

Tower of learning for a young man

By Tom Durso

The temptation, upon reading the recent stories about Tower Records' bankruptcy and store closures, is to shrug one's shoulders and try to learn a lesson about the need to keep up with the times. Tower, after all, is hardly the first company to go under because its business model -- either the products it was selling or the manner in which it was selling them -- became outdated, and it certainly won't be the last. And yet, the chain played a small but important role in one of the most formative periods of my life, and so a small, sentimental part of me does indeed mourn its passing.

As a young twentysomething fresh out of college, a guy much too timid about new things and far too set in his ways, I had to force myself to leave the comfort of the safe enclave that was my parents' South Jersey home and experience the wider world. Among my most effective methods was to drive to the Ashland stop of the PATCO High-Speed Line, hop a train to Center City, and wander around, usually by myself, for an entire Saturday.

As self-discovery goes, this was pretty tame stuff, but for me, it was revolutionary. I'd catch movies at the Ritz Five, buy myself a sandwich and a beer at some corner tavern, sit outside and people-watch and write about what I saw, and, often, stroll into the Tower Records store on South Street in search of some obscure act I had heard recently on WXPB.

In the days before Amazon and iTunes, there just weren't that many places to dig out non-mainstream music, and so Tower had a much bigger cultural footprint than it does today. The store's listening stations, in particular, were a godsend, a place to preview entire CDs from artists whose talent I was just beginning to appreciate, bands and singers and songwriters whose work would never be heard on any self-respecting commercial station.

Those Saturday trips were critical for me. They helped me greatly to grow up, to experience life outside of my comfort zone and beyond my very insular world. By learning to enjoy my own company no matter where I was, I was able to make better decisions on the kinds of people I wanted in my life, and why. More, I learned to accept myself for who I was, and if that meant I was not the conventional, middle-of-the-road guy I thought I had to be while growing up, well, that was just fine. And so when during this new time of my life, I was at a party and met a pretty, smart, funny woman with some sensibilities that shied away from the mainstream, I could allow myself to get to know her because I wanted to know her, not because I felt I needed to. We were married on Oct. 18 nine years ago.

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