

Interview with Don Murdoch

Published in Magic City Blues News newsletter and Fun & Stuff Magazine - 1997

Don Murdoch is the man, and Highland Music is his domain. For close to twenty years, he has been serving the music community of Birmingham. From humble origins and several acoustic guitars, Murdoch has established the best guitar shop in the area with over 500 guitars in stock. Highland Music is not just about guitars; it is a close circle of artists and friends, a place to call home. I started going to Highland Music about 12 years ago, and I soon learned that it was a place where I could find anything I needed, a place where all the best musicians hung out -- a place that was alive and buzzing with creative energy. At that time, the music scene in Birmingham was not what it is now. A small group of local artists who had regular gigs, but the gigs were sparse, and any decent-paying gigs usually could only be found on the road. Fortunately, for many of them they had a home -- Highland Music, and they had a guardian, Don Murdoch.

After almost 16 years in the tiny location on Highland Avenue, Murdoch moved to a bigger and pinker location on Clairmont Avenue. The new Highland Music undoubtedly gets more drive-by visibility on Clairmont, a main thoroughfare. The store automatically gets your attention with its pink brick walls. At first glance, it looks almost like a cafe in the Southwest desert. A closer look will take you past the window display of vintage guitars and amps to the sea of guitars within. Walking into the new Highland Music is a delightful experience for music lovers. It is a guitar player's dream! The store is a cool place to hang out, try out a new guitar rig, play a game on the most popular pinball table in Birmingham, and catch up on what is happening musically in town. Hanging from the walls, two layers deep are a vast array of guitars, both acoustic and electric. On the floor, underneath the guitars, is an equally impressive display of amplifiers. A room in the back is setup where customers can shut the door and try out equipment. A couple of little rooms on one side of the building are set aside to display instruments -- one of them houses nothing but basses, and the other has all acoustic guitars and dobros. Thrown in among the brand new Fenders and Gibsons are many vintage instruments, including a 1957 Stratocaster in perfect condition, and a 1946 Martin acoustic without any visible scratches on it. One wall has an interesting display of ancient little tube amps, and vintage lap steel guitars. In the middle of the floor is a sight never seen in the old location -- a neat little circular display of congas, bongos, and other percussive instruments. The store is fully stocked with every guitar accessory known. Murdoch also keeps PA systems on hand for rent or sale to starving young artists (and old one's alike) who need them for a gig. Murdoch has been involved in the Birmingham music scene for over twenty years.

In the early '70s, something happened. No longer were the jocks very cool, the musicians became the ones. Many seeds were planted in the Birmingham music scene in those days. In the early '70s, we had Dogwood, which of course, was

Don Tinsley's band. We had Chair, which was Glenn Butts' thing. I can remember Glenn Butts and Libba Walker down in Avondale Park when I was in grammar school. I'd go down there, and they would be jamming on Cream. Glenn was about 16 or 17.

Don's girlfriend Patti Cathey explains, "It was like our own little Woodstock; every weekend there was live music in the park." Opening his doors in 1981, Murdoch's humble origins included working part-time in landscaping for five years until his store made it. All through the '80s when music stores everywhere were jumping on the midi wagon and keyboards were big-ticket items, Highland Music survived selling guitars. Ironically, this is when Murdoch's business started turning a profit. During this time, Highland Music became the breeding grounds of musical talent, and it gradually became a Southside institution. The big stores were still on the fringes and downtown, but Highland was the best place to do business, and it was not long before virtually all of the working musicians in Birmingham were regular patrons.

