

# MUSIC IS OUR PASSION

by  
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Having observed the often brutal changes inflicted upon the territory known as Ann Arbor, Michigan since 1968, I shouldn't be surprised that somebody has chucked our zoning restrictions; there are presently no less than four high-rises planned for the already bewildered skyline. Architecture, for the likes of me, is metaphor. And these big buildings are very like those ridiculously oversized vehicles now being operated by proud, cell-phone-grasping consumers, slashing about in tanks, jeeps and jacked-up pickups. A pity we can't fit all of these objects onto the narrow streets. And a tragedy that Ann Arbor's uniqueness must be undermined and overbuilt so carelessly. It is therefore imperative that we support our independently owned businesses, particularly those who operate in solidarity with the real alternatives in local media. What follows is an essay on Ann Arbor's best independently owned source of recorded music.

It was early July and I called SKR Classical to inquire about Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the German lieder and opera singer whose impeccable ethics sustain me in my daily doings. Purchaser and salesman Mike McGovern seems to have grown accustomed to my peculiar investigative research methods; accordingly he handled my call with professional ease. Yes, we have the complete Schubert songs for male voice in three volumes, but look here, while you're at it, how's about Fischer-Dieskau's performance of Neapolitan Songs by Hans Werner Henze? You'll like this package, says Mike; they've included an Essay on Pigs which is really unusual. *Essay on Pigs?* Just in time for Art Fair! Please set that aside for me. (Indeed I did air Henze's *Schweine* piece, a truly frightening anti-fascist suite for vocal contortionist, over WCBN [88.3 FM] during the Art Fair, as part of my Face the Music mix. Just what the doctor forgot to order.) I mightn't have found this strangely wonderful selection on my own. And once again I am grateful.

On another occasion, I passed through SKR Pop & Rock and initiated an open discussion of Wild Man Fischer, my all-time favorite pop singer; should we petition Rhino records for a Wild Man retrospective? "Pronounced Normal" was his very best record, produced by Barnes & Barnes, yet nobody seems to know about it. Maybe we can bring about a reissue, if not a national rehabilitation of this bizarre street-level vocalist whose mother, back in the early '60s, had him committed to a mental institution twice for singing in his room. Get this: Fischer covered the Beach Boys' "In My Room" on the "Pronounced Normal" album. A wicked context for one seemingly innocent ditty.

Then there's the Blues & Jazz end of the operation. If you visit on the weekends you'll see Marc Taras or Michael Jewett, two of the three WEMU [89.1 FM] DJs who help hold the place together. Often when there's time during the week I tumble through at some point in the day to visit WEMU DJ #3, Al Campbell. We often chat about Ornette Coleman and Sun Ra, or maybe I hold the Clifford Brown Blue Note set in my hands once again, softly raving about the Bop which is Hard. Al listens patiently, waits for me to catch my breath, then begins to describe a recent Lenny Bruce documentary. We seem to agree that Lenny was a master improviser. One might compare him with Fats Navarro. Oh man don't get me started. Maybe I leaf through the Blues section and realize that I cannot leave the premises until I have purchased Tampa Red's Bluebird sessions, 1934-36. With this decisive, tangible piece of action I have voted for the best damned music store in this part of the world. And there is no question but that every vote counts.



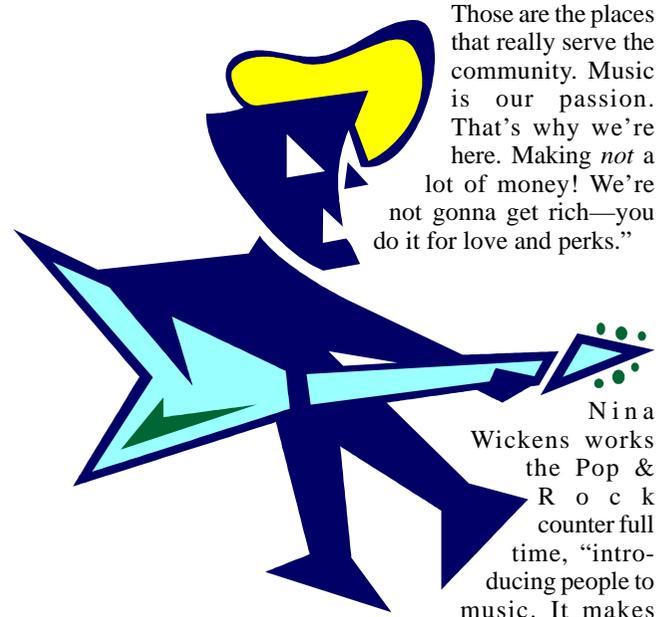
Sean Westergaard speaks frankly, with a friendly fire in his eyes. This fellow

worked at School Kids Records from 1991 until its demise, and he knows more real factual details about the rise and fall of that enterprise than nearly anyone in town. Without dwelling on the subject, let's say that there are still a lot of gross misconceptions floating around; rumors, conjecture and hearsay. "People feel that we forced School Kids out as opposed to School Kids forcing itself out. If perhaps more of the real circumstances surrounding the demise of School Kids were known to the general public, then perhaps some of the animosity wouldn't exist to the extent that it does..." But surely this is not the time or place for us to air dirty linen. "If people have

been staying away, come in and check us out. Take off your blinders, get a fresh perspective and make your decision based on our merit, not on what used to be in this location."

