

Soul. Survivors

The world of music retail
keeps spinning at Dusty
Groove America

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Time doesn't stand still at Dusty Groove America—the ebullient, toe-tapping soul, jazz, funk and hip-hop records in constant rotation at the Chicago shop virtually guarantee that nothing, and no one, stands still for long. But Dusty Groove is undoubtedly a throwback to a different era in music retail: an age when consumers flipped through rows of vinyl LPs and CDs instead of clicking through iTunes playlists.

For collectors who still cherish the ritual of dropping the needle on a new record, studying the liner notes and drinking in the cover art, Dusty Groove is the place where the beat never drops.

“We have a real passion for what we do here,” says Dusty Groove owner Rick Wojcik, a lifelong record collector and former University of Chicago radio DJ who co-founded the company with fellow music freak John Schauer in 1996. “We just carry what we like.”

For the most part, the records that Dusty Groove and its customers like exist far outside mainstream radio playlists. The store's far-ranging catalog emphasizes rare R&B reissues, soul-jazz rediscoveries and African music retrospectives from small, independent labels located across the U.S. and abroad. But catering to such a small, specialized market hasn't limited Dusty Groove's growth. Prior to opening its brick-and-mortar storefront in the Windy City's Wicker Park neighborhood, the company launched

as an online retailer, with Wojcik (a onetime English major) writing thousands of enthusiastic capsule reviews of the hard-to-find releases making up the store's inventory. Collectors seeking a copy of that elusive record from Brazilian cult favorite Os Mutantes inevitably found their way to the Dusty Groove site, especially in the years before e-commerce exploded.

“Search engines have been very kind to us,” Wojcik says, noting that online sales account for about 80 percent of Dusty Groove's revenues. Original reviews and album art still set the website apart from rival retailer efforts, as does the store's reputation for superior customer service: “We've always had more supporters than detractors, which explains why we've been around so long,” Wojcik says.

U.S. album sales fell another 12.8 percent in 2010 to 326.2 million, but Dusty Groove's adherence to rare but well-done records seems to guarantee its ongoing success. The average consumer now spends next to nothing for new music, but Wojcik's customers—DJs, scholars, critics and collectors—are anything but average.

“People are still discovering music from a historical perspective,” Wojcik says. “The sales dip we're looking at now reminds me of the panic over magnetic tape in the early '80s. The record industry was down before, and it's still here.” —J.A.