

## Record Retailer Takes a Last Stand

continued ▲ from Front

decade ago, when retailers like Best Buy, Wal-Mart and Target began selling CDs so cheaply that they didn't turn a profit, but brought customers into the store for higher priced items.

A Beyonce fan could head to a "big box" store for her new CD to save a few dollars.

"We saw a decrease in business but we managed," Currier said. "Then downloading came along."

The youngest generation of music fans are growing up with CD burners and MP3 players. Compared with consumers 40 years ago, they are much more accustomed to owning just the song itself, leaving room for other technological pursuits.

"Music is still a big part of people's lives, but not in the way it used to be," Currier said. "In the past, the younger generation were a part of record retail stores, but they quit going because of the many other things in their lives, computers, text messaging, video games. Not only are we competing with ways to distribute music, but with how people spend their time."

So Music Millennium has found a way to cater to both old and new school customers. The eastside store, a split-level and cavernous building, still attracts loyal customers who hunch over the bins, flipping through thousands of titles. But to the left and right of them are hundreds of non-music items—retro candy, stickers, incense, wallets

and toys. Lots of toys.

"Lifestyle items" is what they're called in the business, toys designed for older kids and adults. The store has always stocked such items, but they are beginning to play a larger role in the inventory.

"We have these weird little key chains that are made by a family in Thailand," said store buyer Carolyn Christ. "And we have action figure coming soon, Tofu the Zombie."

The cutesy tofu doll has a chunk of the health food in his head, which keeps him from eating people. Perfectly weird and perfectly suitable for Music Millennium's customer base.

"And you can't download a weird toy," noted Christ.

She said in the year she's been a buyer they've tripled their volume, and rearranged enough times that the floor space dedicated to lifestyle items has tripled as well. The novelty aspect attracts people who have come in for music, but often return to buy the sour cream and onion-flavored Crick-ettes (they really are bugs).

But toys, candy and edible insects only account for only about 5 percent of total sales.

"I don't think it's going to be crucial," she said, "people will always be loyal to the store, but we need something to keep the other people coming in too."

Don Van Cleave, president of the Coalition of Independent Music Stores, (of which Music Millennium is a member) said many member retailers in the coalition



PHOTO BY SEAN O'CONNOR/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Albums still fill the racks at the independent Music Millennium store on East Burnside, but other products increasingly take more shelf space, filling a void by fewer customers.

are diversifying their inventory but the music remains the central focus.

"We're amazed with an unbelievable uptake in vinyl," Van Cleave said. "I have stores reporting that as much as 20 percent of their sales were vinyl. A lot of kids want that bigger artwork."

It is this type of customer—loyalists to the commodity of music—that keep the indepen-

dents alive. When it comes to it, they are purists who aren't persuaded by the instant gratification technology offers.

"I don't download," said east side Music Millennium employee Tony Lopez. "It's kind of cool but it defeats the purpose of the record hunt."

Music junkie employees make friends with shoppers, who often shop there for life.

"I'll get to know regulars on a first name basis," Lopez said. "We're sharing music, not just selling it to them."

As long as there are regulars there will probably always be a place for stores like Music Millennium. It is only a matter of how they will operate.

Scott Kuzma, owner of the independent Portland store Everyday Music, said his store keeps a steady

clientele of serious music fans.

"But their average age is getting older and older," he said. "I'm sure we'll disappear in the future."

Currier, who has considered a similar scenario many times, already has his Plan B.

"I always thought this would make a great restaurant," he said. "I'd still call it Music Millennium and we could reminisce about the days when there were albums and CDs."

## Advertising in Black and White



PHOTO BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER  
Northeast Portland business owner Katie McNamara puts a multicultural look on her Nice Cubes frozen organic baby food products.

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based nonprofit Commercial Alert says, "However as much as we've wanted to, we have not done much on companies that use race to sell their products."

Nice Cubes owner Katie McNamara contends that it is not race, but aesthetic considerations that help sell her baby food products.

"Honestly, some of the skin tones of the babies went with the colors on the box; this little girl had some sass to her, so she had to go with the Sassy Squash."

The girl's white mother, Kerri Melda of north Portland, met McNamara through a Craigslist posting that sought baby models.

Melda agrees that her adoptive daughter from Ethiopia, Meseret,

has a personality apart from any racial stereotype. She adds, "I don't see sass as a negative word at all; it's a word for someone with a lot of flavor to their character."

Wanting to adopt a child from a country with local ties, Melda went to Ethiopia under the guidance of Alem Gebrehiwot, who owns the Queen of Sheba restaurant on MLK.

"People may associate sass with something they shouldn't, so they may not have selected the right term," Gebrehiwot says.

He emphasizes the importance of Nice Cube's dedication to local and organic principles as opposed to Fred Meyer.

"We consume Fred Meyer's products when we don't have any choice," he says.

At the same time, he argues that a blatant use of "minority pictures is using the community."

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