"Jim Leonard has made a really strong commitment to us as a staff and to the community of Ann Arbor. He's got a lot of confidence in us..." When Sean and various ex-School-Kids employees were hired by SKR, they were pleasantly surprised at Leonard's righteous attitude towards the workers. Here in Ann Arbor's notoriously high rent/low salary business climate, they were suddenly being offered decent pay with health insurance and other benefits which are all but unheard-of hereabouts. Do you hear me, Ann Arbor?! The workers are being treated exceptionally well. This in itself sets SKR apart from most area businesses. (Leonard explained his purpose quite clearly: "All I wanted to do was preserve what was good about School Kids and build on it.")

The working environment is exceptionally healthy. "My job is entirely suited to my strengths," says Sean, "buying and receiving and knowing what's in the store, what should be coming in the store." Drawing upon years of experimental radio experience at WCBN, Sean is able to provide us with music that defies the conventional concept of entertainment. "Sure we sell the Pop hits, but our regular clientele consists of music buyers who are looking for something beyond the mainstream. There are music Fans and then there are music FIENDS. Ann Arbor has a higher Fiend ratio than a lot of other towns. That's the bottom line." Sean's eyes crackle with subversive intelligence. "A locally owned business should mean something.

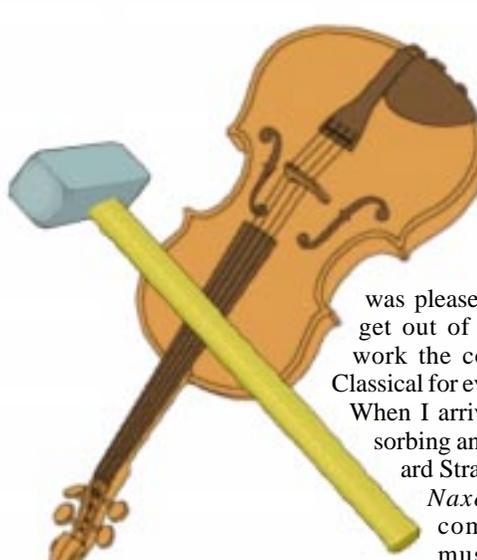


Those are the places that really serve the community. Music is our passion. That's why we're here. Making *not* a lot of money! We're not gonna get rich—you do it for love and perks."

them happy, fills emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs for them." She points out how "working as a clerk at this independent store I have a lot more say in what we carry than a lot of managers have at chain stores." Corporate hierarchy is a pernicious poison. SKR workers enjoy and thrive in the absence of this stifling dynamic. Nina wants it made clear that there's lots of Folk, Country, Bluegrass and Rockabilly in the "Pop & Rock" store. As well as a healthy International/World selection over in the Blues & Jazz department. Wander through the portal, past Elmore James, and the mode of the music changes (the walls of the city shake).

Al Campbell is listening to a 1964 session with Booker Ervin and Don Patterson. Something called the "Hip Cake Walk." We groove for a minute on the solidity of the strut. Al smiles as he says: "It's nice to be surrounded by so many people who love music, first and foremost. It's amazing how much information we share. Everyone here is into a different sort of music, so the information which is passed on is probably the biggest perk of working here. Just being around so many people who are passionate about music. Also: anything that happens in these stores comes from these stores. As opposed to somewhere in California or New York. Decisions are made at the bigger stores which have nothing to do with the people who work there. We have our autonomy. So it's not a revolving door situation like a lot of chains are. I gotta hand it to Jim for being able to say: I'm going to pay my people what they deserve to be paid. As tough as it's been, the benefits are in place. We all worked on renovating this place together. We've kind've got

flesh and blood in here." What's unique about the music you have in stock? "The people who order the music love it." Later I asked Jocelyn Lane, who in addition to working evenings at SKR acts as Jazz Director at WCBN: what is your mission here? The response was immediate and succinct. "To continue learning."



Jim Leonard was pleased to be able to get out of the office and work the counter at SKR Classical for even a few hours. When I arrived he was absorbing an opera by Richard Strauss: *Ariane auf Naxos*. Eager to comment on the music at hand, Leonard pointed out

how "Strauss is about *people*. He has some of the best characters in German opera. There are no characters in Wagner; archetypes maybe! But there's no human beings. Strauss has got nothin' but humans. Even *Elektra*. She may be excessive but she's still human."

Jim feels blessed with his staff. That may sound fluffy but it's serious business. Guy Barast has turned out to be "one of the supreme financial managers", who worked himself up from part-time sales and seems to be essential as Jim's right-hand man. (I am still grateful to Guy for his having alerted me to the singularly brilliant works of Giacinto Scelsi.) Matt Woods manages the Pop & Rock store, dealing effectively and sensibly with maintenance and personnel. Very important that this takes pressure off of Westergaard so he can operate at the top of his form. "Mona de Quis is a *wonderful* find!" She was the Classical buyer for a corporate store; lots of power, buying for a big chain. Today she is much happier at SKR, placing great stock in "the shared values I have with Jim" and all the various opportunities for making stronger ties with the community.

Reflecting on the enormously difficult year which has just transpired, with all of the practical and psychological challenges which came with the territory, Jim attributes the survival of the SKR stores to the collective faith in what can and must turn out to be a successful, locally owned and operated music business. "Nobody's faith ever wavered, you know? The zeal of the converted! Once you've had the thrill of turning a person on to a piece of music and they come back with stars in their eyes...you've changed their psyche!" This is the basis for the operation of the SKR stores. "I truly believe in what we do. And that Ann Arbor will continue to appreciate what we do."