Is Val Shively's Upper Darby shop 'the world's greatest record store'?

Val Shively doesn't like customers browsing for Oldies records in his store but he'll tell you what a 200-pound shark has to do with the four million 45 rpm records he stocks.

Val Shively of R&B Records in Upper Darby. He is surrounded by a small portion of his over four million records, mainly 45s he has collected for sale.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer / Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Pho

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by Dan DeLuca
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Val Shively is telling a story about his father, and a fish. Actually, a shark.

It has to do with obsession, genetics, and how the charmingly cantankerous owner of R&B Records in Upper Darby wound up with four million 45 rpm records — "Or maybe it's five million, I don't know" — in the fantastically cluttered shop that Smithsonian magazine has called "the world's greatest record store."

The larger-than-life subject of Christopher Plant's new documentary film *ReCollections: Val Shively — 50 Years of Collecting Records in Philadelphia* has spent his life assembling a personal library of group harmony records from the 1950s and 1960s that's regarded as the finest in the world.

That collection of 11,000 or so rare, mostly mint-condition 45s — some of which, like West Philadelphia quartet The Hide-A-Ways' lovelorn 1954 "Can't Help Loving That Girl Of Mine," sell for as much as $15,000 — has attracted interest from the Library of Congress and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

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And not just for the music, but for the stories Shively, 79, carries in his head as a one-of-a-kind living, breathing repository of music history who now wonders what legacy a lifetime of collecting will leave behind.

"If this was the Indianapolis 500, I'm on the 496th lap," Shively says. "My collection is my life's work. If it doesn't stay together after I'm gone, what was the point?"

Now, what's that got to do with the 200-pound shark that Shively's father caught in Cape May when he was 12 years old? Plenty, the way Shively sees it. And if you step inside his Delaware County shop he'll tell you all about it. Eventually.

'A collector's paradise ... but the owner was a jerk'

If you're entering the Garrett Road shop, which opened in 1972, don't be cowed by the DO NOT ENTER ("Unless you know what you want!") sign on the door. Or the warning that "Trespassers will be shot, Survivors will be prosecuted." Or a plastic skeleton identified as: "The last guy we caught stealing!!!"

A sign advertises Elvis Presley playing the *Louisiana Hayride* in 1954, next to a *Jerry Blavat Presents: For "Yon Teenagers Only"* LP from 1965. Two cats, Bella and Feisty, are at home amidst the shelves. Behind a counter whose surface is covered with 16 old school Rolodexes — "I'm not a computer guy!" — sits Shively.

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Chuck Dabagian, 67, has worked full-time for Shively since 1978. He's "the new guy" in charge of keeping inventory in order, alphabetical by label and artist. Some day, the store might be entirely his. "That's why I tell him to eat healthy, and drink lots of fluids," Dabagian quips.

Hidden behind piles of vinyl higher than his head, Dabagian works quietly, tuned to *The Many Moods of Ben Vaughn* on WXPN-FM (88.5) on a recent Saturday.

He's OK with me pulling a random 45 from a shelf — a reissue of Bob B. Soxx & the Blue Jeans' 1963 "Not Too Young To Get Married" on Phil Spector's Philles label.

It sells for $10, and, as Dabagian points out, is actually sung by Darlene Love, whose snapshot is taped to the wall. Not far from that picture of Shively's father and a shark, which he's going to tell you about in a minute.

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While Dabagian makes sure the record goes back from whence it came, Shively explains why he doesn't have a working turntable in the store — "I don't want people to play the records unless they're going to buy them," he says.

In the show *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! The Story of Pop Music from Bill Haley to Beyoncé*, British musician and journalist Bob Stanley said he made a Philly pilgrimage to a store that's "a collector's paradise ... but the owner was a jerk, he wouldn't let us browse and it turned out to be a wasted journey."

Val Shively amongst the four million 45s at R&B Records in Upper Darby.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer / Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Pho

Shively became a born-again Christian in 1999, after a low point in his life when, he says, "nothing meant anything." He attends services next door to his shop at the Potter's House Christian Fellowship Church, and includes a flier about his faith with mail orders.

Has he mellowed over the years? "I don't think so," says Mike Hoffman, who was Shively's first customer in 1972 and became a music retailer at dearly departed Philly stores Third Street Jazz & Rock and a.k.a. music. "He does have a softer side, but he also has the 'get the f outta here!' side."

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Those antics scare some away, but customers are also lured to the store for the drama.

