

Bill's Records: Dallas' Best Kept Secret

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During a recent trip to Richardson, Texas (a suburb of Dallas), I stumbled onto what could arguably be called Dallas' best-kept secret, Bill's Records. I suppose I can forgive myself for not knowing about it; after all, Bill Wisener founded it in 1981, and I moved away from the Dallas area for good in 1976.



Upon first walking into the place, one is immediately struck with the notion that if you can't attend the Austin Record Convention (about a 4 hour drive south of here), Bill's Records is probably the next best thing. You could easily spend the entire day here and come away at closing time still feeling as though you had only uncovered a small fraction of the treasures to be discovered.

A visitor is immediately greeted with the pungent odor of cigarette smoke around the front counter (Bill is a pretty heavy smoker). A quick survey of Bill's will leave you with the impression that you've walked into a thrift shop instead of a record store. Make no mistake about one thing though - you'll find no junk here, just a lot of great recordings and music memorabilia.

With the exception of the neatly arranged shelves along the walls and a rack of t-shirts that runs the length of the middle of the store, all the merchandise is in cardboard boxes, both on top of and underneath folding tables. Bill's is divided into two areas: the main section has some LPs, but the rest of it consists of books, magazines, posters, t-shirts, CDs, cassettes, 45s and videos. Autographed posters line the walls. CDs and cassettes are organized by genre, with selections ranging from punk to country and everything in between.

The newer section only has LPs for sale, including an impressive number of 12-inch singles as well as albums, many of which are still sealed. Although the walls here are lined mostly with autographed album sleeves and posters, the back corner is covered with graffiti. The front corner is set aside for regular customers who are aspiring DJs, with a turntable and other equipment. In fact, Bill's Records hosts an hour-long radio program on KHYI (95.3 FM) at noon on Fridays, primarily playing alternative country and early rock music. Free lunch is provided for everyone participating in the radio show.



Prior to founding the record store Bill owned a miniature golf course in the Dallas area. When he sold that business, he didn't really know what he was going to do. One weekend he went to a flea market, and he remembers having a lot of fun watching people bartering with each other. The following weekend he rented a booth himself to sell some of his records, and that's really how he got started in the record business.

Located in a strip mall at 8118 Spring Valley Road, the dividing line between Dallas and Richardson,

Bill's Records has been in that same shopping center for all of its 21 years, although it has moved several times. The shop began with about 1,000 square feet, and has since expanded to the approximately 6,000 square feet that it is today.

You won't find price stickers on any of the merchandise in the store, a throwback to flea market days. Take them up to the front counter and he'll quote you a price on them from memory. I found the prices to be quite reasonable, and you certainly can't beat the selection. Besides the usual suspects like Madonna, Elton John and Eric Clapton, he carries items from a variety of artists that I have to confess I never heard of, like Farley "Jackmaster" Funk and Erotic Dissidents.

When I asked Bill if he had any real rarities for sale he replied, "I'm sure there's a lot of things in here, but then again you find out all the time that what's rare to one person is not necessarily rare to another one. Of course we have a lot of Beatles things that are hard to find, and there's always something that somebody will say they've been searching for the last twenty years for. I've tried to buy a variety of records for the store so that when someone is looking for a record that's hard to find, chances are they would be able to find it here."



I asked Bill if he was doing any business on the Web. "We've only just started a website," he revealed, "but the website is called billsrecords.com." It's definitely in the construction phase. Besides giving the store's location the website also lists store hours, some country albums they carry, such as Pat Green's *Three Days* and Chip Taylor's *Black And Blue America*. You'll also find last week's play list from his radio program.

When asked if he does any kind of mail order business, Bill said, "We don't have any kind of official mail order business, but we'll gladly mail an item to a customer who has a specific request. We also take phone orders, too."



Don't look for a Bill's Records booth at any of the record shows any time soon. "My problem," Bill says, "is that I would end up buying too much stuff. That's how I ended up with so much stuff in the first place. I figure I've got enough already and I'd do better to stay put and not keep searching for more. I do buy things though, especially if it's something I know one of my customers has been searching for that is hard to find."

When asked how he has managed to remain in business while so many of the independent record stores have folded Bill replied, "For me it's more like a lifestyle because I've done this so long. I'm in business seven days a week, 365 days a year. Even if I don't feel good I'm always open because here I feel good, and I get a lot of pleasure from this business." Business is certainly helped, too, by the fact that he has a large and loyal customer base, many of which have been coming in to the store since it opened. Quite a few of those customers are in their twenties, and they're not just going for the CDs, they are also buying a lot of vinyl!

Bill confessed that he has a special place at the front of the store right by the front counter for his favorite singer, Ben Harper. He said that he is always particularly delighted when a customer comes into the store and asks about Ben's music. Regardless of which artist you want to talk about though, it's clear that Bill has a love for all kinds of music.



As I left Bill's Records he was in an earnest discussion with a customer regarding the relative merits of Sting's music. I thought about that conversation afterward and decided that it's really the little things like this which set apart an independent record store like Bill's from all the nameless, faceless chains out there. Besides the selection of music, you just can't put a

price tag on the very real human contact and the genuine love for the music that you have an opportunity to share in a place like Bill's Records. I hope you stay in business for a very long time, Bill. This world could use a lot more people like you.

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