

The Man Behind Farwell Music

By: Jon Spelt

When did you know you didn't want to be a cowboy or a fireman and instead were going to earn your way in the world selling recorded music? What is your earliest recollection of knowing the magic of music?

Being a cowboy was ruled out when I discovered that I couldn't shoot a man and a fireman with the realization that I would never run into a burning building. I guess I realized about a year before I opened the store that selling recorded music would be my profession. It afforded me the time and exposure to music that I craved.

When I first bought records in grade school, it was primarily rock 45's which my budget allowed. I still remember feeling the total release of energy; the adrenaline rush I got from watching the needle trace the groove as Steven Tyler reached into the stratospheric vocal ranges of "Dream On." When I studied music, initially thinking I would be a performing musician, I switched to buying classical LP's and learning to play the trumpet parts. I went to all the sections of the record store. Row after row of undiscovered masterpieces. Even bad purchases became learning experiences. What made one record suck and another take me somewhere I had never been before? I pondered the nature of the LP. How could this beauty being released into my bedroom be coming from a black disc with a plain old looking groove in it? Somewhere in those early days of discovery the seed was planted. I would spend the rest of my days listening in on the aural history of the world as committed to record.

If you had to describe in one sentence why you opened Farwell Music, what might that sentence be? Having worked as an employee of other companies in the same line of work, were you motivated by an inner entrepreneurial spirit or where you driven to it by the policies and practices of others?

Farwell Music was born out of the need to run a record store the way I thought it should be run to service the music as well as the customer. Working at other stores, the focus always seemed to be "moving units" and chart position, street dates and basically treating the music as a commodity. While some of that is important in running a successful business, to ignore the artistic statements of the artists is a grave injustice.

You have customers not only from throughout Southeastern Wisconsin, but some who shop here from other states and even other countries. There is obviously something going on here. How would you describe what is unique about Farwell Music?

It might sound goofy, but a lot of what makes Farwell Music unique is the customer base. It is primarily composed of music fanatics. Birds of a feather flock together. People with only a passing interest in music generally don't seek out a place like Farwell Music with knowledgeable, friendly staff. They want to get in, grab their music and get out. Kind of the experience most people want at a gas station. What people experience at Farwell Music, depending on the day of the week and the mood I'm in, can be stimulating, amusing or educational. There are often lively discussions about the relative merits of two different musicians, the origins of a genre or what constitutes the difference between noise and music. Good luck having an intelligent musical conversation with a minimum-wage rack jammer at the chain store.

U L T R A F I D E L I S

HIGH PERFORMANCE AUDIO & VIDEO

In a world where many forces influence the value of what you sell, and I'm speaking here primarily about the rarer vinyl, with prices for recordings often pushing up into the, shall we say "serious collector range," your business strives to offer real value to a loyal customer base. How do you view the temptation to sell potentially expensive rarities on the open market for more money?

The temptation is always there. This is the way I make my living and the more I charge for an item, the more money I make. As my bookkeeper will attest, this is far from a get rich scheme so I can sympathize with the guy who's not making a lot of money, but has done the research and wants to build a nice collection of music to forget about his miserable job. By the same token, I've got quite a bit of the "collector mentality" and I understand that when you want something bad and it's rare, you've got to step up to the plate. The economy is becoming increasingly global, particularly so in the rare record market. The way I strike a balance is to tier prices with most items being affordable to all and the rarer ones priced so that whoever wants it most gets it.

I would say my stock is of a higher quality and priced lower than the competition. I think other used CD shops would be better off by paying more for knowledgeable staff rather than buying something based on what their computer tells them to.

What are the last five things you have listened to? Not "heard" because I know in your business, as in mine, that's something else entirely, but "listened to." Are these indicative of your tastes or do they represent a musical bender you have coincidentally been on lately?

Duke Ellington, RCA Victor box set- The most important body of work by an American composer- period. Put this in a time capsule and beam it into the far reaches of the galaxy. If any aliens hear this, they'll think we're more advanced than we are.

Hank Williams, the complete recordings- Awesome. Every note he recorded in the roughly 30 years he was on this planet. This has dichotomously supplanted organized religion while reinforcing my belief in God.

A record of songs and dances of the Renaissance- When I first started playing this one, I thought, "Boy this is pretty lightweight stuff." I walked away and cooked some breakfast and came back. I realized that music has many different purposes. Some of this was ceremonial, other pieces for light entertainment. Music doesn't always have to say something specific; sometimes it can just be pretty.

The Byrds, Younger Than Yesterday- Perhaps because I listen to this all the time, it's one of the last five. This record captures the Byrds in transition. For the most part, the chiming guitars are gone. They did their folk-rock thing and were moving on. The Dylan tunes are gone and they were being influenced by Coltrane, the Beatles, UFO's, drugs and the freedoms allowed by the expanding powers of the studio. Producer Gary Usher helps them in unleashing their psychedelic vision. Essential.

The Flaming Lips, The Soft Bulletin- Surreal rock for the new millennium. Thin off-kilter voice, intentionally super distorted drums, nature sounds, samples and loops blended with guitar and synthesizer. The wackiness of the lyrics and structure is offset by strong songs and impeccable production. Though not for everybody, if you're looking for something out of the ordinary, this is my pick for best rock record of the year.

U L T R A F I D E L I S

H I G H P E R F O R M A N C E A U D I O & V I D E O

Finally, you have, by my own observation, a unique gift for mentally cataloging the interests and "want lists" of huge numbers of customers as well as real compassion for people who are afflicted with this disease you and I share as avid music listeners. Take a moment to tell me how you can help the relative novice climb the taste ladder at a more rapid rate. That sounds a bit crass; I think you know what I mean. How can the newcomer benefit from coming in to Farwell Music?

I'm not sure I can help people improve their taste. If that were the case, I could single-handedly change the face of radio. And I would. Instead, I think it's best for people to do it the way I did and probably you did too. Every month I read over 300 record reviews. Obviously it's not necessary for the average listener to read that many, but it is helpful to read reviews of things you don't think you'd be interested in. Take chances when buying CD's and LP's; used record stores like mine are perfect for it. We've already winnowed out all the stuff you get bombarded with every time you turn around and we sell the good stuff at old-fashioned prices so you can be daring. Music doesn't have to cost a lot to satisfy.

There are a lot of excellent reference books available; the Rough Guide is one I can recommend. They have separate volumes for rock, jazz, reggae, soul, classical, electronica and more with descriptions of style and recommended purchases. There is no way of eliminating mistakes. Learn from them. Read music magazines in addition to your hi-fi mags. Two of the best I have found are Q and Mojo. They are both kind of pricey and sometimes hard to get because they are British, but they are absolutely packed with reviews and their in-depth articles leave Rolling Stone and the like looking more like the advertising pamphlets they are.

If I can add a personal recommendation without spoiling my own prime source for good music, Farwell Music is well worth visiting. If you like to shop from a really well chosen selection of guaranteed quality used recordings in all genres on LP and CD and enjoy the assistance of a knowledgeable, helpful staff, I can't imagine you'll be disappointed. In fact, if you're at all like the staff of Ultra Fidelis, you may wind up looking for the twelve step program to stop going there. I haven't found an effective one.

FARWELL MUSIC is located at 2218 N. Farwell Avenue, Milwaukee WI, 53202. The telephone number there is (414) 271-9033.