

MUSIC

## 'Heartbeat of the community': How a Milltown record store became a gathering spot



**Sal DiMaggio**

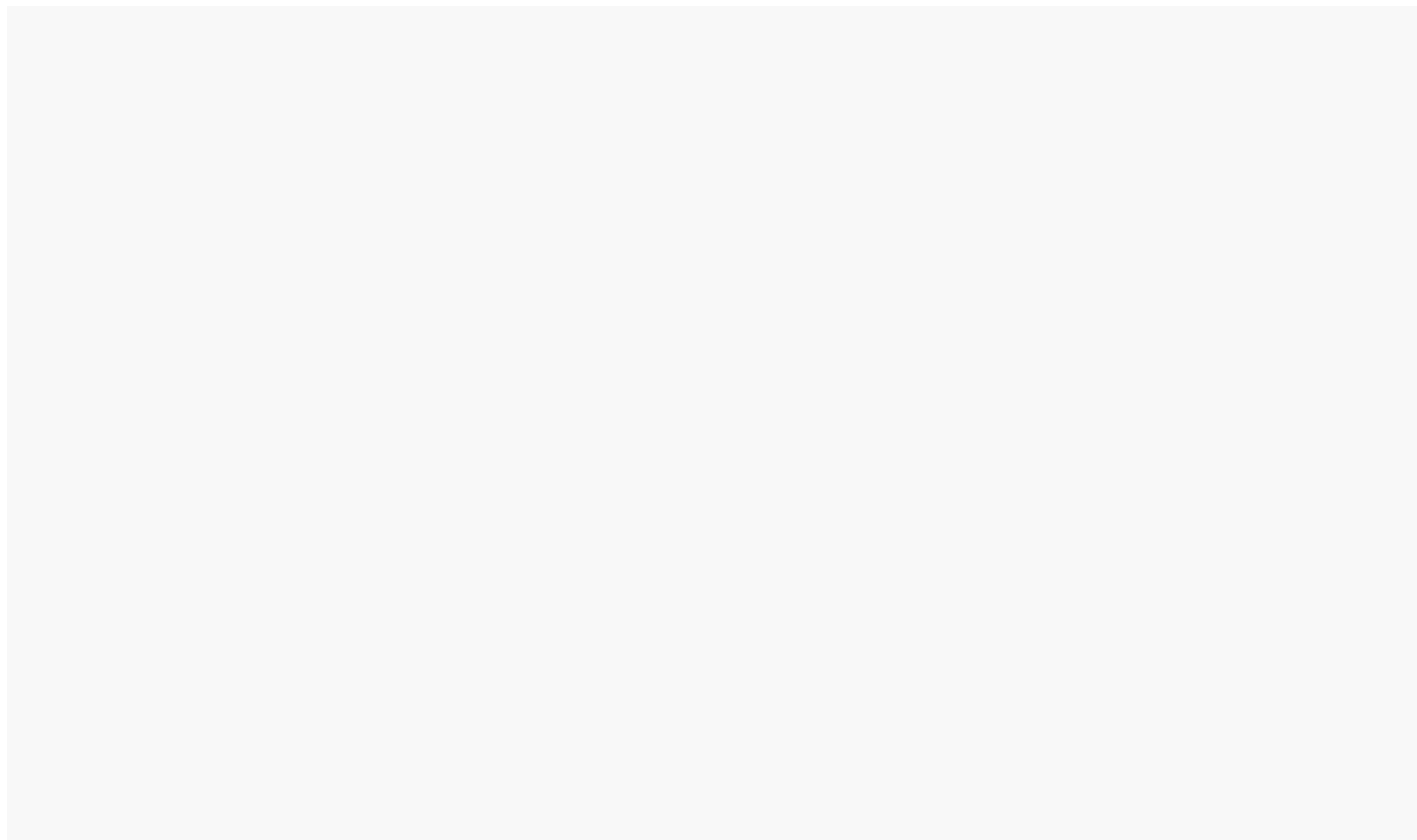
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MILLTOWN – Two thousand records.

That's how many Darren Revilla bought in 1995 for \$1,000 in his first attempt to make a living by selling records.

It did not go as well as he hoped. When he tried to sell them, he quickly learned that the records weren't worth much at the time. After all, most people by that time had abandoned traditional vinyl for compact discs.





“I realized halfway through my day, ‘This was a mistake,’” Revilla said. “‘These records are terrible. This isn't what I should be doing. This is all junk.’”

If you go into Revilla’s record store, Grooves and Gears, in Milltown today, you wouldn’t know the business was a bust.

