



Crowds gather at the event's opening [Photo courtesy of Ace Brown]

Not quite the real thing, but thanks for the memories

Larry Jaffee takes a sobering stroll through the hallowed walls of New York's once greatest record store

IT'S BEEN OVER THREE YEARS since Tower Records was liquidated, during which time the chain's superstore in Manhattan's Greenwich Village has remained empty. However, in mid-January, a group of art professionals known as No Longer Empty (NLE) took over the massive space at Broadway and 4th Street to pay homage to the record store experience.

The month-long exhibition, *Never Can Say Goodbye*, features fake album covers dotting the walls, a paper-sculpted store clerk, whose creator captured the know-it-all attitude of former employees, promotional materials that copy Tower's familiar yellow and red graphics, and record bins, courtesy of a faux retailer called *Never Records*. The ground floor (the three others are off-limits) is filled with music-inspired art.

NLE plans to erect a similar installation in September in Liverpool, England, also economically blighted with scores of vacant storefronts.

Each NLE exhibition is curated in a site-specific way, taking into account the former use of the space, which is made available free by the landlord.

"In its heyday, Tower Records was sales central for indie and contemporary music, as well as a gathering place for musicians and music lovers," states the NLE press release. "Today freely downloading selected songs have created an empty space where a music store once thrived."

But digital downloads aren't the sole reason for the disappearance of Tower and other similar behemoth retailers in New York; greedy major labels keeping CD prices too high and killing the single (at least in the US), coupled with undercutting mass merchants selling releases as loss leaders, probably contributed more to the birth of Napster and its offspring.

Besides the 2006 closing of Tower's other huge location near Lincoln Center, Virgin last year liquidated two Megastores (14th Street and Times Square). HMV was the first to flee its American beachhead in 2004,



Artist/musician Ted Riederer created 'Never Records', a facsimile of the real thing with vinyl bins

closing three large outlets after four years of not turning a profit.

However, the exhibit does serve as a metaphor for what's happened to media manufacturing. The contraction inflicting replication equipment manufacturers and replicators over the past decade has negatively impacted everyone along the packaged media food chain.

As we all well know, the demand for pre-recorded physical media isn't what it used to be during the heady days of REPLItech shows.

The Tower location hosting the art show opened in 1983 and closed in 2006, setting the bar for deep-catalogue CD and DVD stock. The chain was established in 1960 in Sacramento, California.

By the time of its Chapter 7 bankruptcy, 89 US Tower stores were shuttered. At its peak, Tower generated more than \$1 billion in annual revenue with nearly 200 stores in 21 states and numerous franchises internationally.

For Big Apple music lovers, the downtown Tower was mecca. I relished the late nights (they'd close at midnight). I'd peruse the CD bins and get educated on my latest genre/artist obsession in reggae and jazz.

The Greenwich Village store was where I bought my first CD in November 1985, thinking I was buying the misprinted vinyl boxed set of the-then new *Biograph* by Bob Dylan. Walking through where I had been hundreds of times before was a little eerie, as if ghosts were watching.

Apparently I wasn't alone with the personal connection to the place: at the opening of the exhibition on 15 January, a line extended around the block from 5pm to 10pm. On 26 January a discussion, entitled *Discs to Downloads: New Directions in Music*, tried to make sense of what's happened to recorded music.

Session moderator Craig Balsam, co-founder of the US indie label Razor & Tie, reminisced about the mid-1980s when he was a New York University Law School student who lived a block away. "I spent more time here than studying," Balsam smiled.

One of the show's curators and co-panelist, Ted Riederer, said that the inspiration for creating *Never Records* was *Yesterday and Today*, the Rockville, Maryland record store where he spent his suburban Washington, DC adolescence and first encountered punk, ska, mod and rock 'n' roll.

"Everything I know about music, politics, sex, existentialism, style and fashion was at *Yesterday and Today*. It was more like a social library, a meeting place for musicians, than a retail space. *Never Records* is my love letter to the record store."

Riederer added he couldn't understand why the record industry wasn't better prepared to anticipate downloading because it previously moved without a hitch from vinyl to cassette to CD and LaserDisc. Enthusiastic about vinyl's recent comeback, he cited the success of a local, vinyl-only label, *Sacred Bones Records*, which donated its real LPs to the *Never Records* bin. Fans are collecting the entire line for each exquisitely designed, silk-screen printed cover. But he's not suggesting that vinyl will make up the CD's recent sales shortfalls.

Balsam noted that *Other Music*, a small indie store across the street, is still in business. "Fans still enjoy physical," he said.

Co-panelist and music lawyer Elliott Groffman suggested that nothing could stop new media's immediacy and portability as it pertains to music. "I don't want to give up on recorded music, and I'm pretty cynical, but we're sitting here in an empty carcass of a superstore. Virtual space is much larger," he said.

Although subscription services such as *Rhapsody* have been slow to take off, the panelists concurred that streaming websites offering an unlimited selection might eventually be preferred by the masses to owned downloads. Co-panelist/artist manager Kevin Patrick chimed in: "My kids are 12 and 13 and they'll never ever care about holding a CD" – sobering words for those whose livelihoods depend on making physical media.

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Artist Paul Villinski moulded old LPs he actually purchased at this Tower Records into birds [Photo courtesy of Annew Trauben]