

Relaxed Vibe Helps Make Coop's One Of Chicago's Top Jazz Spots

BY ED HOGAN

CHICAGO—Coop's Records, located in this city's Chatham/Stony Island community, is a family operation that merges the experiences of the past and an ear toward the future.

Owner and jazzologist Ezell Cooper, his sons Pierre and Orlando, brother Virgil, and friend Grady Moore have created a kind of outlet that seems to be disappearing in today's retail climate. The relaxed, down-home atmosphere of Coop's sometimes seems more like a barbershop than a record store, where long-time patrons routinely discuss such diverse topics as the weather, finances,



Coop's Records and its new affiliated store next door, Coop's Underground, are in the Chatham/Stony Island section of Chicago. (Photo: Ed Hogan)

politics, or everyone's love: music. Customers feel at ease asking for a particular record by reciting a few lyrics or humming a few bars. If people behind the counter are stumped, someone else in the store can usually help. The shop is an information exchange for music lovers of all kinds: musicians, music students, radio and lounge DJs, dancers, professors, record collectors, and music industry figures.

Ezell Cooper assumed ownership of the shop in 1986, after working as a store employee for more than two decades. A jazz lover, Cooper has the in-store turntable playing sides by Jimmy Smith, Richard "Groove" Holmes, Dinah Washington, the Nat "King" Cole Trio, or any of the 400-plus jazz titles in stock. The store has an open in-store-play policy. If a customer finds a recording that he or she



is unsure about purchasing, someone behind the counter will play it. The benefits of in-store play and the resulting impulse sales are evident at Coop's.

"There's no mystery," Ezell Cooper explains. "A person will be more likely to buy something they've heard as opposed to something they haven't. We sell a lot of releases that people have never heard except in our store. Sometimes that's the only exposure the record gets. Then they recommend the record to their friends."

In addition to jazz, Coop's stocks blues, gospel, oldies, and such accessories as CD-cleaning products and blank tapes. The amount of each musical genre varies. "It's difficult to assign percentages, but we sell at varying times up to 50% jazz, 60% soul, 20% other genres," he says.

Vinyl still figures into sales but not as much as in the past. "We made our living over the years off of vinyl," Cooper recalls. "By and large, most of the record releases are on CD. But the time is a long way off when everything is on CD. Then the question becomes, Will it be priced so that the consumer will buy it? Another thing to look at is that CDs aren't pressed in the same quantities as vinyl. So they go out of print faster. I'm going to continue to stock records as long as they're the kind of records my customers want. There are a lot of titles that haven't been released on CD and are still very much in demand."

He finds it hard to sell limited-edition vinyl releases because of the price barrier. "For example, Tina Brooks' 'True Blue' I have to price at \$18. Even though it's been digitally remastered, I still get resistance. The unit price of vinyl and CD releases are sometimes the same."

Even though Cooper is pro-technology, he cites a downside to computerized retail tracking. "Sometimes the record companies do an initial pressing of

100,000 copies on a release. If their computer readout shows sluggish sales in the beginning, some labels hastily cut the release from the catalog. The consumers aren't aware that the release has been deleted, so they feel comfortable in their decision to delay and buy it later. Later could conceivably be too late, because the release is already out of print. My advice to consumers is, buy now because you never know what the big wheels at the record companies have already decided to do with the release."

Like a lot of independent retailers, Coop's has been burdened by the discount merchandisers' push into record



Pictured, left, is Pierre Cooper, who runs Coop's Underground, and his father, Ezell Cooper, owner of Coop's Records. (Photo: Ed Hogan)

selling. "Yes, I feel the effect of Best Buy and Circuit City," he admits. "I see their ads with new releases for \$9.98, \$10.98; the same releases cost me \$11 or \$12. I can't compete with that. So I have to find specialized areas of music that they don't cover." He focuses on "creative inventorying" to compensate. "Where those stores would offer just the new Al Green CD, I'd offer his entire catalog for those prices."

At 1,500 square feet, Coop's doesn't have "a lot of space, but it's enough to get the job done," says Cooper.

Coop's is located in a choice spot, on the busy corner of a thriving business district, only a few feet from a bus stop along a major city route. A second major bus route is just around the corner. Picture windows allow commuters to see attractive product displays. "Whenever you're in a location that has a lot of people traffic, it's always good," says Cooper. "People can run in and get a record, tape, or CD and still catch the bus," adds GM Virgil Johnson.

Johnson's side job is spinning discs at local lounge the Apartment. This second job presents no conflict because it helps boost the store's bottom line.

"I get direct contact with our customers as I play my music. I can get feedback immediately on what people want to hear and therefore buy." He claims a large percentage of the lounge patrons buy from the shop. "I already know what they want. And sometimes they pick up something else, too."

Cooper bemoans the lack of new mainstream jazz titles. "There isn't enough mainstream jazz being made for folks like me, who remember the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Now, that doesn't mean jazz is dead. It's just those of us who are into the music of those eras for the most part aren't moved to buy what is called jazz today. There's plenty of fusion and smooth jazz.

"The mainstream jazz buyer is gener-

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newsline...

