MUSIC

Indie record stores doing slow fade out

Aron's Records and Rhino Westwood are just a few of the shops that find themselves going the way of the dodo in the digital age.

By Geoff Boucher, Times Staff Writer

It'd be harsh exaggeration to say independent record stores are going the way of typewriter repair shops, but in Southern California it's been painfully evident of late that grand, eccentric music merchants are wheezing badly in the modern marketplace.

Rhino Westwood, a Westside landmark for more than three decades, announced its closing on Thursday, news that follows the November shuttering of Aron's Records, the storied shop that sold music for 40 years (and practically invented the used-LP sales practice), first on Melrose Avenue and then Highland Avenue.

Rhino founder Richard Foos, speaking in dejected tones, said Thursday that it "had become very apparent that it was too difficult to go on." The store's lease expired and Foos opted to lock the doors. The store plans a Jan. 21 parking-lot sale that will be part wake, part fire sale.

"But we are hoping now for a white knight to show up and buy the inventory and the name and hopefully carry on the tradition," he said. "It was a very emotional decision but this is where it's at. Now in Westwood you have no free-standing record stores. You have one of the largest colleges in the country and no inde-pendent record store. That says a lot."

The causes of death for Rhino and Aron's are numerous and unsurprising. Album sales are in decline, music consumers continue to migrate to music downloading and CD-burning. The loss-leader approach to CD sales at giant chains such as Wal-Mart and Best Buy have smothered mom-and-pop outfits. And when prerecorded CDs are sold, more and more often it's through new-approach merchants that are as varied as Amazon.com and Starbucks. Closer to home and to the heart, a new competitor arisen from within the indie ranks with the 2001 arrival in Hollywood of Amoeba Records, the Bay Area brand-name that opened a colossal indie store on Sunset Boulevard that siphons offbusiness from stores far and wide.

Amoeba has learned well from the history of indie-store successes; Rhino is a significant part of that history locally.

In 1973, Foos launched the Rhino brand-name after finding success reselling the rare LPs he had cherry-picked at weekend swap meets. The first Rhino shop brought in a clientele that included Harold Bronson. The two self-avowed music geeks hit it off and Bronson became an employee and strong hand in shaping the oddball charm and pop-culture safari spirit of Rhino. In the back of the shop in 1978 they launched their record label, also called Rhino, which has become a potent force in audio and video reissues, novelty projects and the musically esoteric. In 1998, Foos and Bronson sold Rhino to the giant Warner Music Group in a multimillion-dollar deal that financially rewarded their longtime fandom handsomely.

While the label grew, its retail namesake contracted. Its retail space gave way to comic books and pop-culture trinkets and then later to a row of video games. Its music inventory in recent months was far less than its imposing collection in years past. That's a metaphor for music retail as a whole, which as seen its floor-space given over to video games and DVDs as the prerecorded music CD has lost favor with consumers.

Jim Donio, president of the National Assn. of Recording Merchandisers, the New Jersey-based trade group, said the closing of Aron's and Rhino comes clustered with the shutdown of Crow's Nest in Chicago, a past winner of the trade group's retailer-of-the-year award.

"There will be more casualties, I'm sure," Donio said. "There's a conspiracy of market factors right now. It's not just one thing ... there were only two albums in 2005 that sold more than 4 million copies and there needs to be
many, many more than that. In 2004 there was a small but encouraging growth in music sales after three years of decline. Then in 2005 the numbers were down again."

Donio said the loss of singular shops such as Rhino are emotionally hard to take in an industry that puts a premium on free spirits and maverick successes.

"There's a real sense of community in these stores and discovery," Donio said. "Rhino was a great place. Aron's was a special place. It's sad to see them go away and it's not good for anyone."

The group that calls itself the Almighty Institute of Music Retail, based in Los Angeles, has in its database the names of close to 1,000 indie stores that have closed in the past three years. A decade ago, according to the group's stats, there were about 5,000 music shops flying independent flags; now there are about 2,800. The woes go well beyond small and locally owned stores — large chains such as Tower Records and Wherehouse Music, for instance, have seen their fortunes battered in recent years and have sought bankruptcy protection.

"There's no secret here that times have been tough, but every time you hear about another closing, it's still hard," Donio said. "You hate to read nothing but doom and gloom into it, but it is hard, isn't it?"

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