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Northern Exposure

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The kids today have no idea how good it really was in the “Good Old Days.” Take for instance, the 1940’s and 1950’s. An average American teenager would usually head for the ice-cream parlor after a hard day at school; the library would also be on that list. No computer laptops, just a good old notebook and a few pencils to take notes.

But by far, the one place that attracted most of the young people was the local music and record store.

The record store in my hometown of Union City, New Jersey was a very special place indeed. I can close my eyes and walk through that store as if it were yesterday. The front of the store held a large display of musical equipment, from piano to snare drum.

There was a glassed-in room that was used for giving lessons. Thank God, the room was almost soundproof to save our ears from inexperienced clarinet players or “Wanna-be” Louie Armstrong trumpet players.

The rear of the store held four booths that were specifically for people wanting to hear the music before buying the record! I spent many an afternoon previewing those 79-cent vinyl discs.

Greenville, South Carolina had its very own version of my “Home Town” record store.

Mary Mitchell was the proud co-owner of “Mary’s record Shop” down on South Main Street (it seems that every town in America once had a South Main Street.)

Mary and her spouse William (Billy) Mitchell would eventually own four versions of the original store. One even sat on the Clemson University Campus (Mary's Tiger Shoppe.)

Way back when in 1943, Mary found an old "5 and 10" store and reinvented the space to sell some swinging 78's. She was someone who appreciated the likes of Tommy Dorsey's version of "I'll never smile again", featuring a skinny (and young) Frank Sinatra.

Her love of music had taken hold years before, when as a child she sat on a porch in Lancaster County, South Carolina enjoying music. There she had enjoyed listening to relatives cut loose on a few good country tunes as her Grandpa joined in with a fiddle.

" I just really loved our very first store." She reminisced recently, " We had a donut shop next to our store and an old pot-bellied stove to keep us warm."

She told me how the owner of the little donut "factory" allowed her to wangle a few hot donuts through a pass-through space between the stores.

" They would let me stick an old wire hanger through the space and snag a freshly baked donut off the cooling rack." She laughed.

She remembered the not so happy times when a successful Louie Armstrong came through Greenville on a tour with his wife and world famous jazz band.

"They couldn't find a hotel to put them up, so I offered them some food and coffee on the second floor of our shop. They laughed and played music all through the night. It was incredible." She said proudly.

The black artists usually were put up for the night at a local mortuary.

“ These were hard times for many, the civil rights era was just beginning.” Mary said.

She held record signing parties for the likes of Harry James (with wife Betty Grable in tow.) Fats Domino, Pianist, Roger Williams and the unforgettable Hank Williams Sr.

She held up his autographed photo for me to see and I snapped her smiling portrait in her garden.

“ What a sweet and bashful man he was,” she added. But Mary did not just love Country, or jazz, she loved all kinds of early Rock-A-Billy too. She loved Americana, she loved gospel, and she loved it all.

Mary and her husband added a few new fangled record players, some replacement parts like needles and those little centers for 45 records so that they would play on older phonograph players.

I asked her if she knew what a difference she had made to young and old music lovers in her locale. I asked her if she knew how many lives she had changed for the better though her wonderful meeting place for young music lovers.

“We all serve God in one way or the other, you don’t have to be a minister to serve God, you could be a postman and serve God. I did what I could to give people something to enjoy though music.” She said.

Mary credits her late husband Billy for all he did to make them successful.

“Why we started racking records in the old “Winn Dixie” stores when they were simply “Dixie Home Stores.” We even did mail-order!” she said happily.

I told her that I was jealous. That she should know what a life well spent she could look back upon.

“I had some great times and met some fabulous artists, why just last year I enjoyed a wonderful dinner with the great Les Paul, think about that, dinner with such a great musician.”

Mary Mitchell is in her eighties now, living near her beloved coast.

I left her with a memory of my own. Telling her about a movie that my mom and I enjoyed seeing over and over again. The movie was the great “Penny Serenade” starring Irene Dunne and Cary Grant. The movie opened with a record spinning as the story of their life un-folded. Somewhere there is a record spinning out the musical history of a lady named Mary. A person who loved it all, from gospel to Rock n’ Roll.

As Les Paul and Mary Ford once sang, “Somewhere there’s music...”

A lot of it came from “Mary’s Record Shop.”