

Politics and Economics

Last local record store struggles to stay afloat

by Nicholas Rys

A fixture in downtown State College for more than two decades, City Lights Records —the last remaining independent record store in town — faces an uncertain future.

When owner Greg Gabbard opened up shop in the fall of 1985, there were three other record stores in town. The last of them disappeared when Arboria Records closed last summer. Gabbard fears City Lights may be next. Sales are down 50 percent, he said, thanks at least in part to a sluggish record industry, CD burning and illegal music downloads.

With record industry sales in a seven-year slide, an estimated 800 music stores were forced to shut their doors in 2006. Meanwhile, big box retailers, such as Wal-Mart and Best Buy, have seen their share of the music retail market rise from 20 percent in 1997 to 65 percent today.

Borough Council member Elizabeth Goreham said the rise of such large chain stores, whose size allows them to demand

cut-rate prices from distributors, contributes to the poor business of City Lights and other independent record stores. To compete, she said, small businesses have to stay ahead of the curve.

“Competition is only going up, and embracing the local brand only gets you so far,” Goreham said, adding, “Chains have deep pockets.”

Goreham said Borough Council does its part to help by renting Borough-owned space downtown exclusively to local businesses.

Penn States students are also pitching in. Using the social networking Web site Facebook, students created a group called “I buy my records at City Lights” to show their loyalty to the store. The group has 73 members.

Student Ida Hariri decided to use a class project to take action on behalf of City Lights. While fellow students made up fictional ad campaigns, Hariri and her group

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Photo by Katie Reed

Big box retailers and illegal music downloads may force City Lights owner Greg Gabbard to close the doors of the independent record store on College Avenue for good.

Pedal People ride dirty to keep Massachusetts clean

by Allan Stoekl

The Pedal People are a small group of people who live and work together, operating a hauling business powered not by trucks or tractor-trailers, but exclusively by bicycles.

In a one-hour presentation at FreezeThaw Cycles in State College in late April, three of the seven Pedal People—Ruthy Woodring, Alex Jarrett and Lisa DiPiano—discussed in detail their work and their lives as part of the cooperative.

“When I moved [to Northampton, Mass.] in 2002, I was looking for something to do with myself that combined my love for utilitarian bicycling, being outside and doing physical things with my belief in human power and cultural change through example,” said Woodring. “I was brought up without TV or shopping, with a real focus towards meeting one’s own needs as independent of the system as possible. So I got a firm foundation in thinking critically about my ‘needs.’”

The Pedal People use large trailers, made

“The more money I make, the more money the feds want to spend on things like making bombs. I will not live a peaceful lifestyle and then give money to the feds for war-making.”

--Ruthy Woodring

by a company called “Bikes at Work,” to do their bicycle delivery and hauling. These long trailers can haul as much as 300 pounds each, and as many as three can be linked together at one time. Northampton is unusual in that residents contract independently with haulers to remove their trash. This is where the Pedal People step in—homeowners can contract with them to have their garbage hauled weekly to the town pickup site, from whence it is taken by truck to the town dump.

“The co-op uses bicycles and bicycle trailers to transport things, and is committed to using human power despite the culture of dependence on motorized vehicles,” the group explains in their mission statement. “We hope that our use of relatively simple tools in sound business practice will debunk

the prevailing belief that more technology is needed to solve problems.”

This is hard, sometimes cold, and often quite smelly work, and the group has had to devise unique strategies to work in very cold weather, as well as in sweltering heat, which results in unpleasant flora and fauna that appear when garbage can lids are removed. They also haul furniture and greenhouses with their bikes, offer people rides at fairs and teach classes in bike repair and maintenance.

The Pedal People have placed at the center of their social practice a device—the bicycle—commonly seen by most Americans as little more than a toy, or at best, as a tool for physical fitness. The Pedal People use the bicycle because it allows freedom from the fossil fuel econo-

my; not just from energy corporations and unfortunate political alliances, but from the dead-end of ecocide and social collapse faced in the twin perils of global warming and peak oil.

Just as important, a smaller, local economy based on human power rather than fuel power fosters community: The small scale of a walkable, bikeable city leads to community bonds seemingly beyond the reach of those who live in McMansions and “sprawl” suburbs, the group believes. The bicycle is truly a tool of sociability.

Northampton has no professional sports teams, nor even mega-teams associated with a college or university. Instead it has the Pedal People, professional ambassadors of the future. They are regularly applauded as they make their rounds of the town, they said. Many citizens are rooting for the success of their enterprise.

They not only have embraced an alternative, cooperative lifestyle, but are engaged

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in teaching it. Along with bike hauling, they practice organic agriculture, cultivating both the back yard of their communal property and a three-acre publicly-owned plot in downtown Northampton. They are also masters of the art of dumpster diving, as they demonstrated during their visit to State College in late April.

Their motivation is simultaneously moral—they refuse the easy compromises of a high-carbon mode of life—as well as practical, as evidenced by the hauling and delivery service. Additionally, they are doing what amounts to practical research in the fields of transportation, urban living, and agriculture, and in that way they are preparing the way to a communitarian, sustainable future.

Talking with them, one almost senses that one has slipped into a time warp into a future that recognizes and implements strategies of sustainable living and community affirmation.

“I don't like to shop,” said Woodring. “I don't like to go inside stores. The glitz and lights feel like an assault to my senses. I try to avoid entry. More buying means more trash, and I don't like to make trash.”

The Pedal People's way of life is also a way of protesting government policies.

“We believe that social change is possible, and we share inspiration and education with people wanting to choose more sustainable lifestyles,” their mission statement states. “We aim to make a living in a fair, noble way, exploiting no one.”

Woodring applies that statement to her life.

“The more money I make, the more

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members designed an actual campaign to help the struggling record store.

“Our professor informed us about the poor business at City Lights, but I already knew business wasn't good and thought it would be more practical than doing a fake campaign,” Hariri said. The students developed a project proposal, conducted research and then created ads based on their findings.

They had their work cut out for them. CD sales for the first three months of this year were 20 percent lower than last year. Even the national chain Tower Records has had to

close stores across the country.

Hariri said students should care about the plight of City Lights because it has more to offer than the big retail stores like Best Buy.

“If people are bored with what they are listening to, it could expand their taste,” she said, adding that customers can have the store order them a CD if they don't find it on the shelves.

Gabbard said he is thankful for the students' work.

“These things are certainly appreciated as a grassroots effort to help keep my store open. Every little bit can only help,” Gabbard said. “It remains to be seen if it will be enough to keep us going.”

money the feds want to spend on things like making bombs. I will not live a peaceful lifestyle and then give money to the feds for war making.”

An estimated 40 percent of federal income taxes go toward war-related expenditures, according to the watchdog group The National Priorities Project.

“I have been a war tax resister since I was 19,” Woodring explained. “The simplest way to do it is to not make enough money to owe anything, so that is what I have done my whole life. I prefer to tax myself with my time rather than my money.”

For more on the Pedal People, go to www.pedalpeople.com.



Photo by Alex Jarrett, courtesy of the Pedal People
Not your everyday trash collector, Al pulls two trailers full of waste behind his bike.



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