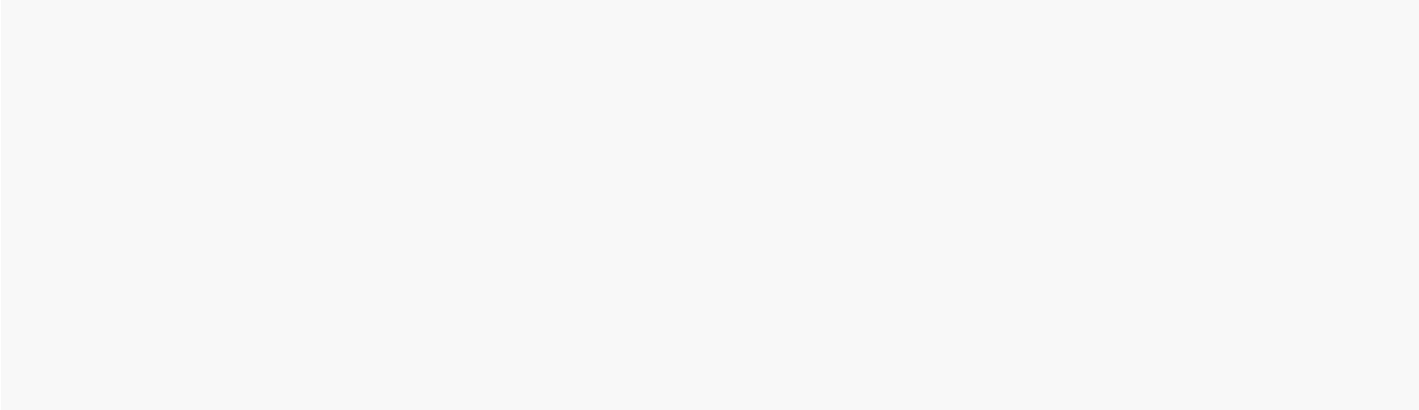
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With a constant flow of customers and more than 100,000 recordings, either on vinyl or CD, filling the store on North Main Street, you would know that Revilla made the right decision in 1995.

Revilla’s Grooves and Gears is one of the most prominent record stores in New Jersey.

From the extensive collection of 45s to the early listening parties for top name artists like Twenty One Pilots and Charli XCX, the store draws record collectors and music lovers from far beyond New Jersey.





Revilla has been selling records under the name “Revilla’s Grooves and Gears” for 13 years, but his journey with music started long before then, being exposed to different genres through his relatives.

“I’ve been a music lover since I was a little kid,” Revilla said. “On trips back and forth to my grandmother’s house, we listened to the radio, and I probably fell in love first with Alice Cooper’s ‘School’s Out,’ and Bachman-Turner Overdrive’s ‘Taking Care of Business.’”

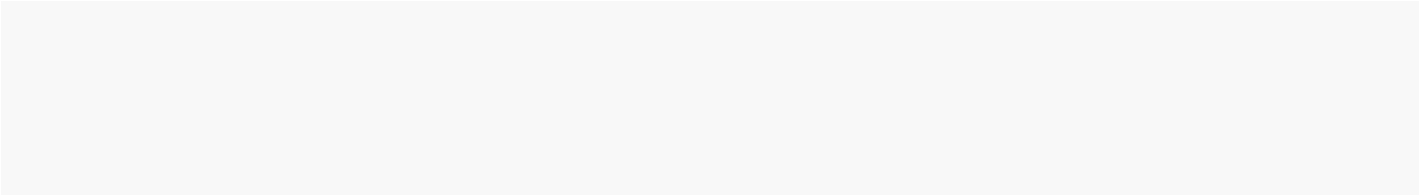
Revilla focused on growing his collection for much of his early years, working as a DJ or part-time at a deli. In his spare time, he frequented Princeton Record Exchange, where he found his personal heaven on earth.

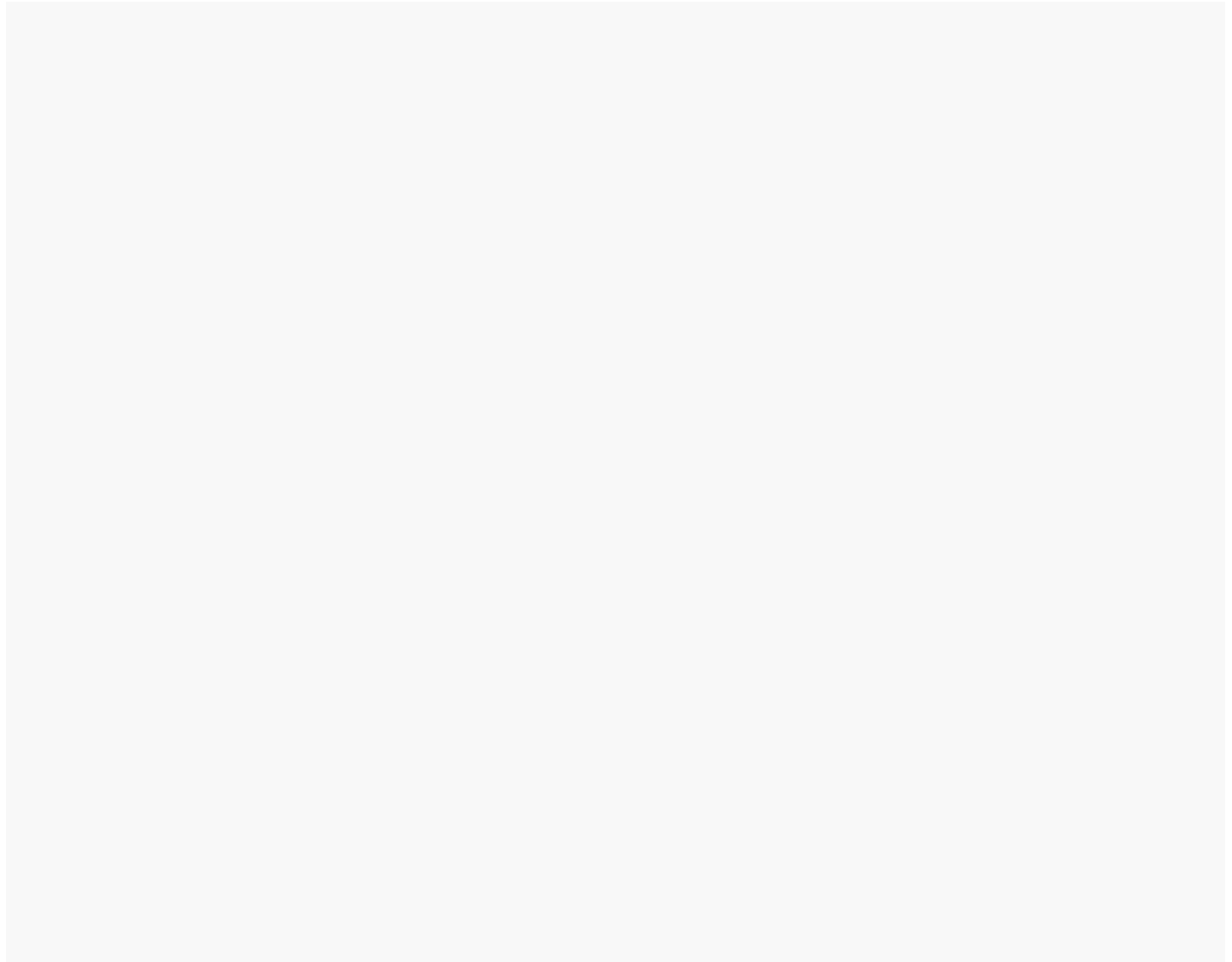
“I’m so excited I park and forget to feed the meter,” Revilla said, laughing. “So, I got a ticket the first time I ever went to the Princeton Record Exchange. I go in and my eyes open wide. I hadn’t been to a store that carried that many records at that point.”