ALLIANCE ENTERTAINMENT, a distributor and wholesaler of recorded music, reports that net profit fell to \$5.3 million last year from \$12.8 million the year before. Revenues rose 34.5% to \$720.3 million from \$535.2 million. The higher revenues are attributed to acquisitions and a 17% increase in music distribution sales. Lower profit is in part the result of an "unexpected slowdown in music industry sales." New York-based Alliance also attributes the decline to acquisitions, which increased amortization charges, and a \$125 million bond offering, which increased interest expenses. But the company points out that its operating cash flow (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization) jumped to \$51 million last year from \$39 million the year before. For the fourth quarter, Alliance reports net profit of \$4,000 on \$228.8 million in revenues, compared with income of \$6.1 million on revenues of \$193.6 million in the same period the year before.

PLATINUM ENTERTAINMENT, a record company based in Downers Grove, Ill., has gone public with the sale of 2.65 million shares of stock at \$13 per share, for net proceeds of \$34.4 million. The company, which had revenues of \$15.4 million for the year ending May 31, 1995, has three labels: CGI Records, Light Records, and River North Records. It will focus on gospel, adult contemporary, country, and blues and has contracts with such acts as the Beach Boys, Peter Cetera, and Jim Messina.

ATLANTIC RECORDS is marketing a retail package consisting of an enhanced CD developed with multimedia fanzine Spew+ and a Net-Music Internet music guide. The enhanced CD, which will be sold at Tower Records and Tower Books nationwide, is Atlantic's first. The NetMusic guide is published by Michael Wolff & Co. and distributed by Random House. The package is priced at \$11. The venture will be promoted through an Atlantic/NetMusic World Wide Web site that was launched on the Internet March 1 and includes an animated game and a contest page.



MUSICLAND GROUP reports that sales for stores open at least one year rose 1.1% in February from the same month the year before. Same-store mall sales (Sam Goody, Musicland, Suncoast Motion Picture Co.) rose 3.6%. But comp sales for superstores (Media Play, On Cue) fell 5.3% in the month. Overall, the Minnetonka, Minn.-based retailer reports a 14.9% increase in February revenues to \$123.6 million. The company says, "We continue to expect that the effect of last year's rapid store growth with the attendant increased fixed occupancy costs will still significantly reduce pretax profits in the first three quarters of 1996. Discussions are continuing with our bank group concerning the establishment of a store closing reserve, the Suncoast IPO, and other covenant amendments." Musicland plans to sell a stake in the Suncoast video sell-through chain to the public this year.

SENSORMATIC ELECTRONICS, the developer of electronic anti-theft systems for retailers, says that the Retail Music Assn. of Canada has designated its acousto-magnetic electronic article surveillance technology as the standard



for source tagging of music product. Tests involving the placement of anti-theft tags on CDs during manufacturing, packaging, or distribution will begin in April. The RMAC's action follows similar recom-

mendations by the British Assn. of Record Dealers and the National Assn. of Recording Merchandisers in the U.S.

BORDERS GROUP reports that sales from its 118 Borders Books & Music superstores rose 65.7% to \$683.5 million in the fiscal year that ended Jan. 28, compared with \$412.5 million the year before. Sales from the nine-unit Planet Music superstore division jumped to \$34 million from \$13 million. Sales for Borders superstores open at least one year increased 9.6%. The company did not break out same-store sales for Planet Music.

ALL AMERICAN COMMUNICATIONS reports that its recorded-music unit had revenues of \$22 million last year, an increase from \$16.1 million the year before. Gross profit last year was \$6.2 million. The music unit, formerly called Scotti Bros., recently changed its name to All American Music Group and switched distribution from BMG to WEA. It operates three labels—Scotti Bros., Street Life, and Backyard—and its roster includes "Weird Al" Yankovic, Skee-Lo, and James Brown. All American is the producer and distributor of the hit syndicated TV show "Baywatch."

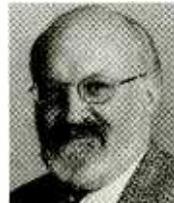
BUENA VISTA HOME VIDEO says that Walt Disney Home Video's "Pocahontas" sold more than 9 million units in the U.S. in its first week of release. Disney says it shipped 17 million videocassettes to retailers. The company says it is working "closely with our retail and distribution partners in order to replenish inventories on a timely basis."

EXECUTIVE TURNTABLE

RETAIL. HMV U.S.A. in Stamford, Conn., appoints **Rebecca Fogg** advertising and campaign marketing manager and promotes **Jim Freeman** to purchasing manager and **Michael Krevlin** to research and analysis manager. They were, respectively, business development consultant for Nickelodeon and MTV, Eastern region manager, and business development manager.



LAMBETH



BOSSIN

DISTRIBUTION. Ted Lambeth is named national sales manager at Allegro in Portland, Ore. He was a sales manager for Sight and Sound Distribution.

HOME VIDEO. Gordon Bossin is appointed VP of operations for New Line Home Video in Los Angeles. Previously, he operated his own consulting company.

Julie Markell is appointed VP of creative services for Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment in Beverly Hills, Calif. She was VP/associate creative director for Eisaman, Johns and Laws.

RELATED FIELDS. John Moyer is named West Coast sales and marketing manager for Disc Makers in Burbank, Calif. He was an advertising manager at Mix magazine.