NIGHT LIFE
Keeping the jukes jumping

By Dean Kuipers, Special to The Times

Don MULLER stands in his living room, grinning like a caffeinated teenager, clearly dazzled by the magic he has wrought. The playroom in his Van Nuys ranch home features four classic jukeboxes crowded around a small dance floor, and lightbulbs are flashing like an arcade around the room and across the ceiling.

"See how this model has a speaker on top?" he shouts, patting a 1946 AMI "mother-of-plastic" Model A jukebox, as Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues" comes blasting out at about ear-level. "That was so it would play over the top of the tables. See, this would be the music for a whole restaurant or dance hall, and it only took one machine in the corner to do it. It really kicks it out!"

Muller is clearly enjoying himself, and his enthusiasm is infectious. To thousands of Southern Californians who own jukeboxes that play vinyl records, and the smattering of restaurants and bars that still keep them around, he is something of a guru, a figure familiar to the rich and famous, to music junkies and nostalgia freaks.

Now in his 35th year as sole proprietor of Jukeboxes Unlimited, Muller has seen the industry turn toward CD jukes and, recently, to Internet-connected players that download songs from massive databases. He is one of only two jukebox owners in L.A. who still make house calls to service record-playing jukeboxes.

"I have always been the party guy," a grinning Muller says, adding that his first business, in 1971, was parties. "But then one day I rented a jukebox for a party. People loved it. It was the best party we ever had!" he nearly shouts. "I got an idea. I started buying up every jukebox I could get my hands on." The outrageous success of the iPod and, before that, illegal file-sharing sites such as Napster are only the latest way to scratch what is now a 129-year-old itch: to program your own music, on your own machine, and make your own party.

"The outrageous success of the iPod and, before that, illegal file-sharing sites such as Napster are only the latest way to scratch what is now a 129-year-old itch: to program your own music, on your own machine, and make your own party. That desire began with the invention of Thomas Edison's "Phonograph or Speaking Machine" in 1877, but it didn't become a staple of public life until Edison's machine became the jukebox. And that
happened, fittingly, in a bar.

According to recorded-music lore, the official birth date of the jukebox is Nov. 23, 1889, when Louis Glass and William Arnold demonstrated an Edison Class M Electric Phonograph, which played prerecorded cylinders, fitted with a coin mechanism known as a "nickel-in-the-slot," in the saloon of the Palais Royale restaurant in San Francisco. It was a smash success, and they patented the coin apparatus. By May 1890, the two men said, the 15 machines they had built had raked in $4,000, a huge sum for the times. A booming business was born.

The flat-record disc as we know it already existed at that time, having been patented by Emile Berliner in 1885, but disc and cylinder players were both too expensive for the average home, so the coin-operated players exploded in popularity. For the next 25 years or so, this was the record industry. Near the turn of the century, the spring-driven machines began replacing live bands in the "juke joints" that proliferated near the cotton fields of the South, and thus the name was born: the jukebox. By the 1930s, the big-name manufacturers we know today began developing their effusive, bulbous wonder gizmos that dazzle the eye as well as the ear — the Rudolph Wurlitzer Co., the Rockola Manufacturing Co., AMI Inc. and the J.P. Seeburg Co.

In 1947, Seeburg came out with a durable mechanism that could manage 50 vinyl records, playing both sides of what were then big 78-rpm discs, thus offering 100 selections. The modern jukebox era was born, and competition among operators was stiff.

"Years ago, you really had to be on your toes about it, because you would lose a location, easy," says Tom Blackwell, a jukebox operator in South Carolina who began one of his businesses when he was a teenager, around 1945. "You had to keep the machines running real good, because there was too many people in the business. On jukeboxes, the main thing was changing records — keeping the new top records in there."

Blackwell kept up by reading Billboard. Most people think the record companies supplied the records, he says, "but that never happened." Instead, he raced kids to the record shops when new hits would land, trying to keep about 1,000 machines stocked with the latest releases.

And every once in a while, he'd sell a jukebox to someone who wanted to put it in his home. "They'd get 'em at Christmastime," he says, laughing, "but then they'd never play 'em unless they had company come over."

Which, for Don Muller, is the point: The jukebox comes to life when you have company.

In the late '60s, Muller discovered a cache of 40 vintage jukeboxes in a theater in Prescott, Ariz., and bought the whole lot for about $3 apiece. He fixed them and began selling them to private individuals, to strip clubs (the girls could program their own songs) and to developers who'd put them in their model homes.

He began doing TV ads. Quickly, he had a big shop in Phoenix and was buying and selling jukeboxes all over the country.

In the early '70s, he moved the operation to L.A. It's not out of line to say that the reason so many American homes have jukeboxes in them today is because of Muller; his was the first business set up to put them into homes.