After building his collection for a bit, Revilla came across those 2,000 records that would end up leading to his first failed sale.

After swallowing that pill, he focused on his DJ job, sometimes doing eight gigs a week.

During this time, Revilla stayed a regular at Princeton Record Exchange. He was there so much that after sending three applications, he found himself working there in 1997, surrounded by people who lived and breathed records like him.





“I always say that it was like grad school for record dealers because I knew nothing,” Revilla said. “I learned so much from those guys. I learned about music itself, what the genres are, about the crossover between genres, the good records, how to grade records, how to clean records, how to price them and how to make money doing all of that.”

After three years, though, Revilla was just about ready to give up on a career in records. After learning that his wife was pregnant in 2000, he made the switch to an IT job that he could work at from home most days.

Revilla had more time on his hands than he expected, however, and quickly began going through his collection. He realized that records that he had bought for a couple dollars years ago were

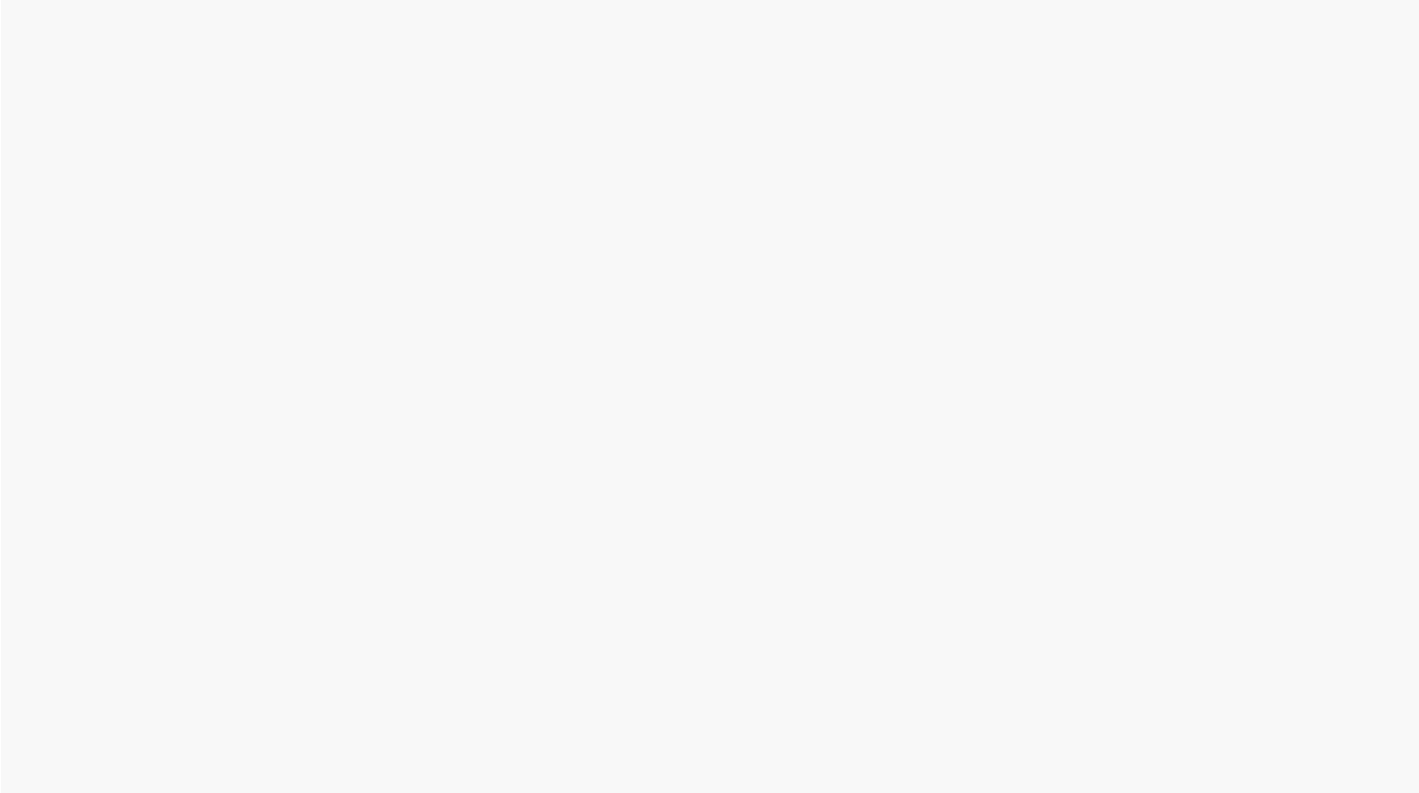
now worth much more. So, he started selling on eBay, beginning with a copy of Bob Marely's "Catch a Fire."

