COMMENTARY

It has bins; don't call it a has-been

Haunt the aisles. Weigh your fate. Independent record stores still offer things the Internet can't.

By Robert Lloyd, Times Staff Writer

Some say that in the future — the near future — there will be no records, and so no record stores of any kind to sell them. All your music will arrive sucked through a cable or beamed from a satellite or by some means not yet imagined. (Pill form, possibly.) You will never need to leave the house. In fact, that pretty much has already happened.

So maybe, in the long view, it doesn't matter all that much that after more than 30 years Rhino Records — the Westside store, not the quirky label it spawned, which itself has been subsumed into a vast corporate sea — is going out of business, with a parking lot sale this weekend to cash out what's left of the inventory. Aron's Records, in Hollywood, also is set to shut its doors for good sometime next month, after even more years of operation.

Each was, in its day, an institution, the king of its territory, a mecca for music lovers who wouldn't be caught dead in a Tower Records or Virgin Megastore, or anywhere that charged retail. (Though the economy of scale would suggest otherwise, prices have always been lower in the indie stores than in the big chains.)

The trend is national, if not worldwide: There are, by one count, only around half as many independent record stores in the country today as there were 10 years ago. Whether it's the slump in album sales (down 7% last year, according to SoundScan), or an increase in the downloading of tracks (up 150%), or competition from online shopping, or the various technological and cultural shifts that have driven the youth of America to different distractions, it's a changing world, and one less inclined to support small businessmen selling music out of (mostly) small rooms.

Some Internet retailers, such as Miles of Music or Forced Exposure, which sell real CDs, or eMusic.com, which sells MP3s, are trying to function as virtual independent record stores. They cater to tastes outside the mainstream, posting lists of "employee favorites" and describing their offerings in knowledgeable, friendly, sometimes cheeky terms; even through the computer screen one senses their engagement. (And many real-world stores, of course,
also have a Web presence.)

But Amazon.com, whose clear business plan is to one day sell everything to everybody, has also put significant energy into creating the illusion that its website is just a friendly corner store. It remembers your name if you've shopped there before, says hello when you click in, knows what music you like, and recommends some more.

I know that for some, and not only of the X, Y and Z generations, cyberspace is as authentic a marketplace as any other, but I am old-fashioned enough to want to get out of the house once in a while, into real three-dimensional spaces stocked with things you can see and smell and pick up and turn over to see what they look like on the other side.

Proust had his madeleine, but nothing unlocks the seven volumes of my memory so much as handling some LP I bought when I was 13 or 14 years old. There are those of us for whom music is a fetishistic activity, in the primary meaning of fetish: "an object that is believed to have magical or spiritual powers." Can one fetishize an MP3 file? I haven't been able to yet. (You can fetishize the player, as Apple accountants can attest, but that is a different thing.)

Records Ltd., a storefront operation on Victory Boulevard in Van Nuys, at the end of a 25-minute bike ride, was where I first bought records, and I remember not only the records I bought there but the act of buying them (after the long act of deciding what to buy). Record albums seemed to hold clues to the future, my future, and going to the record store was in some way a first step into a wider world. It was the first place I spent time around — not "with" exactly, but around — adults who, like the acts whose music I bought, were on my side of the generation gap. I knew they knew things I didn't know yet, but might soon.

Later there were Vinyl Fetish and Bomp and Moby Disc and Texas Records and Bebop and Aron's and Rhino and a place across the street from Hollywood High in a building that's no longer there where I stopped every day on the way home from my first real job. And as I had occasion to travel the country, there were Wax N Facts in Atlanta, Homer's in Omaha, Other Music in New York and Harvard Square, Waterloo in Austin, Reckless Records in San Francisco, Schoolkids in Chapel Hill, Sonic Boom in Seattle (two locations), Millennium Music in Portland, Ore. (ditto), Let It Be in Minneapolis, Third Street Jazz and AKA in Philadelphia, the Record Exchange in Princeton, and others, here or already gone, whose names I can't always recall but whose dimensions remain vivid in my mind.

It's not just record stores, of course, that are losing their independents. Their disappearance comes alongside the death of local television, locally programmed radio and independent bookstores, not to say independent pet stores, barber shops and burger joints.

Notwithstanding an anomaly such as Amoeba, the 800-pound gorilla of indies and a tourist attraction whose fame has spread wide, the independent record store is fundamentally a neighborhood institution, with a neighborhood clientele. They may only stand silently shoulder to shoulder thumbing the racks, but they nevertheless form a kind of club, a community of people who take their music more seriously (sometimes way, way more seriously) than most.

Anyway, it isn't over yet. We may be living in the twilight of the independent record retailer, but there are those who will not go gently into that twilight. There are sellers whose intent is (possibly to their disadvantage) more missionary than mercenary — whose staff have a record they want to play you, not merely sell you — and buyers who like a place that cares, and who need to look beyond the new big thing or even the next big thing.

You can still find me there among them, going through the bins, still trying to work out my future.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.