

Daily Camera

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SPIN DOCTORS It may be the closest the technological world gets to real magic: A coin drops—ka-ching—into the belly of the machine, and the sleeping mechanism awakes. Gears turn, levers move, motors run, a single black disc is plucked from hundreds and placed on a spinning bed. A needle drops with a barely audible hiss, and suddenly, music fills the room.

The whole Rube Goldberg sequence brings a smile to the face of Dan Coulter, a Niwot-based contractor who restores jukeboxes and other coin-operated machines in his spare time.

He's standing by a 1954 Seeburg; every spare inch of his two-bedroom apartment is crammed full of machinery, catalogs and service manuals.

Coulter is a man with a passion. "I grew up in an era where you couldn't see the record player," says Coulter, 38. "All those good old-fashioned '50s machines had pretty much gone away by then. So there was just a kind of magic, mysterious box. And being the kind of person who wanted to tear everything apart, I had to know how that dumb thing worked."

Judging by the growing popularity of jukebox restoration, Coulter isn't the only one with a passion for the magical machines: A whole cult of hobbyists has embraced jukebox restoration as the tools of the trade have become easier to obtain.

The back pages of trade publications such as "Always Jukin'" and "Jukebox Junction" are full of classified ads offering parts, title strips and reissued service manuals. The advent of



Elvis Presley's records are must-have selections in this Wurlitzer booth box jukebox. This small remote unit was most likely stationed at a table in a restaurant, where patrons could select songs from the main jukebox without leaving their table.

the World Wide Web is a boon to restorers and collectors as well; there are Internet chat rooms and Web sites devoted to jukebox repair, and auction sites like eBay list hundreds of classic machines for sale through private dealers.

A Google search on "Jukebox Restoration" yields more than 2,500 Web pages devoted to the subject. "I was born in 1948, and by the time I was a teenager this stuff was all gone,"

says Steve Ralston, a Lyons antique dealer and jukebox restorer.

His work shed, behind Ralston Antiques, is filled with wood and glass relics from the "Golden Age" of jukebox production, 1937 to 1948. "It wasn't until I got into the antique business that I really started seeing them.

When I first started back in the mid-'70s, they were still treated like used refrigerators. That accounts as to why they're in such crappy condition." The job of the restorers is taking those abused, neglected machines and bringing them back to life through hours of sanding and polishing, cleaning and rewiring. Ralston says the real challenge is restoring machines that were only built to last three or four years. "That's something the guys who built these never had to deal with," he says. "To put them together to start with, when they were new, was one thing, but going back and pulling all of the gremlins out of these things over the years is quite another."

For Coulter, the curiosity began in sixth grade, when he discovered a 1947 Aireon jukebox in a classmate's basement.

Already the kind of kid who routinely disassembled toys to find out how they worked, Coulter became enchanted with the Aireon. "I ended up buying it for \$25 and hauling it over to the house," Coulter says. "I just kept taking it apart, and there were more and more parts stacked up everywhere. My mom and dad thought, 'At least he'll have fun and maybe learn something,' but nobody ever expected that I'd get it back together again."

But Coulter did get the machine back together, a process that started his lifelong love affair with the jukebox.

Today, he has a network of coin-op suppliers in the Denver-metro area who call Coulter whenever they pull an older machine out



The 1939 Mills Empress plays 78 rpm records. Dan Coulter, a jukebox restoration expert from Niwot, stands by a 1939 Mills Empress, one of the jewels of his collection.

of a restaurant or bar. He says it takes him a month of evenings and weekends to restore the average jukebox; this involves cleaning it inside and out, setting all machinery to factory specifications, checking the circuitry and wiring, and replacing any broken parts.

A few prize machines—a '39 Mills, done up in art deco style; a '70s "furniture style" Wurlitzer Cabaret—remain in Coulter's personal collection, but he sells most of the restored jukeboxes. "If you want a phonograph for your game room and you've got young kids, you're not going to want to spend \$25,000 on a Wurlitzer," says Coulter, who focuses most of his attention on the more plentiful '70s machines. "You're going to want to buy something for about \$1,000 that someone's made sure works properly for you; you can make that kind of investment.

If you're going to do anything more than that, you're going to buy a 200-CD changer.

This market is becoming popular right

now because the machines are still relatively inexpensive. "Ralston's "Golden Age" machines sell for a bit more—anywhere from \$4,000 to \$31,000 for boxes that take hundreds of hours to restore."



Records play vertically in the Seeburg M100B, which dates from 1954

Some jukeboxes I've sold have been bought as trophies, where it's just a good-looking nightlight," he says. "But there are some families that grew up with the music. There's a real strong nostalgia, where they were kids going through puberty when these were around, and this is sort of revisiting one's youth."

Then there are the people who feel nostalgia for an era they never lived in. Dave Simmons of Longmont has bought two restored jukeboxes from Ralston—both from 1946, the year he was born. "A Wurlitzer is like a Tiffany lamp to me, it's just so beautiful," Simmons says. "I like that era anyway, all the things that our parents

went for—jukeboxes, Glenn Miller. To see the machine light up and hear that type of music come out of it, it's like being transported back 50 years.

Today (with CD players), you put the disc in, turn it on and the music comes out. But the jukeboxes have so much animation that your eyes are fixed on the machine. It's looking as much as listening."

Today's musical delivery systems may be technologically superior to the Wurlitzers and Seeburg's of the post-War era, Coulter says, but modern stereo components will never have the soul of their predecessors: "A 200-disc changer, although there's a heck of a lot of music on it, is just a component that sits on the shelf. The jukebox is the sound of the coin going through it and the lights that are on it—the novelty.

For me, it's been a strong part of my whole childhood. Even before I started buying them, I remember going down to the arcade and playing the pinball machines and the jukeboxes. It's nostalgic for a lot of people of my generation, because we used to dance to the jukebox. People don't do that much anymore."

Not that Coulter has much room to dance now, with his place crammed full of jukeboxes (his garage is stuffed with more machines, in various states of renovation, and boxes of vinyl records).

He's planning a move soon, to a house in Platteville that will give him a little more room to work. "I can only imagine what that place will look like 10 years from now," he says with a laugh. "I just thank God I never got into cars."

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