

## CHICAGO



## JOURNAL

Volume 1, No. 12 ■ Thursday, December 1, 2005

## From dust to Dusty Groove

*Venerable West Town record store got its start as a way to pay for a plane ticket*

By LAURA PUTRE  
Editor

Distinguished by high ceilings, exposed brick, and abundant natural light, Dusty Groove's digs are a real estate agent's dream come true, if not a scruffy music fan's. Yet most of its customers never set foot in the place. The indie record store at 1120 N. Ashland does most of its business through the mail, to customers in Tokyo, Helsinki, and Cleveland searching for outside-the-mainstream hip-hop, funk, Latin, Brazilian, and jazz music. Ninety-five percent of its retail is online. About half of the market for its CDs, LPs, 45s, and 12-inches is in Japan and Europe; the rest is domestic.

"We're actually quicker than Amazon," says Rick Wojcik, Dusty Groove's owner and an East Village resident. "All our inventory is here in Chicago, so when you give us a call, we can get it in a box and out the door the same day. When we sell out of something, we take it off the Web site [www.dustygroove.com]."

Wojcik, who with a partner owns the vintage three-story building that houses the store, has built his business almost entirely by word of mouth. Fifteen years ago, he was a left-of-the-dial music aficionado with a radio show at WHPK, the University of Chicago station, and an inclination to travel the world. To finance his trips, he'd take orders for obscure import records and CDs and deliver them when he returned to the states. He was taking the lead of a "pre-existing culture of guys," dating



Photo by Josh Hawkins

Dusty Grooves welcomes browsers at its West Town store, but most of its customers browse online from overseas.

back to the 1930s, "who mail out lists of records and take orders." Before the Internet, they'd advertise in national magazines like *Goldmine* or *Discoveries* to build their clientele.

The timing couldn't have been better. Dusty Groove went online in 1996, before the Internet was clogged with online record outfits. Type in an obscure scratch artist's name, and there was a decent chance that Dusty Groove would pop up as the first listing on Google. "That doesn't happen anymore," says Wojcik, especially to a business just starting out.

Now that Dusty Groove is well-established online, Wojcik says growth in the business comes

mainly from good buzz from "happy people who care about music." The retail store started out small, with limited hours that have now grown to seven days a week, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays.

To keep from cultivating an aura of snobbishness in the shop, Wojcik stays away from hiring club DJs and other hardcore fans of marginal music, favoring liberal-arts types with friendly demeanors.

However, there is one other authority in the mix: John Schauer, a hip-hop host on WHPK at the University of Chicago since the mid-1980s. Schauer, who goes by the name J.P. Chill, introduced the likes of Common and Twista to the Chicago scene;

undiscovered artists would bring him tapes to play on his show.

"He was in a dead-end job at the university, but would fly to London to buy records there," says Wojcik, who hired Schauer as Dusty Groove's resident computer guru.

"It was a lot better than some pot-addled techie who would charge us \$100 an hour and give us nothing," he says. "That sort of thing has been an incentive for us, just to keep learning it ourselves."

Another thing Wojcik does firsthand is listen to all the merchandise first, before he allows it in his store; he writes a critical review capsule of each offering that goes online. If he doesn't like a release, it doesn't make the cut. "We listen to a lot of music," Wojcik says. "We listen to more we don't end up selling. We like this music a lot, and we want it to find a place in this world."

**"We're quicker than Amazon. All our inventory is here in Chicago, so when you give us a call, we can get it out the door the same day."**

**Rick Wojcik**  
Owner, Dusty Groove