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"I don't mean this to be egotistical," says Shively. "But people come here because of me. Because of the way I am. They could buy records anywhere. But they get a kick out of it. People call me up and say 'Would you tell me to go f— myself?' "

Miriam Linna, head of Norton Records, music historian, and original drummer of psychobilly band The Cramps, says that Shively — besides being "a pussycat" — is an invaluable human database.

"He knows everything. ... Everybody knows that if there's a record you want to know the story behind, you call Val. He's the god of all gods in this world."

Val Shively in the 1960s.
Courtesy of Val Shively

A trance courtesy of Jerry Blavat and Elvis Presley

In 1956, he was 12 and growing up in Upper Darby, raised by a mother who worked as many as three jobs and a father who, Shively says, spent most of his time fishing.

Music changed his life.

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First, it was Presley's "Don't Be Cruel."

"That record put me in a trance." As a teen, he listened to Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis on an Emerson transistor radio he kept under his pillow at night. "We had no money. I had no grades," he says of his years at Upper Darby High, where he's now on the Alumni Wall of Fame with Tina Fey, Jim Croce, and former Sixers coach Dr. Jack Ramsey.

Val Shively has a collection of over four million records, mainly 45s, and Rolodexes full of history.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer / Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Pho

Then in 1962, while studying at Pierce School of Business Administration in Center City, his hobby became an obsession. A friend clued him into Blavat's radio show on WCAM-AM in Camden. What he heard "blew my ... mind."

What excited him so were the obscure group harmony records Blavat played like The Students' "Everyday of the Week" and "I'm So Young" and "Bing Bong" by Philadelphia vocal group The Silhouettes.

Commonly referred to as "doo-wop" — a term Shively finds overused and limiting — it was impossibly romantic music made by mostly Black groups of big city teenagers with heavenly flights of vocal prowess.

It held boundless appeal to a lonely 18-year-old self-described "loser" who began to cut classes to work at the Record Museum, a Center City store co-owned by Jerry Greene, Shively's now best friend. He made $1 an hour, trading his salary for credit to buy more records. He lights up, remembering the thrill of discovery.

"The music is all about emotion," says Shively. "These kids, they didn't go to Julliard. They probably never made it through high school. They're standing on the corner, and they improvised this music and put a record out. And they never made a dime!"

Shively spent a decade working for a record distributor, driving with a portable record player in his car, pulling up in front of people's homes to lure them with the sound of beloved records like The Heartbeats' "A Thousand Miles Away" or The Paragons' "Two Hearts Are Better Than One."

A mission had taken over his life. As a collector, every need fulfilled with a pristine copy of one obscure 45 needed to be followed by another. He bought from other collectors, jukebox operators, radio stations.

"I had to have these records, and know everything about them. That's why I didn't get married for 30 years. I thought if I got married, I wouldn't be able to travel, and wouldn't be able to go to somebody's house in the middle of the night to look at their records. It's a sickness."

It's something he and his father have in common.

And finally, the shark story

"All my father did his whole life was one thing: Fishing, fishing, fishing. I never saw him. I couldn't pick him out of a lineup. Every Friday night he would come home from his job, if he had a job, and he'd go to Long Beach Island or someplace and fish all weekend."

His father died in 1974. Years later, a friend found a newspaper photo from 1926 of a proud 12-year-old Val Shively Sr. posing with a 200-pound shark.

Val Shively holds a photograph of his father as a boy when he caught a 200-pound shark.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer / Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Pho

"And here's what's interesting," Shively says. "That set his course for the rest of his life. He was 12 years old, and he spent the rest of his life trying to catch a 300-pound shark. A 200-pound shark wasn't good enough.

"That's the connection. That's me at 12, the same thing. Ruined! Something happened that captured me for the rest of my life. With him it was fish. With me, it was records!"

The Oldies Capitol of the World

In 1975, the National Enquirer published a story, "There's Gold In 'Golden Oldies,' " about a 31-year-old "hip-talking Philadelphia-area store owner" Val Shively, whose shop housed a staggering "100,000 records." Readers' vintage 45s, it suggested, might be worth big bucks. Soon, Shively was selling thousands of catalogs for $3 each.

He built a mail order business that's sustained the shop as foot traffic has slowed to a trickle. Records are shipped in the United States and to strongholds like Japan and England, where Shively's shop is regarded by fans as what a billboard on the roof claims it to be: "The Oldies Capitol of the World."

Major record labels stopped mass producing 45s in the 1990s, though they're still released in the indie underground, now called 7-inches. Shively's clients aren't indie kids, though. "They're all my age," he says. "Everybody's dying."

