

At Full Tempo

Despite competition from large retail chains and Internet downloads, Flat, Black and Circular remains a music mainstay in East Lansing. **By Jake Holmes**

The world of MP3 downloads and illegal file sharing seems miles away in quiet used music stores. With obscure tunes playing in the background, music posters and old record jackets lining the walls and an accessible and knowledgeable staff of one ready to assist, the atmosphere is something special that can't be found in major retail chains.

Such stores have a special appeal to music lovers and Flat, Black and Circular in East Lansing's Campus Town Mall is a prime example, where music takes precedence over profit margins. With no cash register, handwritten receipts and just one employee on the payroll, Flat, Black and Circular co-owner Dick Rosemont couldn't even tell you how many CDs or records he sells.

"I don't know," he says with a grin. "We're not that corporate."

Rosemont says FBC provides customers with much more of an experience than they would get through downloading music (legally or otherwise), or even visiting large chain music stores.

"People are social," he explained. "They've got to get out, they've got to interact."

Indeed, FBC gives customers things the Internet cannot: a familiar face when they walk through the door, a physical artifact (an actual CD or record) to go along with the music and, of course, low prices that everyone can appreciate.

Those low prices not only led to the rise of used music stores like FBC across the country in the mid- to late 1980s, but they also gave the music industry cause for concern, as music executives claimed that used music stores siphoned royalty money away from artists. That attack has taken a back seat in recent years, as the industry has now turned its attention to illegal music downloads from file-sharing software like Kazaa.

However, a 2004 study from Harvard Business School and the University of North Carolina says that file-sharing may have even less of an impact on artist royalties than used music does. The study, titled "The Effect of File Sharing on Record Sales," concluded that it would take 5,000 illegal downloads to equate to one lost CD sale.

Rosemont chuckles at both of the music industry's attacks on music lovers.

"Nobody likes an industry that falters," he explained. "You've always got to find a scapegoat."

Either way, FBC has managed to stay in business for 28 years, while bigger retailers like Warehouse Records and Tower Records have tried and failed to snatch some of East Lansing market share. Rosemont says part of his store's success is due to the fact that it sells a wide variety of music, from out-of-print imports to obscure independent label titles — all things that bigger stores can't stock.

"We used to fill in the gaps," he says. "Well, the gaps are getting bigger."

This variety is, in part, what attracts East Lansing DJ Dustin Hunt, who said he visits FBC a few times a week to feed his passion for music. Hunt, who needs vinyl copies of music for his job, has been collecting records for five years, often at FBC.

“When people walk in here they see a familiar face,” said Rosemont. “So it can create loyalty.”

Rosemont — who is assisted by sole full-time employee Jon Howard — didn’t start FBC out of a desire to turn a profit. He said his love for music reaches back years, as he recalled the informal dorm-room music sales of his youth at adjacent Michigan State University.

“There were times when I would buy a crate of 150 records just to get two records,” he says. “Then I’d sell the rest to pay for it all.”

Since it first opened in 1977, FBC has catered to many musical tastes. The record and CD bins contain everything from soul and hip-hop to folk and techno. Posters and record jackets on the wall range from Johnny Cash to Led Zeppelin. Rosemont says he tries to take into account what customers want when stocking his store, mostly accomplished through CDs bought from those very same customers.

“It’s not a static situation as to what is popular,” he says. “We just kind of follow the market.”

CDs are bought by FBC for between \$1 and \$5 and then are usually re-sold for between \$2.50 and \$9. The store even has a shelf labeled, “Everything on this shelf is free!” Compared to the prices of new releases at stores like Barnes & Noble Booksellers, located down the street from FBC, the savings can be dramatic. A used but mint condition copy of The Who’s “Then And Now” sells for just \$9 at FBC; Barnes & Noble stickers it at \$16.99.

Though Rosemont acknowledges that today’s customers have far more media choices than just music — be it DVDs, video games or sports — he doesn’t think the used music market will go out of style any time soon.

“Are we running out of things?” he muses, with a smile. “No.” **MIPA**