"My kids didn't go somewhere else to party," says Muller, who has sold more than 15,000 jukeboxes.

"They were here, and all their friends were here, and their parents knew they were here. Now I go to their weddings, and they sit there and say, 'The best time of my life was growing up at your house.' "I've had everyone up here from Martin Scorsese to Barbra Streisand, and everybody just loves the jukebox," says legendary music producer Richard Perry, seated in the rec room of his home above the Sunset Strip. The Art Deco room has a bar and walls full of instruments and gold and platinum records. Like Muller, who sold him his 1978-79 Seeburg Disco jukebox, his primary interest is in the music.

"I was particularly fortunate to find this gem," he says, beaming. "It sort of has an Art Deco look, like it belongs here. This happened, fittingly, in a bar."

As a demonstration, he turns up "Love TKO"; at 50 watts per channel, it's flapping the potted plants. Plus, he affirms, the jukebox experience is hands-on fun. And everybody, himself included, loves to choose music.

"I dare you to name one person who doesn't find it fun to stand around the jukebox and be part of programming whatever music they want to hear," he says.

For Perry, who has produced albums for artists from Streisand to Ringo Starr to Carly Simon to the Pointer Sisters, and continues today to have huge hits with albums of standards by Rod Stewart, stocking the jukebox is an art unto itself. His has 80 selections, and his standards are high. He picks a song like Van Morrison's "Moondance," for instance. "Come on; that's a song that's great to hear anytime, anywhere. I strive to have every song as meaningful as that," he says.

So his machine is packed with '40s big-band classics such as Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade," a smattering of doowop and lots of R&B, Sinatra and classic blues. There are about 60 selections, he says, that he'll never change. The other 20 slots, however, are for contemporary stuff, experiments. And don't try to tell him that a CD jukebox would give him more selections.

"The CD jukeboxes have hundreds and thousands of selections, and it leaves too much to someone else's potential bad taste," he says with a smile.

For others, taste may have other connotations. Children of the alternative '80s and '90s find a jukebox can be an ideal display site for that offbeat record, keeping what might be a little-played record at your fingertips.
"When I was a kid and started to collect 45s, you had the little spindle where you could stack about five of them on your record player," L.A. music journalist Dan Epstein recalls, "and I just like remember going to restaurants where they had a jukebox and going, 'Oh, that would be so badass. I could put all my 45s in this thing and not have to take 'em in and out of their sleeves, just play 'em.'"

By the time he got his 1964 Wurlitzer about eight years ago, he had 3,000 to 4,000 singles. Then his obsession exploded.

"Oh, God, yes! I probably bought like another 1,000 or 2,000 in the next five years. From digging through 25-cent bins at used-record stores to going on eBay and tracking down MCS and New York Dolls singles."

And the more obscure, the better. Epstein would change out the records every few months, adding rarities like "Naturally Stoned" by the Avant-Garde — game-show host Chuck Woolery's '60s psychedelic band — and "Break It All" by Los Shakers, Uruguay's version of the Beatles.

Though several people interviewed for this story admit, somewhat sheepishly, that their jukes have suffered because of their new devotion to the iPod, filmmaker and former Rhino Records artistic director Sam Epstein (no relation to Dan) claims nothing can usurp his 1958 Seeburg with 200 selections. He's a die-hard collector of 45s, now owning more than 10,000, and contends the ideal sonic and aesthetic environment for discovering music is the jukebox.

"The 45 is the way it was originally intended, you know? For a lot of early rock 'n' roll, a lot of vintage vocalists, even the punk movement," Sam Epstein says. "It's more organic than any of the digital media, especially if you get an old Motown 45, or an old Chess 45, and you hear Howlin' Wolf or Bo Diddley. It's kind of like the whole box rumbles and the room rumbles, and it's different each time you play it."

Having been at Rhino more than 25 years, Sam Epstein also loves how what he calls "feeding the jukebox" leads him to new music. His interests have led him to make a film about the blues, still in production, called "When Blue Men Sang the Whites." He'll ask friends going home to Nigeria to bring him fresh juju singles, or will set up his whole jukebox with Bakersfield country.

"For those who really like to play the records, this was the machine," Epstein says of the Seeburg.

Tom Blackwell points out this is an urge the downloadable or Internet jukebox may not scratch sufficiently. He notes that all commercial jukeboxes have about 20 songs on them that are the hot sellers, the hits, and it's always been that way.

"If there are good things on the jukebox, there are probably discerning people behind the bar." Epstein says. "And the whole fun of my jukebox is discovering things that were an obscurity — one of mine was Sugar Pie DeSanto. She was a singer, a pal of Etta James, still lives up in San Francisco, putting out records. You'll never find that stuff downloadable, or whatever. It just doesn't make marketable sense. It's kind of like the haphazard route of history."