There's also a younger generation of DJs and producers who see Shively's store for what it is: an unequaled treasure trove of rare grooves ready to be repurposed in hip-hop tracks and DJ sets.

The music warehoused at R&B Records has been mined by hip-hop producers like DJ Shadow, bringing the music full circle. Jerome Hewlett, the Philadelphia DJ known as Cash Money, has been shopping with Shively since the early 1980s.

"I was a teenager collecting soul & funk 45s," he said, via email. "Val had this thick mustache like Freddie Mercury. I thought he was a grumpy man at first. Always mad about something and complaining, but he was always nice to me. He deserves to be celebrated. And Chuck does also for putting up with Val's b—— all these years, LOL."

Val Shively with Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson at R&B Records in Upper Darby.
Courtesy of Val Shively

Shively calls Lee Andrews & the Hearts' 1958 heartbreaker "Tear Drops" the greatest Philadelphia group harmony record ever made. Among the hip-hoppers who are his steady customers is Lee Andrews Thompson's drummer son, Ahmir, known to the world as Questlove.

"I've spent 42 billion hours inside Val Shively's Records [near Philadelphia]," Questlove says, in Eilon Paz's 2014 coffee-table book *Dust & Grooves*.

Chris Fralic, a Chestnut Hill venture capitalist and vinyl enthusiast, saw that quote and headed to Garrett Road on a Saturday in 2021.

"I couldn't believe how packed it was," Fralic says. "Anytime I spend more than a half hour there, my allergies from the cats start kicking in."

Shively and Dabagian guided him through the dos and don'ts of Quincy Jones and Aretha Franklin, and gave him a 15 LP crash course on the Sound of Philadelphia. (Shively and Dabagian do sell full length albums and CDs, though 45s are their specialty.)

Fralic was hooked. He talked Shively up to Christopher Plant, whose University City-headquartered company Radio Kismet produces science podcasts for the Franklin Institute.

Plant walked into Shively's store, and quickly decided he wasn't making a podcast. He was about to embark on his first documentary film.

"That first day what was supposed to be a 60- to 90-minute conversation turned into five hours," Plant says. The *ReCollections* film is currently 30 minutes, with potential to grow. It will screen at Radio Kismet on Nov. 16.

Val Shively at his R&B Records store in Upper Darby in the 1980s.
Courtesy of Val Shively

ReCollections' scene stealer is Patty Shively, who's been married to the store owner since 1990. She calls the slow ballads her husband prefers "funeral dirges." "Val likes the words to the songs. And I always say, 'That's so phony,' " she says. "Because even though it's romantic words, it's not anything that would ever come out of his mouth."

A collection that is 'too important'

Jason Schupbach, dean of Drexel University's Westphal College of Arts and Design, saw *ReCollections* and thought "this collection cannot fall into private hands. It has to go to the Library of Congress. It's too important. It's a true piece of American history and such an important collection of cultural artifacts."

Drexel's co-op students can help with creating an oral history of the collection, Schupbach said, documenting Shively's stories.

Matthew Barton, curator of recorded sound at the Library of Congress, says he's keenly interested in Shively's work.

"It's an extraordinary collection, and he's also an extraordinary source of authority. The vocal group phenomenon was happening all over country, and it's part of a great story about that time in American history."

Barton and Shively started talking before the pandemic, but he hasn't actually seen the collection yet.

Chuck Dabagian, employee and jack of all trades, feeds the cats, sends out orders, finds records, and answers the phone and email.
Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer / Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Pho

Greg Harris, CEO and president of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, says the Rock Hall is interested "in documenting the collection in some way."

The Bucks County native got to know Shively in the 1980s, when he co-owned the Philadelphia Record Exchange. "Philadelphians have always had a thing for the people who let their flag fly and their personality shine. That's who Val is. Val is a character."

A Philadelphia character, whose obsession made him a Philadelphia institution.

"ReCollections: Val Shively — 50 Years of Collecting Records in Philadelphia" screens at Radio Kismet, 130 S. 34th St. at 7 p.m. on Nov. 16, followed by a discussion with Shively, filmmaker Christopher Plant, and guests. Free.

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Protesters

Protesters detained at 30th Street Station as they demand a cease-fire in Israel-Hamas war

Protesters gathered at 30th St. Station on Nov. 1 to call for a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war, who outnumbered volunteers, SEPTA officials detained by police, after refusing to stop blocking entrance at around 3:pm(6 pm).

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