Selling records on eBay proved to be successful for Revilla, with his revenue eventually almost matching what he was making from his IT job. After 12 years, he decided to leave his day job to focus on selling records full time.

Revilla did this from home until about 2015, when he heard that a storefront in Milltown was available. He moved in and began to sell at record shows at well.

Then, in 2019, Revilla heard that the store under the apartment where he used to live when he began selling records online was up for sale. It was bigger and right down the street, with room for a listening room and tons of records.


Revilla moved there and has been thriving ever since, running the store with his brother Brandon.



Since then, the store has found ways to expand its reach into the community, including hosting local bands. Revilla's Grooves and Gears has seen a surge in visitors thanks to early listening parties of albums by top bands and artists. The biggest one to date was for Twenty One Pilots' album "Clancy."

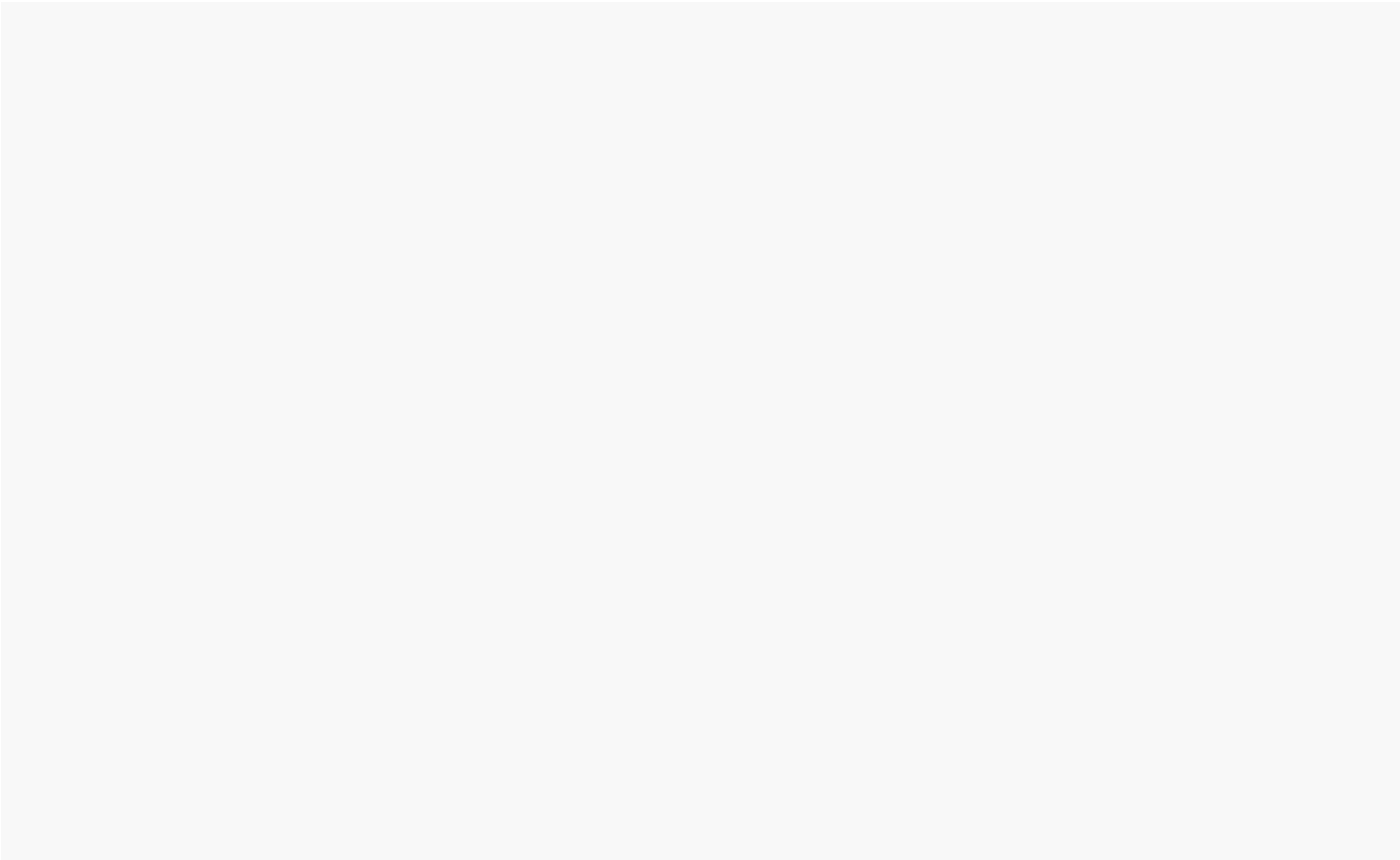
"We have a capacity here of about 70, so we braceleted to that capacity," Revilla said. "And then we had another 40 people in the rain, just to listen to the record."





