

Losing Our Groove

EW'S POP MUSIC WRITER LAMENTS THE CLOSING OF CD WORLD

By Will Kennedy

Back in the '90s I started working at CD World's Corvallis location — and in case you weren't aware, yes, there was a CD World location in Corvallis. It wasn't my first record store, or even my first job. But it was the first record store, and the first job, I really cared about.

I was 18 or 19, something like that. I thought I knew a lot about music. Turns out, I knew a lot about the music I liked. Both a grain of sand in the desert and the only important thing there is to know about music. Because, after all, the ultimate purpose of music is to be enjoyed.

That all changed quickly when confronted with CD World's massive selection. My head was spinning, selling everything from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to Pete Fountain and selections from John Prine's deep catalogue.

I was scared shitless.

Skip Hermens, the owner, split time between the Eugene and Corvallis stores, but he lived in Albany. People live in Oregon so they don't have to commute, but one thing I came to know about Skip is that he does things his own way.

Another person I remember from the Corvallis CD World was a guy named Kit, a manager. He was a lot more worldly-wise than my tender self. He introduced me to Slint's *Spiderland*, but he got fired for sleeping in the store surreptitiously after closing down a nearby tavern, at least that's how I remember it.

Eventually I moved to the Eugene location of CD World with some ludicrous idea I'd go to school. Which I did, then I didn't, then I did again — this time, I mean it. Skip let me work full-time, then part-time, then no-time, then sometimes.

Last time I worked at CD World — later known as Skip's Records and CD World — I managed the place for something like seven or eight years, and I coordinated the artist in-store appearances it became known for.

That was post-Napster, pre-vinyl revival. But we'd been fighting for a while, first big-box stores and then Amazon, and Walmart and Best Buy exclusives.

Over time, incense and posters and stickers and then — the sexy minx of music formats — vinyl made its triumphant return about 10 years ago, because, for many, it had never really gone away.

In the early days, though, the CD was king, and CD World was like a temple to the great CD boom of the 1990s — those shiny little buggers in impossible cellophane. But CDs sold — did they ever — everything from the Titanic soundtrack to... well, better stuff than that, a lot better.

Looking back, did the CDs, music's first digital format, kill music retail?

I kind of think they did: too many reissues, too much album filler, too much repackaging. People felt burned.

But, like The Beatles or Steph Curry, it's a fine line between redefining and destroying your game. And yes, there's all that stuff about everything that goes up one day having to come back down.

I wish I had some salacious stories to tell you about my time at CD World — drugs in the poster room, sex in the soul section. But I don't have any stories like that. Instead, all my stories are about people and music, music, music.

On Saturday mornings I opened the store all by



myself. I needed to pick music to play on the speakers, and I had something like a 10,000-square-foot music store from which to pick. That's one of my favorite memories — my selection filling the space before any customers even arrived, sunlight streaming in through the tall windows, the high ceilings alive with light.

I even got to take a few business trips — yes, record store people do sometimes go on business trips. On one trip, I got to see Beach House, Black Keys and Dead Weather over the course of a couple nights. I felt like I was in the music business for real, which is all I ever wanted in the first place.

Thanks for that, Skip.

Skip was always there at the store: before dawn, long after close — sometimes all night. When you own your own business, you get to work half-days, noon to midnight or midnight to noon, he often joked. It wasn't always easy working for someone who worked that hard, but it was never in doubt how much he prioritized the success of his business.

I learned a lot — about small business, retail (I still judge a store on how quickly I get greeted when I come through the front door) and, of course, music. But also place, and the importance of space outside the digital domain to be yourself, alone, but also with a lot of like-minded people.

CD World was my college.

In 2019, with the current retail climate and with all the challenges faced by locally owned business, it's hard to imagine anything filling CD World's space that would mean so much to so many people. CD World's business plan had one advantage, though, because it was always about the music — made from the very vibration of the stuff that binds us together as people.

There are other great record stores in Eugene, the grand old House of Records, for one, and Epic Seconds, as well as great newcomers like Moon Rock Records and Little Axe over in Springfield.

But CD World is my Civic Stadium of record stores — a place where I did a lot of growing up, a place where it seemed like you really could make a life out of loving rock 'n' roll.

CD World didn't burn. I got to say goodbye. I shopped there on the first Saturday after Skip's retirement was announced on social media July 3. It was busier than I'd ever seen it, even in Christmases past, when CDs still ruled the world.

"I should've been going out of business this whole time," I can imagine Skip thinking as he worked the register feverishly.

I'll continue, Eugene will continue and, of course, music will continue. But for now, I'm going to put on a record and think about how lucky we were to have a place like CD World in our town. ■