

# WE CD PEOPLE

BY SARAH LAZAROVIC

Do people even buy CDs any more? The short answer is yes. But the longer answer is that they spread their media money around, buying DVDs and video games in increasing numbers. Which is why the oldschool used-CD shop has evolved into a multimedia megastore. But where to get the best bucks for your slightly scuzzy Soundgarden? (Better yet, where to find anyone foolish enough to take that scuzzy Soundgarden off your hands?) For this highly unscientific survey, I gathered up a half-dozen CDs and headed out to four Toronto stores to see what kind of deal I could get — and to find out whether certain music went over better at certain shops.

The CDs: *Baptism* (Lenny Kravitz); *Alphabetical* (Phoenix); *Auf der Maur* (Melissa Auf der Maur); *Spiderman 2: Music from the Motion Picture*; *You are the Quarry* (Morrissey); *So Much for the City* (The Thrills).

The shops: CD Replay (762 Yonge St.); Flash & Crash (499 Bloor St. W.); Sonic Boom (512 Bloor St. W.); Deja Vu Discs (26 William Kitchen Rd.; 1076 Wilson Ave.).

To find out what the stores offered for my CDs, you'll have to read to the end.

CD resale shops have inventories that fluctuate like the tide, so the task of keeping tabs on what's in stock falls mainly to clerks. At Sonic Boom, a huge shop at Bathurst and Bloor, with something like 20,000 CDs in stock at any given time, the clerks determine CD prices by eyeballing the offerings. "For CDs, we grade them visually, and by how many we have in stock," clerk Tim Oakley says. "If we see it a lot, then we can't pay as much for it."

In determining prices for DVDs, Sonic Boom uses a computer to look up how much it would cost to order a new disc, then factors in how many it has in stock.

At CD Replay and Flash & Crash, computer inventories also inform clerks' decisions, but the stores have varied pricing mechanisms. I learn this when they give me different quotes for the same CD. Only Deja Vu Discs has a well-developed, highly organized pricing system in place.

Let's face it: Most of us are pretty lazy when selling off CDs (for many of us an annual or biannual rite). We just want to get rid of old, often bad, music and memories, and we don't mind losing a few dollars. I had thought my CDs would be worth about the same no matter where I went. It's surprising, then, when Deja Vu Discs, a chain of eight suburban stores, offers so much more than the others (\$30, compared to a low of \$3). It does so by keeping scrupulous tabs on inventory with a specially devised computer program.

"When we started, we knew there was definitely a void out there in this resale business," says Aziz Walji, who wrote the program and is coowner of the chain with Shameer Esmail and Hussein Musa. "There were a lot of independent stores, but no one really did it right, with a friendly environment and systematic procedure."

He and his partners created a fair-value system that's quick and effective, as I discover one day on a trip to the North York store, located in a mildly depressing strip mall. A hand-written sign on the door reads "No more than five students in the store at a time." Despite this, it feels welcoming. Sam Stilson, the teenage clerk, assesses my CDs and tells me I would have gotten \$3 more for the Thrills CD, except it looked a bit scratched and would have to be resurfaced. Deja Vu offers a 30-day scratch-free guarantee.

The quotes given by the computer program are based on the number of CDs in stock, sales of the CD and a few other variables the staff doesn't disclose. As a result, prices can fluctuate in a matter of hours, though Walji says they seldom change too much. Still, impressed by the return for my CDs, I'm left to conclude that the system is precise enough to allow Deja Vu to work within narrow margins — buying CDs for five or six dollars, and selling them for little more.

Combined, the Deja Vu stores buy more than 1,000 CDs a day, and together have more than 60,000 CDs in inventory. If a particular CD can't be found at one store, customers can search for it at a lookup station and have it sent over from another.

Over the years Deja Vu Discs has expanded into DVDs and games, with the former accounting for 40% of its business. "We've gone from being a CD shop to a one-stop entertainment shop," Walji says.

But back to our survey. In the end, Deja Vu Discs tops the other stores with a total offer of \$30. The tally: *Spiderman*, \$5; *Kravitz*, \$5; *The Thrills*, \$6; *Phoenix*, \$5; *Auf der Maur*, \$3; *Morrissey*, \$6.

The other stores' quotes come in significantly lower, for a variety of reasons. At Flash & Crash, a tiny boutique store with a concise collection of really good music and DVDs, the clerk tells me he already has a copy of all my CDs except for one. Given the confines of the place, there's simply no room to stock duplicates. The tally: *Phoenix*, \$6.

Meanwhile, at CD Replay, a larger store that sells both new and used discs, I'm given no explanation for the refusal of my discs, and I'm offered a paltry \$3 for *Phoenix*, the best in the bunch.

At my old hangout, Sonic Boom, where once I'd been content to sell my CDs without comparison, I'm made happy by the fact that at least they'll take all of of them, though the prices are about half those offered by Deja Vu, and based on a dubious clerk-scrutinizing method.

The tally: *Spiderman*, \$1; *Kravitz*, \$3; *The Thrills*, \$2; *Phoenix*, \$6; *Auf der Maur*, \$2; *Morrissey*, \$2. Total:

\$16.

No doubt there are countless other resale stores out there, but the lesson in all this is that unless your time is more valuable than Donald Trump's, you'd do well to shop around. And to visit your nearest suburban strip mall.

Walji advises people to donate store rejects to Goodwill or to the library. But based on the fact his store would offer a fiver for Spiderman 2, I'm left to think you'd have to try really hard to get a CD turned down. What would they pay for William Hung, I wonder?

#### OT H E R R E SA L E STO R E S

CD Exchange 161 John St.; 416-977-6889 Neurotica 642 Queen St. W.; 416-603-7796 Penguin Music 2 McCaul St.; 416-597-1687 Rotate This! 620 Queen St. W.; 416-504-8447 She Said Boom! 372 College St., 416-944-3224; 393 Roncesvalles, 416-531-6843 Soundscapes 572 College St., 416-537-1620



KAZ EHARA FOR NATIONAL POST Shameer Esmail, Aziz Walji and Hussein Musa have eight stores in their Deja Vu Discs chain.



YVONNE BERG FOR NATIONAL POST On a Saturday afternoon, music buffs browse the thousands of offerings at Sonic Boom. Many CD-resale stores are branching into DVDs and video games.