Revilla said that he has noticed more and more young people coming in to buy records as well, even with the takeover of streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music.

“Young people have grown up in a world where physical media is not supposed to be cool,” Revilla said. “It’s not supposed to be ‘the thing,’ yet they’re all buying it. Why? Because they still have this desire to have physical things.”

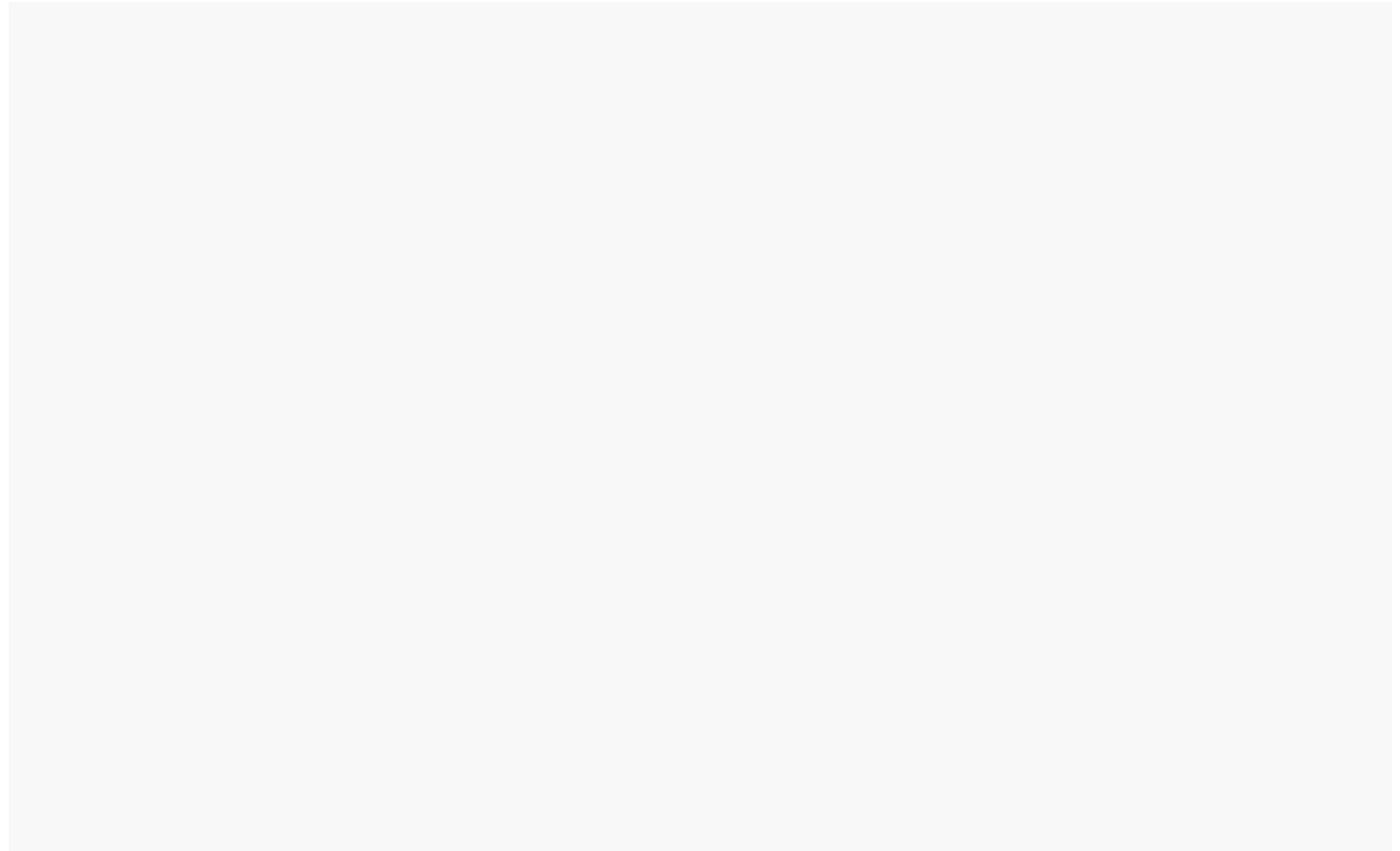


The store also stocks used, vintage audio gear - turntables, receivers, amps, pre-amps, speakers, tube, solid-state - of classic brands like Marantz, Fisher, Pioneer, Kenwood, McIntosh, Technics and Thorens.

