe never came out before. It might be some of the stuff that the artists, when they were alive, didn't want to come out, but there's people that want to buy that stuff. There's a big demand for obscure stuff or interesting reissues."

One of the maddening parts of working in record stores is the way forces beyond your control can cause chaos. A fragile supply line means that even seemingly good news can trigger a series of reactions that result in new problems.

In 2020, when the pandemic forced some record stores to temporarily close, demand for vinyl increased. Folks who were no longer able to throw their cash toward concerts started turning that money into more extensive record collections. While this seems excellent looking in from the outside, there's now a demand for albums that stores can't always fill.

There are currently only about 27 record-pressing plants in the United States, and while it used to take a couple weeks to get a return on your vinyl order, some projects now have an eight-month turnaround. Adding to the bottleneck, a February 2020 fire in California destroyed Apollo Masters, a plant that produced the acetate discs used in vinyl manufacturing. It was one of only two plants in the world that made the discs, with the other located in Japan. So it's a real problem that immediately caused concern and panic about it affecting the production of vinyl records.

Even the popularity of Record Store Day can create supply-chain headaches. If you have more than 100 releases that are almost entirely vinyl records, you're jamming up the pressing plants for a good part of the year. That means catalog titles for, say, copies of *Led Zeppelin IV*, aren't being made at the same speed they were before. As a result, indie stores might receive a fraction of the number of records they've ordered — and customers sometimes have to wait months before they can buy something they expect will always be in stock.

And it's not just the stores. Think of how it affects indie labels like Merge Records or Polyvinyl. They don't have as much sway as the major labels, so they often have to be patient or be left in the dust. If you've noticed more of your favorite bands, particularly local ones, selling tapes at shows, it's because they want to hand you a physical product, and the turnaround for tapes is much faster.

Even when things are going great in the record industry, it is a struggle. And that trickles down to the employees.

Record retail is a business I love, but it does not always love you back. In 2014, I was running into a problem that is familiar to lots of people working for love first and money second: I could no longer afford it. My life was changing rapidly, and

when it was made clear that my pay wasn't going to change with it, I left. I probably would have stayed forever if I could have made a living wage.

And while I never had to deal with it as a record store employee, the pandemic has added a new variable in the power dynamic. Employees in the New Salem, Massachusetts, location of Bull Moose say they were all fired in May by Record Store Day co-founder Chris Brown after they complained that a change in the store's masking policy put them at risk. In a statement and follow-up media reports, Brown denied that staff members were fired over the mask policy, but the episode was a reminder of the expendable nature of employees in an industry where there are always more music lovers looking to chase John Cusack dreams.

And yet, it's impossible to escape the pull of record stores that attracted me. Like most of the people manning indie shops across St. Louis and everywhere else, I'm a collector at heart. For this story, I toured some of my many favorite shops in the city last week. I ended up spending \$160 in between interviews. There's nothing that can stop me from grabbing all my favorite albums on vinyl.

Most record store folks have a love for physical media. Maybe it's the sound quality, the warmth that comes when the needle hits the groove

"Beyond just a nostalgia factor, I feel like vinyl has a life of its own. Used things especially," says Lewis of Vintage Vinyl. "You hear that when you put on a record for the first time. It's got those pops and clicks and roughness and smoothness and just all kinds of textures that are just there. You can feel it. You don't get that with CDs or tapes or digital media."

For Mayfield, at Euclid Records, sound is paramount. "Just purely sound," he says. "I enjoy CDs almost as much as LPs; they both have their pros and cons. They both sound great, but I'll pick an LP over streaming every day of the week. I can't stand the sound of streaming, so ... it's a different thing."

Beyond the music, there is something about holding an album in your hands. Some like to see the artwork the size it was meant to be. Others collect it to spin and sample. In St. Louis, there are spots that cater to nearly every niche. The metro area is an anomaly when it comes to record stores. When so many have had to shut

their doors in other cities in the past fifteen years, more stores seem to pop up all over our glorious city.

For collectors like me, they remain an institution, a golden palace of infinite musical wonder. I enter them like a sacred temple where you can go into a trance flipping through the racks looking for the holy grail missing in your collection. Each store holds relics of the past and sounds from the future. They're a solemn place where you can learn about music you'd never otherwise hear. For all their challenges and flaws, they're something special for those in the know. Record stores are rad as fuck.