

The times, they are a-changing. Twenty years ago it was estimated around 2,500 independent music stores operated within the UK. In 2013 that number stands at just over 200. Even giants, HMV, recently became a casualty of the change.

Despite the decline, the North East still finds itself spoilt for choice, with stores such as Newcastle's Reflex, RPM Music, Sunderland's Hot Rats and Stockton's Sound it Out Records considered amongst the most popular in the country.

Saturday, April 20 will see these stores take part in the sixth annual Record Store Day, organised by the Independent Retailers Association. They will be stocking exclusive, over-the-counter-only releases, which in the past have included the likes of The Beatles, The Vaccines and Foo Fighters.

In 2011, Blur released a limited edition single for the day, their first in almost a decade, selling out within a few hours.

"It brings the emphasis back to the high street and gets people buying music, in particular vinyl, from record stores again," says Reflex owner Andy Ferguson. "It's also about the old attitude of getting out and talking to someone. A lot of our customers come in and end up buying from artists that they normally wouldn't have done, which you don't really get from sitting and trawling the internet."

On Record Store Day, most shops will also host in-store performances and promotions, as well as food, face painting and games.

"That's the great thing about small shops and why this day is so special, we can talk to you, gauge your interests. If we don't have something we can try and find it for you," explains Marek Norvid, owner of Newcastle's RPM Music. "It's a great two-way community process that you don't really get somewhere like HMV. It's like a cottage industry again with the emphasis on the music rather than the music business."

He adds: "It's been great success so far. There's always a buzz and we've always made a big thing about it. The High Bridge festival, which we're also involved with, runs concurrently with the event and I think last year we managed to click through 12,000 people between the two. That's probably the busiest event of the year, something we should shout about."

"It just goes to prove that there's still something there. One day there will be no record stores, but we just don't think that has to be now," adds Andy. "Record Store Day is just one day of course, but it can sustain us for the rest of the year because there's so much great stuff being released. You'll see people coming from outside of the area too, such as Middlesbrough and Carlisle. It can extend your demographic by tens of miles and that is huge."



NEW MUSIC Record romance

Vinyl continues its resurgence as a 'luxury' alternative to a download, celebrated once more with exclusive releases for Record Store Day. Ian McCabe finds out more

Although the decline in record stores may paint a gloomy picture, Record Store Day has helped to usher in a renaissance for sales as of late, in particular vinyl, with last year's sales increasing by 50% on the previous.

"In its intention it has worked incredibly well and been very successful," says a proud Marek. "The increase of sales in vinyl has been on the up and up over the last five years. There's much more interest in music once more. It's becoming a rite of passage again."

"It makes me smile, we now get younger people coming into the shop and viewing vinyl as the luxury version of a CD. Years ago CD was the luxury version of vinyl, it's quite ironic. It gives us a lot of pleasure."

Despite the boom in music downloads shifting the state of the music business, Andy and Marek both agree that there's just something special about the physical copy.

"There are also a lot of younger people who are just realising that the physical copy does have value," says Andy. "A lot of people are making a point of saying, look, this is the record, it has a track listing, it's supposed to be listened to in a certain order and not just this track or that track."

"It's about the difference in quality," adds Marek. "MP3s are very accessible but a bit of a throw-away. With the physical copy you have got the uncompressed sound and the fact that it's a physical product that you can collect and put it on your shelf with other LPs and show off the beautiful cover art."

Newcastle singer-songwriter Bridie Jackson will be one of the numerous artists performing on the day at Andy's Reflex store and believes that Record Store Day is just as important for the artists and that the stores played a part in nursing her love of music.



"It's important for DIY artists to support Record Store Day. As a child of the 80s, I remember ordering CDs and vinyls from my favourite record store, and being in genuine awe at their ability to source the most obscure releases," says Bridie. "Obviously, that's all changed now that it's fairly easy to track music down yourself, but it left a strong impression on me, and a real love of record stores."

"There will always be a place for physical albums, in the same way that there will always be a market place for bicycles. Just because a new way of doing something comes around doesn't mean the older style is chucked out."

"You don't have to buy anything, just come and join in," says Andy. "Last year the atmosphere was out of this world, it was just amazing. We opened at 8am but there was a queue up Grainger Street by half six. It's fair to say it's getting bigger every year."

Record Store Day is on April 20. To keep up to date with this year's releases, visit www.recordstoreday.co.uk

Bridie Jackson and the Arbour. Bridie will be performing on April 20 at the Reflex store in Newcastle

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