

B-Side records to continue after heartwarming response

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Ralph Cross, left, co-founder of B-Side Records, helps a customer last week at the store at 436 State St. Cross sold his stake in the business in 2004 but has returned to help his longtime friend Steve Manley who was injured in a bicycle crash in late November. Manley, who served as manager for Cross for over 20 years and bought the business in 2007, could return to work on a part-time basis later this month.

Steve Manley now knows how George Bailey felt.

Manley's uncle didn't misplace \$8,000, Henry Potter is no where to be found, and Madison plays the role of Bedford Falls, New York.

But Manley, 59, can't help noticing the parallels between "It's a Wonderful Life" and the ordeal that nearly closed his B-Side Records store on State Street this winter.

In fact, Manley probably has more friends than Bailey could ever have hoped.

Instead of a laundry basket full of cash, Manley has received \$25,000 from more than 600 contributors in a GoFundMe campaign to help him keep his store open. A bicycle crash on Nov. 28 left Manley with a broken hip and grave concerns about how to staff his record store where he put in 75 hours a week.



B-Side Records owner Steve Manley is recuperating from a bike crash but could return to the store later this month on a part-time basis. Manley has worked at the store since 1983 and has been its owner since 2007.

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Those concerns were quickly put aside when the \$6,000 goal was reached within five hours and the campaign suspended after just a few days. Manley, who needs a walker to get around his house, is hoping to return to work on a part-time basis later this month.

“The outpouring of support and well-wishes and offers to work was overwhelming. Who knew so many people cared about a little old record store? Not us,” Manley said in an email interview. “We are humbled and thankful beyond words for the kindness of the community.”

The small shop at 436 State St. has survived the decline in vinyl record sales in the late 1990s and 2000s and the arrival of digital music through iTunes and on-line streaming services.

Changes in the retail makeup of the city’s Downtown has led to more bars and restaurants and rising rents while altered shopping habits have forced some retailers out of the State Street area.



B-Side Records, 436 State St., has been a part of the Downtown retail landscape since 1982 and is the sole remaining music store on State Street.

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But B-Side is a survivor. Vinyl sales make up about 50 percent of the store's revenue and has been buoyed by national promotions like Record Store Day and a resurgence over the last eight years of the retro sound, feel and experience of playing a record on throwback technology that includes a stylus and turntable.

"This phenomenon was completely unpredictable even 12 years ago. Vinyl was assumed an antique, obsolete format, with only small numbers of fringe collectors as potential customers," Manley said. "At that time B-Side stocked just one bin. Now vinyl comprises over half our inventory. Record companies and the few remaining pressing plants can hardly keep up with demand these days."



New and used vinyl records make up for than half of the sales at B-Side Records.

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The 700-square-foot store is about the width of a couple of bowling lanes and is crammed with CDs, new and used vinyl records, posters and turntables. The shop sells guitar picks and drumsticks, and is a big promoter of local music. When Ralph Cross and Dan Jenkins moved to Madison to open the store in 1982 after graduating from the University of Michigan, there were several record shops Downtown including Record Town, Discount Records, Paradise Records, Slatewood, Wazoo and Penny Lane.

Today, only B-Side remains, and Cross, 59, is back behind the counter helping out his longtime friend.

“We’ve been corresponding on the phone and I’ve been getting things to him so we’ve kind of been keeping up as best as we can since he’s been gone,” said Cross, who sold his share of the business to Jenkins in 2004 with Jenkins selling out in about 2007 to Manley. “It’s been fun to be back. I’m glad to help. It’s no sweat for me. For a few months it’s kind of nostalgic and fun to get caught up on music again.”



Ralph Cross is among those filling in for owner Steve Manley who was injured in a bike crash in late November. A crowd funding campaign raised \$25,000 to help pay for staffing in Manley's absence but the money that remains could be used to remodel the store. Cross said he was not surprised by the generosity of Manley's friends, family and customers.

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Manley was finishing up an associates degree at Madison Area Technical College, working at a nearby sandwich shop and started shopping at B-Side as soon as it opened. Ross and Jenkins were customers at the restaurant where Manley frequently dropped hints that he'd like to work at the record store. He was hired in June 1983 and married his wife, Anita, that same month.

Manley was ultimately named manager of the store that in the mid-1990s had sales of about \$1 million and six to eight employees, Ross said last week. Sales plateaued and began declining and then went from “bad to worse” when Apple introduced the iPod in 2001. Scores of record stores went out of business, but Manley took out a second mortgage to buy the store when he had the chance. However, he had to become essentially the store’s lone employee in order to keep the business solvent.



From the Bob Dylan records to Sherwood stereo receiver, B-Side Records on State Street is a throwback.

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“It was a struggle, but it was my passion,” Manley said. “So I’ve worked 75-hour weeks ever since.”

Manley’s son Brendan has been working at the store since 2014, when Manley broke his collarbone and elbow in a bike crash but the November 2016 crash was much more severe and debilitating.

Manley almost took the bus to work the day of the crash because of rain but it had stopped by the time he was ready to leave his house so he rode his bike, although the pavement was wet and temperatures were in the upper 30s. He normally takes the Capital City Trail from the East Side but on that day he decided to forgo his normal route that would have taken him along Lake Monona and instead headed up to

the Capitol Square via East Wilson Street. But when he tried crossing the railroad tracks where John Nolen Drive becomes Blair Street, the front tire of his bike slipped and locked between the rail and tie.



A customer browses the music selections at B-Side Records, founded in 1982 at 436 State St. The business has survived the digital revolution and has been buoyed by a resurgence in vinyl records.

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"I went down hard," Manley wrote. "A couple pedestrians asked if I was OK, but I didn't know, and stoically said, 'I think so.' After a few minutes of trying to get back up, a driver who had seen me, stopped and asked if I needed a ride," Manley wrote. "I didn't know if I had broken bones, but it seemed possible. Even so, I asked him to take me to work, instead of a clinic. He kindly put my bike in his station wagon and dropped me off on State Street, where I then limped to the shop."

Manley waited at the shop for six hours until his wife could get off work to take him to a doctor. In the meantime, he called Cross, who came down to help run the store for Manley since he could barely move. X-rays showed Manly had a broken and compacted hip bone and an elbow fracture. Surgery followed the next day when doctors put his hip back together with three screws and told him he would be out of work for two to three months.

Cross and other former employees like Dave Colby and Jim Ackerman, along with Brendan and his girlfriend Alivia Kleinfeldt, have been keeping the business running. Anita, Steve's wife, initially proposed a crowdfunding campaign but

Manley declined. So, without his knowledge, she, Brendan and Kleinfeldt came up with a plan for the GoFundMe campaign to pay for employees in Manley's absence.

"We had no idea how long it might take," Manley said. "We had no idea even if the goal would be met ever."



Shops like B-Side Records are far and few between but the business has survived thanks to the efforts of owner Steve Manley who works 75 hours a week as the only full-time employee. Manley has been out of commission since a bike crash in late November but friends, like Ralph Cross, background, and family have filled in to keep the business going until Manley's return.

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The overwhelming response means Manley not only has employees to run the store but the extra cash will allow him to make renovations to the business, which could help ensure many more years of record sales on the iconic street.

"I just didn't know how people would respond to helping a business trying to keep its doors open but it became a personal thing. It was more about Steve," Cross said. "Steve's a really great guy and he's been here a long time. It had a lot to do with him and the fact this store is kind of a dinosaur and a lot of people didn't want to see it go away."
