

## *The Thief of Time Prowls the Used Record Store*

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Many years ago, I was a clerk in a used record store in downtown Santa Cruz, CA. Being a beach town, a university town, a broad-minded town, Santa Cruz has many characters, and since the store was on the main downtown drag, more than a few of them wandered in.

My job as a clerk was straightforward: buy and sell used records, keep the rock and roll on loud enough to draw in street passersby, and try not to light anything on fire. The store was essentially a giant rack of records: narrow aisles, long wooden bins of vinyl, a few crappy posters of self-admiring rock stars, and me behind the scratched-glass counter, trying to keep desperadoes out of the cash register.

A typical day at the store would bring four or five people lugging in their collections of prized but scratched Journey albums (though there might be a Joni Mitchell thrown in to show their diversity), dumping them on the counter, and expecting to put a down payment on a Porsche when they walked out.

Upon being told that only three records of their thirty were purchasable, and those at twenty-five cents apiece, the “No man, that’s not cool!” would ring out. But that’s what I’d been taught by the store’s owner, having watched him dispense with the dreams of sellers with crisp dispatch over and over. I was definitely not cool, but he was cold.

Icy or not, in the nearly two years I worked there, I learned a lot about the constrained value of used records, the middlebrow taste of most record buyers, and that—even for a single track—I didn’t like any song of Motorhead’s with the volume on. I also learned how to quickly and efficiently wipe down the blotchy fingerprints (and even some shallow scratches) on the used customer records I bought, with a special spray and a quick rubdown with a towel, though some records could have used an acid bath.

We had some regular customers who would come in and ogle certain albums and never buy, some who would ogle and occasionally buy, and one who literally talked to the records, holding forth on esoteric

issues while framing his face with the album cover. It's unclear if they ever spoke back. Most days were pretty routine, though my boss once had me chase a shoplifter through the streets of downtown Santa Cruz for blocks. Though I was playing a lot of basketball then and had good wind, the little weasel eluded me. I hope the albums he popped were all from the Journey section.

But when I had the night shift, me soloing when the store was open to 11 pm, things got dicier. One day a fellow who appeared to be a Sasquatch came into the store near closing time, holding a crinkled paper bag. He circled through the record bins, not pausing to look, and then approached me at the counter.

"Hey man, what will you trade for this?" he said, pushing the bag toward my face. I unrolled its crumpled top and saw what appeared to be some twigs and clumped moss, with some small brown mushrooms mixed in. Now, I had some familiarity (ahem, scientific interests) with magic mushrooms then, and those appeared to be candidates, but there remained in me a mild sense that perhaps the Great Adventure of my life was yet to unfold, and eating mysterious mushrooms might close down the road.

When I told him I couldn't help, he whined, "C'mon man, how about just a little Marley?" but I was unmoved, though I did (and still do) think a little Marley is good juju for most any occasion.

But Mushroom Man was nothing compared to Meat Man. Some months later, again when the wolves were out, a bedraggled guy came walking into the store with his hand thrust forward and something large and wet in it. He approached the counter, keeping the arm stretched out like a theatrical waiter delivering an order on a silver salver.

But I hadn't ordered the very large and vividly dripping bloody raw steak he held. "What will you give me for this?" he said, in a reasonable tone. Though the steak still had a Styrofoam tray and plastic wrap below, my deep fear was that he was going to drip a lot of bloody hell onto the counter, and I had no hand grenades with which to clean it up.

I could see from the label on the plastic wrap that the beef was from the local Safeway, a couple of blocks away. Perhaps the first one he'd stolen he'd eaten raw, and he figured he would trade the second for some Marley. Or maybe a shrunken head, though we were out of those.

"Uh, I can't use that right now," I said. He grunted something meaty at me and walked out. My counter was unscathed.

There wasn't a great deal of glory in the used record trade, but it could be—literally—sweet. The store was right next door to a shop that baked great cookies, on the premises. It was staffed by college-age women, all friendly, all welcoming. A long-time admirer of cookies, at down times in the store I'd go next door to munch and chat. I dated one of the women for a while, and besides the benefits of her charm, she used to give me paper sacks—full!—of broken cookies on a regular basis. [Info dump: broken free cookies—better than intact.]

I tired of the cramped nature of the store and the work after a while, but not before I took a blow there: I'd been given a lovely 1911 gold Elgin pocket watch from my father, who'd been given it from his father, who received it from his parents when he graduated from high school. It was my most cherished worldly object, so even though it didn't pair all that well with my Levis, I did loop its beautiful gold chain through my belt loop and into the little watch pocket of my 501s.

Until that chain broke at work and I left the watch behind the shallow counter, partially under a shelf, but in plain sight.

So whoever stole the watch probably only saw it for a moment, saw me putting albums away, and snatched it and walked out. He got way better value from that transaction than any bid on his Sticky Fingers album. I searched and searched the entire store for the watch, but I knew someone had palmed it, and it was unlikely that Mushroom Man or Meat Man would bring it back in for trade.

I left the store when vinyl and cassettes were being overtaken by CDs, with digitized music following not long after. Vinyl, of course, has had a hipster and audiophile resurgence, but I only feel a mild twinge of nostalgia for my immersion in album-time. But if I were able to go back in time to that record store, it wouldn't be the vinyl I'd be after: I'd go back to the very day my watch broke, and put it right in my pocket.