

In Richfield, The Jukebox Lives

By Andrew Wig, March 21, 2013



Dan Coulter stands at his work table at his Bloomington shop, where he repairs jukeboxes and pinball machines. (Sun Current photo by Andrew Wig)

Off the top of his head, Dan Coulter has trouble naming many establishments where a real, honest-to-goodness jukebox still booms.

They have wall-mounted devices, the jukebox repairman notes, mounted at booths at the famous Mickey's Diner in St. Paul and at the 1950s-oriented burger stand Johnny Rocket's in Mall of America. Oh, and Bug's Bar in St. Paul has one that plays CDs.

But there is one more local establishment

where someone can drop a quarter and spin an old 45. The AMI-brand e80, made in 1954, is back in commission this year after gathering dust for years in the back room of the Richfield Historical Society, thanks to the efforts of Coulter, a Bloomington resident.

The jukebox had a home in Frenchman's Pub until the bar's owner, the late Bill Snyder, donated it to the Richfield Historical Society sometime before his death in 2009.

This jukebox from 1954 used to grace Frenchman's Pub in Richfield, but after years gathering dust, has been resurrected as part of a Richfield Historical Society exhibit.

Jodi Snyder, Bill's wife, was not very involved in the pub's operation; she had a career of her own. But "I imagine it was there when he bought (the bar), and when he replaced it with a new one, he thought maybe the historical society could use it," she offered.

But they couldn't use it, because the 60-year-old machine no longer functioned, and was in such disrepair that "it's a wonder that it didn't blow a fuse when they plugged it in," Coulter said.

"We tried a few times to get it running, but we just didn't have the right parts or the right know-how," said Jodi Larson, director of the Richfield Historical Society.

Coulter brought the device back to life after replacing the machine's tubes, rebuilding the amplifier, replacing the wiring and installing new lamps – an estimated \$1,700 worth of repairs that Coulter performed pro-bono. It helped that Coulter has a near-lifelong passion for these kinds of machines.

"The jukebox is my favorite device of all time," he declared without hesitation.

Coulter works on pinball machines and other old games, but there is something about the jukebox that has captured his devotion.

"I still get a kick out of putting a record on a jukebox and playing it," he admitted.

The preoccupation started when he was a 12-year-old growing up in Bloomington. He had grown curious about the inner-workings of the then-omnipresent jukebox. The design of the typical model had changed from offering a view of the mechanics via a glass window to being completely enclosed.

Coulter had his opportunity to take one apart



Dan Coulter opens a box of 78 RPM records, the kind used in many of the jukeboxes he restores, and which are still available new. (Sun Current photo by Andrew Wig)

when he bought a broken-down jukebox from a friend of his parents for \$25, and with the help of an older friend who taught him about the 1947 Aireon's electronic workings, he fixed it up.

"Took that thing down to the last nut and bolt," Coulter remembers.

But before the boy got the machine working, his father was on the skeptical side. "He says, 'Well, when I can go down there and drop a quarter in it and play it, let me know,'" Coulter said.

Later, his father found a quarter sitting on the kitchen table, placed by the boy as a hint.

He put it in, "and it played and he was astonished. He says, 'Well you've got a knack for this,'" Coulter said.

It was all the license he needed to build on his growing expertise in amusement machines and turn the family's basement into his own private arcade.

"We had one of the nicest game rooms in town," which included a jukebox, foosball, pinball, air hockey—the whole bit," Coulter said.

"It just kind of became a lifelong fascination

for me. I've worn many hats and done many things, but the one thing that I've always kind of done throughout everything is jukeboxes and pinball machines. And right now it's all I'm doing."

Those "many hats" included living in the small town of Platteville, Colo., for 20 years, operating a construction business and serving as mayor. Now divorced, Coulter, age 50, moved back to Bloomington six years ago, finding shelter under the roof of the same childhood friend who helped him start his jukebox kick almost 40 years ago.

Now, they're history

Standing next to a mock-up of a 1950s soda fountain, that 1954 AMI now serves as an educational tool as part of a historical society exhibit that looks back on teenage culture in Richfield.

"It was a wonderful, evocative specimen of this really cool time in Richfield," Larson said.

Jukeboxes went on from their crank-operated origins to become booming centers of attention boasting a sound big enough to serve as an alternative to live music at eating and drinking establishments. Now, those jukeboxes, which eventually moved from playing 45 RPM records to the CD format, have been replaced by wall kiosks capable of accessing a near-infinite library of music from the Internet.

Instead of bars and restaurants, most of Coulter's business now comes from private residents looking to add a historical flourish to a game room or den.

While the market for repairmen like Coulter is still there, "not many of us" are still around, he observed. In fact, the profession is in such decline that as unable to find a single apprentice during the 20 years he spent in

Colorado.

"I couldn't find anybody that was interested in learning it, which I think is going to be sad," he lamented.

The people in the business when he started are mostly dead or retired now, Coulter noted. Helping keep the business alive are people aiming to preserve their jukeboxes as a family legacy, with the chance to teach their children, who have no idea what a record is, about bygone days. "It's really a history lesson," Coulter said.

He noted how over the years, jukebox design would follow car design, a signifier of a particular era's aesthetic sensibilities. One jukebox manufacturer put tail fins, à la the '57 Chevy, on the grill of its jukebox, for instance.

"When cars had lots of chrome, the jukeboxes had lots of chrome," Coulter said. "And the cultures kind of followed each other."

The symbolism went deeper than looks. "When things were very conservative and there wasn't a whole lot of money, the jukeboxes got very conservative," Coulter noted.

And vice-versa, when things were more flush, "then they became very outrageous and had lots of flashy lights and all kinds of stuff."

Jukeboxes can also bring back less pleasant memories.

Coulter remembers one time fixing up a machine that came complete with labels that defined the jukebox's offerings. One of the labels said, "race music," as a category unto its own.

The customer wanted the label removed and Coulter complied, but he kept the label for himself, recognizing the importance in remembering the more disturbing aspects of history, too.

Acorn shavings

While well-neglected, the 1954 AMI jukebox at the Richfield Historical Society was far from the furthest-gone machine Coulter has saved. The most extensive jukebox restoration he remembers was found sitting in a barn in Colorado, "full of acorn shavings and stuff because there were squirrels living in it."

A friend helped retrieve the relic.

"I said, 'I'm probably going to need two people to pick it up so it doesn't fall apart,'" Coulter remembers.

That friend questioned Coulter's ambitions for the neglected machine, but "I said, 'When I'm done with it it's going to look like it's brand new.' And it did."

The project closest to Coulter's heart brings his career full-circle. Since fixing up that old Aerion as a 12-year-old, Coulter said he has since seen only two like it. The first he found was not for sale, but he found another in north Minneapolis.

"The second he opened the door I said, 'I want that jukebox,' and I bought it from him," he recounts.

Coulter is currently restoring the machine in his free-time, of which he has had more

than he probably would have preferred after moving back to Bloomington.

Seeing the housing bubble beginning to burst, Coulter said he got out of the construction business and turned his attention solely to repairing jukeboxes, pinball machines and the like.

But that business hasn't been smooth sailing either.

"In an economy where people have to choose between that hundred dollar tank of gas and getting that jukebox fixed, I'm kind of the last consideration right now," although things have picked up a "little bit recently," Coulter said.

Still, "it's been kind of a hard business to build."

It is a small niche market, after all, but as jukebox repairmen disappear, Coulter assures would-be customers that they will have at least one local option for quite a while:

"I'll probably be puttering on these things 'till the day I die."

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