



People line up to enter Ranch Records for the going out of business sale in Salem on June 23. The record store is closing after nearly 40 years in business.

BRIAN HAYES/STATESMAN JOURNAL

A bittersweet end for Ranch Records

Customers mourn shop's closure and celebrate retirement for original owners

Capi Lynn Salem Statesman Journal
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David Ballantyne bought his first record at Ranch Records — “Vitalogy” by Pearl Jam. He still has it, and the all-black album jacket with gold foil title looks as pristine as it did in 1994.

The 14-year-old would spend two-thirds of his school lunch money at the downtown Salem record store and later most of his paycheck while working there between gigs as the frontman for The Widgets, a local rock band in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

“There are so many people who have had that moment because Ranch Records was here,” Ballantyne said.

He and other music fans are feeling nostalgic as the end of an era approaches.

After 38 years, Ranch Records is closing.

A going out of business sale was announced June 22 on Facebook, and fans have been swarming to the shop on High Street NE ever since. Many have waited in line for two hours to peruse half-price CDs and posters and records a third off.

Only 10 customers are allowed inside at a time because of COVID-19 guidelines, and there’s much to see. The store has thousands of new and used records and CDs as well as hundreds of vintage posters and other collectibles.

The pandemic isn’t the reason Ranch Records is calling it quits — business was good before COVID-19 and even better when the shop reopened after the shutdown — but it did give Kit and Lori Close the nudge they needed to retire. They’ve been talking about it for a couple of years.

“While we are saddened to be closing the store, it is finally time for us to fulfill our dream of retirement,” they posted on Facebook. “We’re very excited.”

At the same time fans and customers celebrated the couple’s retirement, they mourned the loss of what they call a local institution and a cultural icon.

Words like devastated and heartbroken were used multiple times in social media posts.

“I wanted to cry when I heard it, I’m not going to lie,” Kavin Blanton said while taking advantage of the sale. He’s been a Ranch Records customer for 24 years, since he was 13.

Alyssa Delgado, co-owner of The Governor’s Cup Coffee Co. just around the corner, grew up going to the record store with her dad and said the news was bittersweet.

“It’s going to leave such a hole,” she said, then turning to Lori: “You were just doing what you guys love, but it impacted people in such a meaningful way.”

Outlasting the competition

Ranch Records is billed as the oldest record shop in Oregon with the same continuous owner. Other shops have been open longer with multiple owners.

Kit Close opened the store in May 1982 with friend Tim Knight in a “hole in the wall” on Court Street NE. They basically sold their own record collections out of crates.

The first mention of Ranch Records in the Statesman Journal archives is in June of that year. A half-inch advertisement in the “Wanted Miscellaneous” column of the Classified section reads: “We buy used records.” The phone number’s still the same.

Knight left the business after a little more than a year to eventually open his own store, Guitar Castle, which is celebrating its 30th year in business.

“We’ve both done pretty well,” Knight said.



Customers have waited two hours in line to get a chance to peruse titles during the going-out-of-business sale at Ranch Records, which has been operating downtown since 1982. CAPI LYNN/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Close worked two jobs to help pay the bills, bartending and waiting tables. It took nearly seven years before the record store was profitable enough for him to quit moonlighting.

Competition was tough in the mid-1980s, when there were at least three other independent record shops in downtown Salem. Others came and went over the years.

So how did Ranch Records outlast them all?

“None of them had owners that love records like I do,” Close said.

The feel and smell of vinyl

He’s been collecting records since he was 10. He grew up in the Candalaria neighborhood, a third-generation Salem resident.

His mom bought him his first record, “Everybody Twist” with Johnny McGee and his International Twisters. It’s framed — along with a 45-rpm single and a photo of him dancing beside the album propped on a table in their living room — and hangs behind the cash register at the store.

Within a couple years he was buying his own records for 89 cents a pop at a nearby grocery store, first “Don’t Worry Baby” by The Beach Boys, then “The Little Old Lady (from Pasadena)” by Jan and Dean.

Back then he put the initials K.C. in the upper left-hand corner of each cover.

Just a couple of years ago, he was reunited with that same Beach Boys 45. He recognized his initials in a photo posted on Facebook by someone in Florida, and now it’s framed behind the counter, too.

When Close was 15, he started working at Mayfair Market as a box boy, giving him first crack at new releases. And he spent every cent of his paycheck on records.

He’s always loved the feel and smell of vinyl and to this day, nothing makes him happier than when someone comes into the store with a box of records to sell.