Revilla also buys collections. As the store's website pledges, "We'll give your old records and gear the respect they deserve."

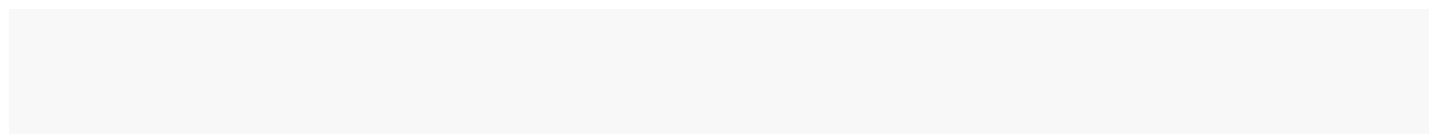
The store can be so connected with the community, Revilla said, because of one employee in particular. Brandon Sasway, who came on board two years ago, is in charge of organizing listening events, community outreach and more.

"Music is the heartbeat of the community," Sasway said. "This store is the heartbeat of all that. So, to get people that constantly come in and meet each other and talk and do all that is great."

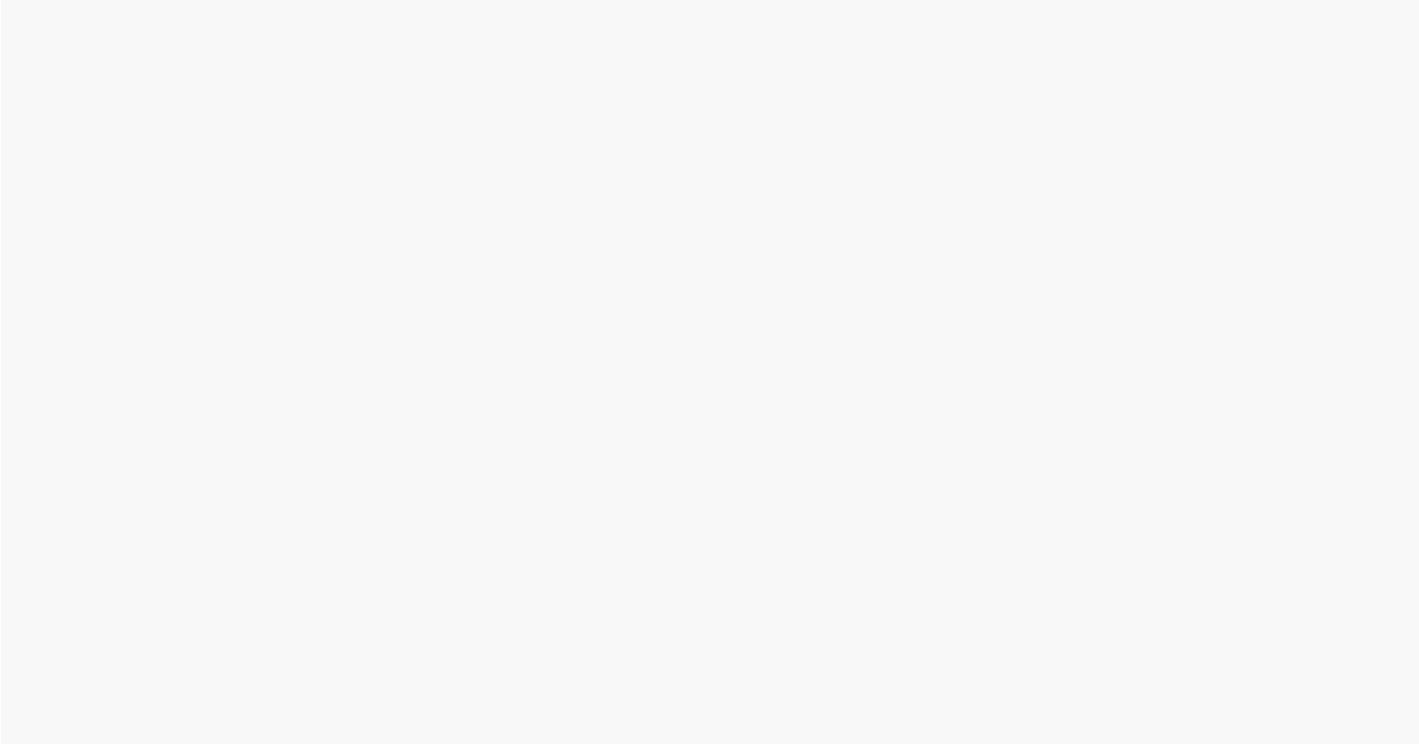


Sasway was the one who approached Revilla with the idea for the listening parties, beginning with one that Sasway thought would be immediately shut down.

"Sasway came to me and said, 'I got two listening parties. You'll probably want to do one, you're probably not going to want to do the other,'" Revilla said. "I'm like, 'Alright, what are they?'"





