

# Wax Trax Melts Competition With Its Underground Selection It's A Rocky Mountain Rock Mecca

BY PETER M. JONES

DENVER After more than a decade, Wax Trax here remains the Rocky Mountain mecca for obscure underground music, rare albums, and the latest in 12-inch singles.

A testimony to the store's reputation for hard-to-find music is the fact that Wax Trax has attracted many notable record buyers to its three-shop cluster over the years. According to Duane Davis, co-owner and manager, Ric Ocacek of the Cars makes frequent visits to Wax Trax.

"The last time he came in, he said we had a better selection of Boston hardcore than they have in Boston," Davis says.

During a tour stop in Denver last summer, Bob Dylan dropped in to sign autographs, chat, and buy several hundred dollars worth of used blues and r&b albums.

Wax Trax, located in the centrally located Capitol Hill section, remains one of the more popular record dealers, but major retailers have consistently given the store a run for its money. With many record chains adding metropolitan Denver locations in the last decade, it has been increasingly tempting for some suburban music fans to just stay close to home.

"It's still awfully convenient to drive down to Sound Warehouse or any of the malls and have a parking place and not have to be harassed for spare change or by people selling drugs—or selling almost anything," says Davis.

Wax Trax is housed in its original small and humble home on Denver's 13th Avenue on northern Capitol Hill, the city's "alternative" community. The store is down the street from the now-defunct Mercury Cafe, a once lively nightclub known for showcasing new wave rock and small-label bands. Allen Ginsberg would often read poetry and perform with his band at the "Merc."

Wax Trax is also two blocks from the heart of East Colfax, Denver's lengthy strip of pornography retailers, streetwalkers, and panhandlers. To counter that stigma, the store's promotions focus on its unique specializations found in its mix of 90% new and 10% used record inventory.

The firm endeavors to represent nearly every major musical style except classical, with compact disks making up 2%-3% of its inventory. According to Davis, most of the suburban record stores cannot match his selection.

"For a store to be considered competition, it has to have a certain inventory," says Davis. "Still, [some of the record chains] have several locations that attract the suburban kids."

Joe Beine, a Wax Trax manager, notes that other Denver dealers feature frequent discounts, and, "We do our best to match them." Most of the stores' ads run in Westword, a weekly feature-oriented newspaper. Says Beine, "It reached a point where 'word of mouth' took over, and that's

primarily what we depend upon now."

The extent of the Wax Trax inventory attracts both esoteric music fans and mainstream record collectors. "On the new releases, we actively go out to find every variation that there is—singles with different B sides, picture sleeves, 12-inch singles—all the little wrinkles that make collecting fun," says Davis.

Davis, who with his partner Dave Stidman bought the 1,100-square-foot Wax Trax in 1978, began with a personal crusade for alternative new music. "If someone came in and asked for the new Fleetwood Mac, we'd laugh and say, 'Go shop somewhere else.' We were very arrogant

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at the time."

After several years, a branch oldies/used record store called Another Wax Trax opened two doors down. A second annex, Across The Trax, a 500-square-foot store specializing in memorabilia, T-shirts, and video rentals, soon followed. The latter store was originally opened across the street from the other two outlets. Davis cites Jean-Luc Godard's "Breathless" and Joel M. Reed's "Blood Sucking Freaks" as typical of the Across The Trax video library.

In addition to purchasing the Wax Trax site, Davis and Stidman had to buy use of the Wax Trax name. The original owners subsequently opened a new Wax Trax store in Chicago and started the Wax Trax record label. The two retail operations remain independent of each other.

Davis admits that the market for the Denver Wax Trax was originally quite small. "There weren't a lot of people in the neighborhood who were into [underground music]," he says. "We did a lot to create the audience."

"We sell a lot of music that KBCO [a Boulder/Denver album rock FM station] won't touch," says Beine. "There's not a good college station in the area."

According to Davis and Beine, Wax Trax often sells records before the artists receive either commercial success or critical acclaim. "I couldn't even hazard a guess how many copies of 'Tainted Love' by Soft Cell we sold on 12-inch imports before it was ever released in America," says Davis.

The birth of the oldies/used record store came almost by accident—the shop ran out of room. "About eight years ago, we filled up the corner store with all the things we wanted to do," says Davis. When the needlecraft store down the street closed down after a robbery attempt, Wax Trax owners seized the opportunity

to expand with a store dedicated to "quality older music."

The creation of the 1,100-square-foot Another Wax Trax helped alleviate some of the original store's "conceptual" problems. But because of space problems in both stores, Davis says, the distinctions are still not clear cut. "We were having an identity crisis with the emphasis on new

wave," says Davis. "We have a huge soundtrack section, but we don't have any room for it at the oldie store, so it's still at the corner store."

"People are in looking for 'Man O La Mancha' and hearing Black Flag," Davis says. "We don't mind expanding their horizons, but we don't want to oppress them with it."