The Beatles and Rolling Stones are among his favorite bands. He listens to music at home on a stereo system he bought in 1972 after getting out of the Marine Corps. While others used their separation pay for a down payment on a house, Close invested in the best stereo he could buy.

Specializing in the rare and obscure

Ranch Records has survived multiple moves and the evolution of music for

mats during its nearly four-decade run.

It operated out of three different locations on Court Street, inching its way up the block, each time expanding. When it moved to Liberty St. NE, the new store featured a larger selection of music and memorabilia and a stage where local and touring national bands could perform.

It moved to its current location, 237 High St. NE, across from the transit mall, around 2008.

Ranch Records built a reputation for carrying independent labels and collectible records, anything rare, eclectic and obscure. If it was hard-to-find music you were looking for, Ranch Records was the place to go. And it’s always been more than just a retail establishment but a museum of musical treasures.

Close kept the name even though tastes in music formats changed from albums to cassette tapes to CDs to MP3s and back to albums. In the 1990s, records represented just 5 percent of sales. By 2014, that had increased tenfold.

He survived the CD and internet downloading eras by providing unmatched customer service. For example, Ranch Records used to let customers listen to any CD in stock before purchase, which was unheard of at other shops.

“Meier & Frank had listening booths when I was a kid,” Close told the Statesman Journal on the shop’s 10th anniversary in 1992. “I always wanted to do something like that in my store.”

He expanded by opening stores in Bend and McMinnville and even had one for a short time in Monmouth. Two former employees opened their own record shops, what Close calls “baby Ranch” stores, in Portland and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

In 2004, with three locations in operation, a Statesman reporter asked where Close saw the business in 10-15 years:

“We’re a dying breed. We’re not the future of the music business by any means,” he said. “I’m just on the tail end. I’m just hoping I can hang on long enough that I don’t have to go out and get a real job.”

The McMinnville store closed around 2012. The Bend store is now called Smith Rock Records and has a new owner, Patrick Smith, who was in Salem scooping up sale items to beef up his inventory.

Patrons thankful for the memories

The good news is, Close doesn’t have to get a real job.

The bad news is, Salem will no longer have a hub that unites music fans across

generations.

Ranch Records has been a constant fabric of the city’s music scene, a place where people could come to browse and socialize, whether you liked rock, jazz or heavy metal, whether you were a teenager or retired.

Kit and Lori have been touched by the personal messages they’ve received from customers of all ages, many sharing how Ranch Records help them get through school or a tough time, such as a death in the family or a divorce.

Some have expressed how Kit was much more than a business owner but a father figure.

He was a huge supporter of local bands, but always did it privately and quietly. He fronted The Widgets money to record their music, for example. The band paid him back after sales and even put the photo of 10-year-old Kit doing the Twist on the back of their second record.

Ballantyne, who played guitar and sang for The Widgets, was interested in buying Ranch Records. Numerous people were.

If Close had sold it to anyone, it would have been to a friend like Ballantyne. But he didn’t want to watch anyone lose their investment in a few years.

“It sounds arrogant, but I’ve been in this for 38 years, and it’s not easy,” Close said. “They’d be coming in with COVID and what’s going on downtown ... This way I make everybody happy. It’s our gift to Salem to put it all out there cheap.”

More items to be added to sale

The going out of business sale is expected to continue for about a month. Close promises there’s plenty of inventory left to sell, although bins and walls are starting to look a bit bare after the first few days.

It’s not just individuals who are taking advantage of the good deals. A Portland record dealer was first in line Thursday morning and spent a couple of thousand dollars.

More items will be added daily over the next few weeks as Kit and Lori clean out the basement, the upstairs area and the storage room. They may even add items from their private collection at home.

They figure they won’t be able to sell everything before closing and are telling customers to watch social media for possible pop-up sales in the future.

“We’re not going away,” Close said, although he and Lori are sure to be spending time traveling during retirement and enjoying their new beach house in Lincoln City.

They have no idea how much they’ve sold so far, or how many items they had in their inventory. Records are kept old school style, handwritten in a spiral notebook.

Their attention to customer service will continue to the end. They’ve been staying open well past the noon to 5 p.m. posted hours until the last person in line has had a chance to come in and shop.

Jeremy Clarke, who bought a jukebox from Close and has been going through drawers of 45 records to fill it, said the lines are a tribute to Kit and Lori Close.

“People are waiting in line not just for the discounts but to say goodbye,” he said.

“Forward This” taps into the heart of the Mid-Valley — its people, history, and issues. Contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her on Twitter @Capilynn and Facebook @CapilynnSJ.