

Icons

THE TEMPLE OF TUNE

IN 1964, when I was eleven, I was judged by my parents old enough to go with a friend to Sam the Record Man's famous Boxing Day sale to buy *12x5*, by the Rolling Stones. I don't remember how I'd heard of Sam's, but it was the kind of knowledge that passes through the teenage underground via morphic resonance—that process by which a few members of a species learn new skills, and other members, no matter how distant, instinctively absorb them.

The lineup ran down Yonge and across Gould almost to Victoria. Inside, the store was jammed like the Hadassah Bazaar. Hand-lettered signs revealed a mysterious pricing system (\$7.99 discounted to \$3.33; \$6.99 discounted to \$2.19). Long before it grew to the 50,000-square-foot emporium it is today, it seemed huge—grubby tile floors, harsh fluorescent lighting, walls covered in pegboard gaudily painted in a diamond pattern and hung with LPs rising to the ceiling. It felt like a cluttered jobber's warehouse, a place where people who cared about music sold records, the way women in the dressmaker supply shops on Spadina sold fabric.

Sam's had set up shop at 347 Yonge in 1961. Its chief competitor (and new neighbour) was understood even then to be second best. More than thirty-five years later, A&A is gone, replaced by a new generation of industrially designed mega-stores (HMV is half a block south, Tower Records on the corner of Yonge and Queen). But Sam's still dominates the imaginations of serious music fans who value chaotic eclecticism over slick efficiency. I delight in its idiosyncratic reflection of the man who's been selling records since 1937. At seventy-eight, Sam (The Record Man) Sniderman—a local legend in the spirit of (Honest) Ed Mirvish and Mel (Bad Boy) Lastman—still walks the tile floors. I saw him the other day, and when I told him I was happy he'd resisted renovating the place, a smile lit up his cherubic face.

As a teenager, when others were having erotic fantasies, I dreamed I'd won a contest giving me an hour alone in Sam's to fill a basket with as many albums as I wanted. Today I'm one of those music geeks who walks around carrying a spiral-bound notebook filled with the names of CDs I plan to buy, divided into categories (pop/world, soul/R&B, country, jazz, classical). I browse the Web, and I sometimes find myself in used-CD shops or in HMV or Tower, but Sam's is the base camp from which I make forays into the great music-buying world beyond.

One year, around Christmas, after being out of town, I took a cab from the airport to a friend's place downtown, where a party was in progress. The QEW, the CN Tower and the Sky-Dome told me I was back in Toronto, but it wasn't until we turned off Bay onto Elm and I saw Sam's distinctive two-storey neon sign—a pair of black platters glittering like the spirit of Christmas sales past—that I felt I was home.

—David Hayes