During the '80s, it was really strange. I got nervous about everybody buying keyboards and the guitar sales were not good, and it actually got me nervous. The saving grace was MTV. But before MTV, the saving grace for my shop was the Nick, because the Nick would let anybody play there. If you could play, if you had a guitar and an amp, the Nick would let you play there, which was great. I owe a lot to Pam (Stallings) for that. Without Pam and the Nick, I'm not sure I would have made it. She and Dan Nolan would let anybody play, so every kid wanted a guitar. I was able to sell a lot of guitars. I think MTV really helped guitar for the whole music business. Before MTV, you would see live music on the Dick Clark show, or some other bad program. Now it's on twenty-four hours a day. It brought the guitar from the Crosby Stills & Nash era to where it is now. Curt Cobain was the saving grace on the Jaguar and the Mustang. Without him, they would be nothing. You can't get two hundred dollars for a Duo-Sonic, the same kind of guitar, without vibrato, but that's not it, it's because Curt Cobain wasn't playing them. Before that, I used to buy Les Pauls for two hundred fifty bucks, and was lucky to get three hundred for them, and guess who comes along? Slash! I couldn't keep Les Pauls in stock! I had guys coming in from Atlanta, buying them from me at retail for \$795, and selling them for \$1250 in the late '80s.

A successful business rarely makes it for the long haul without repeat business, constant referrals, and good service. All of these ingredients have been mainstays at Highland Music, and the loyal following of musicians have been there to keep it going. Murdoch's laid back philosophy and humble approach to serving his customers, along with his fairly recent delve into the "vintage" market, have combined to create a unique atmosphere -- a place where you can find just about anything new, or old, to add to your collection. In addition, several talented instructors are always on hand, and the master guitar craftsman, Billy Gallant, has his repair shop in the back. If you have a sick amplifier, or you need to find

parts, the amp guru, Sam Timberlake, will set you up. Ben Trechsel, Tony Lombardo, and other teachers keep a tight schedule training all the eager guitar pupils who frequent the store. The list of top Birmingham musicians who call Highland Music home is tremendous, and now spans two generations of artists, some of who have been very successful locally and nationally.

When I first started at 25, all of my customers were my age. Most of them are still with me. A few years after I opened, I started getting the second wave of players. A prime example: this little wiry kid comes in with his mother, couldn't even play, but wanted a guitar. She said, "This is Tim, Tim Boykin." He was just a little kid. I sold him his first guitar, and for seven years, he never came out of his bedroom. He's probably the most talented guitar player in Birmingham, because he can play anything! Where Rick Kurtz is obviously the best, Tim Boykin is the best all around. He can play Brazilian music, jazz; he can play all that stuff. The way he learned to play guitar was with albums. He's got all the old guys from the '40s and '50s, and all the great rock players. That is why he's such a good guitar player now. He can switch from the Shame Idols to Topper Price and the Upsetters just like that (snaps fingers) -- go from one style to the next. I got Tim, and his little group of followers, one of his early bands, Pinky The Stabber, they were playing down at the Nick when they were eighteen or nineteen. They were very big, and they almost made it. I think their CD was the first one released in Birmingham. Then there was a new group of kids after them. Sometimes it would be like three years, and I'd get a whole influx of new guys. Now I've got the Little Red Rockets, and all that little group of people. In addition, there's Macy Taylor's kid -- people my age, their kids. I remember when Macy would bring his little girl in, a bald-headed baby. Now she lives in Athens, and is working on a record deal. I get to know them real good, too. They'll come in, the new batch, and they'll be all shy, with one band. Then they all spread out, and I've got six bands, and they're all like nineteen years old, and they come in, hang out, and smoke cigarettes. Everybody has always said, "Look, if I ever make it big, I'll come back and spend a bunch of money with you." Really the first one to make it that far was Eric Dover. Right before he went on the road with Slash, he flew in from Los Angeles and bought six guitars -- expensive guitars. Same with Milton Davis, I never had any idea Milton would make it. See all those cases (points to a stack of anvil cases by the door) -- he just bought all that stuff from me the other day. He lives in New York and Miami. He's mostly a producer now. He produces Winona Judd, Reba McEntire. He produced China Phillips' last album. That's how he makes all of his money now, but what got him in the door was writing a number one song that Dionne Farris did, "I Know." It beat out Madonna! He wrote that back with The Cast years ago. The Vallejo Brothers all hang out here when they're in town. Then I remember back in the old days, Rick Carter and all the guys from Hotel would come in. It has changed so much. The good thing is they are all still here. I just try to imagine when I'm sixty-five, what it will be like, when I'm selling guitars to grandchildren!

Bill Ledbetter - 1997