Don't rock these jukeboxes

Décor is nice, and reasonably priced drinks can be a boon to business too, but the contents of the music-playing machine on the wall does as much as anything to set the tone in a bar.

"Jukeboxes totally epitomize the bar," says Carl Lofgren, who for four years was manager and co-owner of the Scene in Glendale. "When a person comes into a place, the first thing they do after getting a drink is to check what's on the jukebox.

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That, of course, is a matter of taste. But predictability is, well, no way to be memorable. "Greatest hits collections are no go," says Lofgren, now manager and co-owner of the downtown bar La Cita. "You have to offer things outside of what people expect."

Following are 26 jukeboxes we remember. Got a favorite? Tell us:

The Blue Room: Get your groove on in Burbank, where the digital juke seems to take on the color of the room. 916 S. San Fernando Road, Burbank. (323) 849-2779.


Canter's Kibbitz Room: Heavy-on-the-rock box at the bar Guns N' Roses once frequented. Lots of Stones and, inexplicably, Third Eye Blind. 419 N. Fairfax Ave., L.A. (323) 651-2030.

Club Tee Gee: Tony Bennett and Dean Martin rule the CD box, but classic rock rounds out the selection in this Atwater Village watering hole. 3210 Glendale Blvd., L.A. (323) 669-9631.

Continental Room: Hipster Fullerton martini bar has a great juke for those seeking a Rat Pack vibe. 115 W. Santa Fe Ave., Fullerton. (714) 526-4529.

Frank & Hank: Pull up a stool at this K-town dive and if you are lucky, 91-year-old soul singer/songwriter and F&H regular Timmie Rogers will sing along with his CD. 518 S. Western Ave. L.A. (213) 383-2087.

HMS Bounty: Choose your poison — CD or 45 rpm single — at this Wilshire bar. Dueling boxes are heavy on classics such as Sinatra's "My Way." 3357 Wilshire Blvd., Koreatown. (213) 385-7275.
Hop Louie's: Black-clad art students and Chinatown regulars alike are "Crazy" for Patsy Cline tunes played on this charming dive's CD jukebox. 950 Mei Ling Way, L.A. (213) 628-4244.

Johnny's Saloon: Punk-heavy jukebox makes room for icons (Hank Williams Sr.) and the hoi polloi (Scissor Sisters). 17428 Beach Blvd., Huntington Beach. (714) 848-0676.


Knuckleheads: Bikers, Marines and surfer dudes play the likes of Social Distortion, Metallica and Tom Petty. 1717 N. El Camino Real, San Clemente. (949) 492-2410.

Little Joy: Gram Parsons, Jesus & Mary Chain and rising local bands are in heavy rotation at this Echo Park dive. 1477 W. Sunset Blvd., Echo Park. (213) 250-3417.

Malo: Upscale Silver Lake restaurant-bar known for its Ecast jukebox crammed with every popular and obscure song you could want. 4326 Sunset Blvd., L.A. (323) 664-1011.

Mel's Drive-In: So it's a tourist trap of a faux-'50s diner, but where else can you play the Temptations and Frankie Avalon, for free, on a freestanding jukebox? 1650 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood. (323) 465-2111.

Mr. J's Cocktails: Friendly older locals' dive tucked quietly in a strip mall, where the jovial atmosphere will have you singing "Barracuda" soon enough. 303 E. Katella, Orange. (714) 744-3665.

Paradise Cove: Punch up some Dick Dale on this Malibu standby's CD jukebox and watch the sun set in style. 28128 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu. (310) 457-2503.

The Red Garter: Westside partygoers are inspired by the 155,000-plus songs at their fingertips courtesy of the TouchTunes jukebox. 2536 Lincoln Blvd., Venice. (310) 398-4781.

Reno Room: Long Beach staple boasts cheap drinks and an eclectic alt-rock soundtrack — Cash to Kinks, Ramones to Raconteurs. 3400 E. Broadway, Long Beach. (562) 438-4590.

Route 66 Classic Grill: Santa Clarita diner-bar is one of the few places in SoCal with a Rowe Bubbler jukebox that plays 45s hooked up to wall boxes at tables. 18730 Soledad Canyon Road, Canyon Country. (661) 298-1494.

The Scene: Rock staples mix easily with a smattering of local favorites and indie artists such as Black Mountain and Clap Your Hands Say Yeah. 806 E. Colorado Blvd., Glendale. (818) 241-7029.

The Short Stop: Don't play Madonna on this hipster hang's jukebox — the bartender has a secret "reject" button behind the bar. Play it safe and choose Neko Case or Hüsker Dü. 1455 Sunset Blvd., L.A. (213) 482-4942.


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