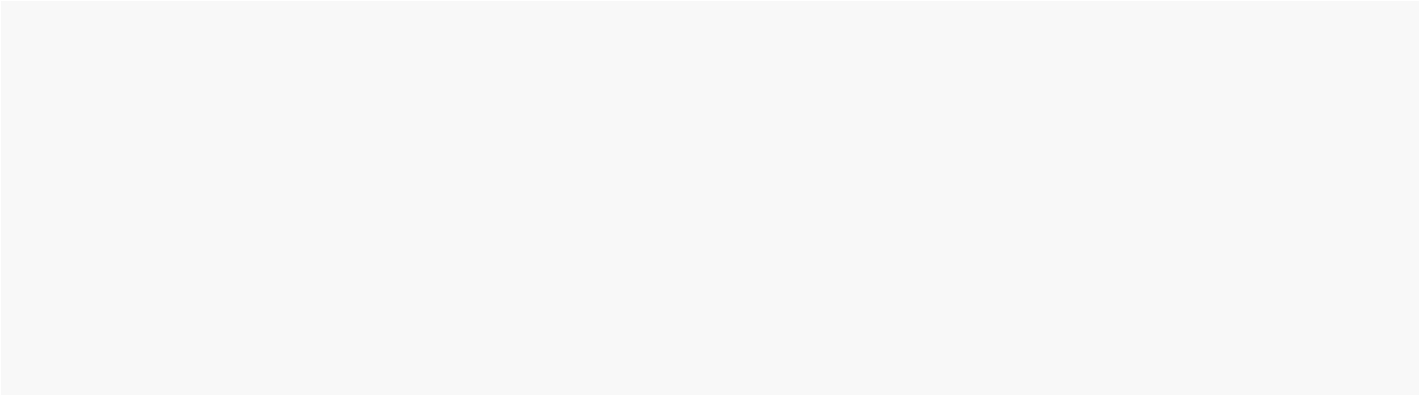



“Well, there's the Barbie listening party,” Sasway had said. “You’re probably not going to want to do that.”

But to Sasway’s surprise, Revilla was for it, and so it happened. From that point on, labels have consistently reached out to the store to host listening parties, ranging from gothic pop artists to alternative rock bands.

For Sasway, the most important thing is the flow of people in and out of the store, and the time they spend inside with each other.

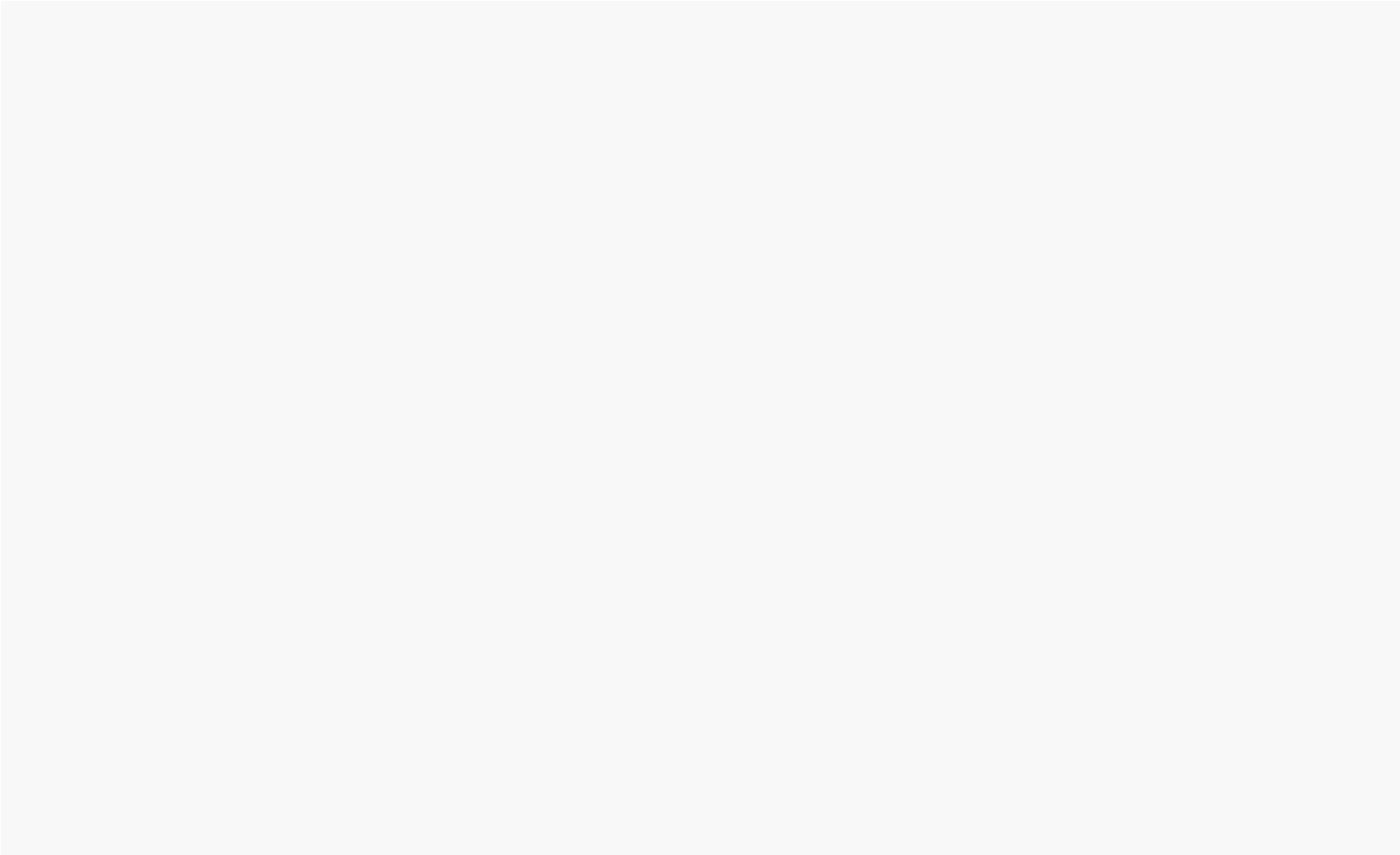
“With record stores, it's very much the people who run it and who work there, but it's really the customers that come in and make it what it is,” Sasway said.





