For Tower Records, End of Disc
In Rockville, Reminders and Remainders of the Dying CD

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In the wan light of retail desperation, it's nearly impossible to spot a gem amid the acres of dreck: Eddie Money CDs, anyone? The soundtrack of "Snakes on a Plane"? Boxed sets of "Captain and Tennille" DVDs? Get there before it's too late.

Too late, though, is almost here. Tower Records is closing, and as the signs say, everything must go. The whole chain is shutting, not just this thoroughly ravaged store off the Pike in Rockville. A liquidator is peddling the stock left in Tower's 85 or so remaining stores (five locally), and by Christmas, even Tower's desiccated carcass will be dust.

All of it is going, of course -- not just Tower, but the record store culture that Tower embodied. Anything that can be squeezed down to ones and zeros and moved around at the speed of electrons doesn't have to be stacked in plastic cases, shoved into bins and splayed over aisles under fluorescent lights anymore. All of it's going online.

And isn't that better? Doesn't the digital universe give anyone with a computer and a credit card wider and speedier access to more music than any Tower could ever stock? Isn't it better when you never have to find a parking space or deal with one of those haughty, green-haired clerks who always gave your Beach Boys and show-tune selections a look that said, "Wow, you are such a geezer"?

No, it isn't. Not exactly.

There will never be the same sense of wonder on iTunes, the same joy of discovery and intoxicating power of musical abundance that hit you every time you walked into even the dinkiest Tower or any comparable record store. There it lay before you -- unheard! unseen! unfondled! -- potential treasures beckoning from row upon row of wooden bins.

Clicking a mouse cannot replace the singular ritual act of pawing through those big bins to find . . . well, you never knew what. And that was the point. Skilled veterans could flip through dozens of records -- "records"? Ha-ha, Grandpa! -- with knowing hands and studious concentration while the rest of us dawdled over a particularly alluring piece of cover art. Working your way down the alphabet (Abba, the Beatles, the Cure, etc.) could take the better part of an afternoon.

Tower facilitated all this with spacious, high-ceilinged stores that seemed to stock every note recorded in the preceding decade. Just when you thought you owned everything by [insert name of favorite artist], Tower had something you'd never heard of ("Whoa, when did Zeppelin do that?"). It had obscure imports, generous helpings of jazz, blues and classical.

I hear the music geeks whining: Tower wasn't the cheapest place around, and it often employed
contemptuous or conveniently nonexistent salespeople. It also pushed the same Top 40 pap as the marts (Wal- and K), the big boxes (Best Buy, Barnes & Noble, etc.) and the surviving mall chain stores. Yeah, yeah and yeah. And so what?

Having grown up in Southern California, I hold a nostalgic fondness for Tower. The company was founded in Sacramento in 1960 by Russ Solomon, himself a music geek, who got his start selling records out of his father's drugstore. Solomon expanded first to San Francisco, then headed south, to Los Angeles.

There was a big Tower in the heart of Westwood Village, close to where I grew up, but the real action was a few miles away at Tower on the Sunset Strip. It wasn't the biggest location, but for a generation or two, it was a holy pilgrimage site for kids in the know.

The Strip Tower seemed to be open all the time, and it was always humming well into the werewolf hours. If you were really happening, you caught the late show at the Troubadour or the Whisky on the Strip (here's how old I am: I remember when all the talk around the Whisky was about an unknown band called Van Halen). And then, ears still ringing, you walked down the street to Tower. The place always had a slightly sinister, druggy feel to it, with a breathtakingly odd and diverse clientele and a PA crackling with the most obtuse music (Afro-Manding blues? central Indian Lavani tunes? whatever). For some reason, it always felt as if the cops were about to raid the place.

Music and the music industry have evolved rapidly in the past decade, and each mutation has disrupted Tower's niche. First came the discounters to undercut Tower on price, followed by Napster and Amazon.com and iTunes, which beat Tower on selection and convenience. It's reasonable to ask whether Tower could have adapted. As a friend put it, Tower had the brand-name cred to be what iTunes is, if only Tower hadn't clung to bricks and mortar and $17.99 CDs.

The future portends more abundance and choice than Russ Solomon could ever have stacked in his biggest store. But something's being lost in this vast and unending digital banquet. Tower's downward arc tracks the fragmentation of musical tastes into 10,000 little pieces. We're well past the point where broad musical consensus is possible.

That means there might never be another Beatles or U2 -- no more supergroups to span the niches and subcultures. More shocking, Tower's fall suggests the end of "standards." Long ago, two strangers could hear "Some Enchanted Evening" or "Norwegian Wood" and share, for just a moment, something familiar and lovely. Now my iPod ain't like yours.

There's no doubt the Internet is a superior transactional medium for getting music. But saying so assumes that the transaction is all there is. It values ends over means, destinations over journeys.

For a long time, Tower was a great journey.

"Can I help you?" one of the clerks asked a customer at the Tower store in Rockville the other day.

The guy said he was looking for something or other, something the store no longer had, which was just about everything.

Can I help you? The answer is, not anymore.