“There were like three regulars in here that didn't know each other,” Sasway said. “By the time they left, they all knew each other's names. They were sharing records; they were talking about things.”

Revilla hopes to keep his community of music lovers thriving and growing, which is why he has big plans for the coming months. The back end of the store is being renovated from storage space to a space where people can gather.

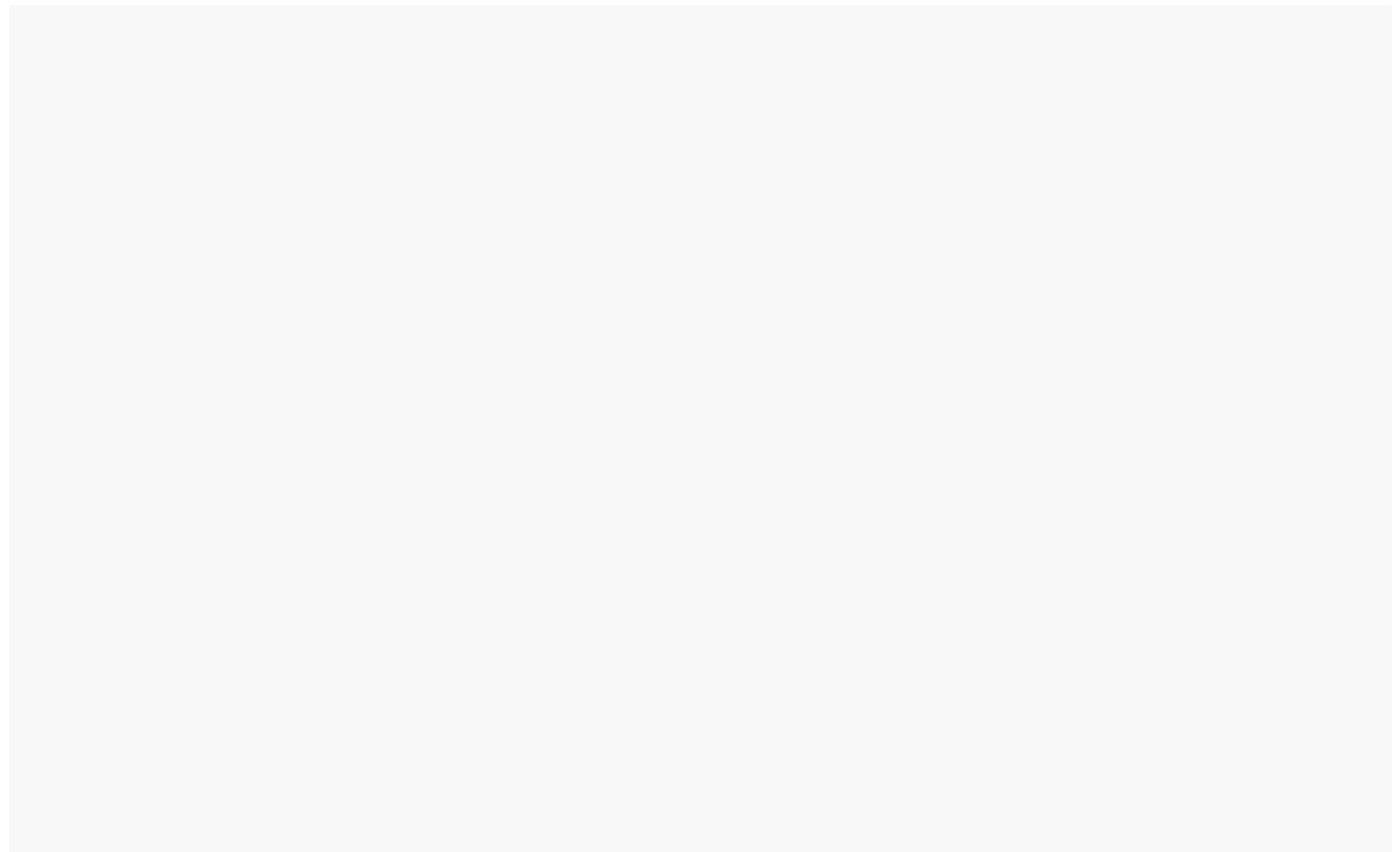


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“We're going to have a lounge back there with couches, people can come and sit and hang out,” Revilla said. “Plus, a place where we can have bands come in, set up a table and sign some records or sign some books.”

Revilla expects the back area of the store to be open by July 2025. For now, he’s focused on what he’s been doing for years – collecting good pieces of music and sharing them with others.

“The thrill of the chase, the thrill of the hunt, is really what it's all about,” Revilla said. “If there was no money in it, there was no way I can make a living, I'd still do it on the side because that part is so important. We just happen to be lucky we're actually make a living at it.”



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