

Photo by Jackie Jardine

Marvelous employee by day, DJ by night, Shemp spins at an in-store event.

The Name is Marvelous

And they've got a mission

By Jackie Jardine

Running along South 40th Street you'll find the ubiquitous golden arches of McDonald's, ethnic specialty shops and the bizarre mini-marts like the mysteriously named 'Sony, Produce, Fish.' But tucked away between Walnut and Locust Streets is something more than a little different—something marvelous.

Buried in the basement of Smokey Joe's Restaurant, along the thin line between University City and West Philadelphia at 208 S. 40th St., is The Marvelous Records & Comics, an obscure, yet startlingly inviting indie record store. Boasting rarities ranging from limited-edition Johnny Cash vinyl to the quirky zine-scene favorite Urban Hermitt, the shelves of Marvelous can provide hours of exploration and discovery for even the most elite collector of underground cultural artifacts.

And as good as its selection of music may be, The Marvelous has more to offer than an assortment of hard-to-find albums. Workers there have another mission in mind—creating a place that contributes to and enriches the West Philly community that supports it.

"We're serving as a forum—a connection for West Philly to identify with through cultural identity," says Milan Marvelous, the store's owner. He sees his shop as an essential element of that identity. "We need unique, creative, small businesses as part of our cultural identity," says Marvelous.

His employees, mostly musicians who spend the greater part of their wages at the store, have found a number of means to meet this lofty end. Working with West Philly mover and shaker, VJ Large Marge, staff regularly promote round-the-corner venue at The Rotunda in an effort to expose local bands. The Marvelous staff members 'Shemp,' Dubei and DJ Severe even host shows of their own variety in the store's tiny space with weekly spin sessions.

Friday nights are booming with the sound of 'Gospel-Dance' as DJ Severe tries to spread the genre to the Philly scene, which has been slow to catch on. Dubei is the MC extraordinaire for 'We Take No Requests' Radio at www.WTNRRadio.com, a forum for DJs to spin their stuff and music aficionados to hear the latest live shows. WTNR also provides the perfect outlet for guilt-free plugs for The Marvelous.

Mike Heinzer, the self-proclaimed "Robin to Milan's Batman," and current manager, also gladly carries The Marvelous mantra. "It's a cold reality that there's little relationship forged between the average consumer and those mega-chain stores," says Heinzer.

Recognizing this void, Heinzer seeks to offer something more to the community. But operating on a middle ground between selling mass-produced goods and sticking to the DIY work ethic isn't easy. To combat negative presumptions, such as lack of quality and getting people in the store, The Marvelous offers a slightly different policy than most record shops. Loitering is not shunned but welcomed. Signs read, "It's cool if you want to read the comics, just put them back on the shelf when finished." And the turntable to the left of the used vinyl is not merely a piece of décor.

The same customer-as-friend attitude is at the core of The Marvelous Code of Ethics, as revealed by Heinzer: "There's no reason to create barriers between customers and staff." These policies make people like local vinyl collector Alandress Gardner feel right at home. "The atmosphere is very casual and relaxing. This is the place for music," says Gardner.

While business has been good, Marvelous is not satisfied with merely surviving in the basement. In order to truly connect with the youth of West Philly, Marvelous is considering expansion.

Cramped between the used CD rack and the new-release vinyl, it's perfectly understandable why Marvelous wants more space for the in-store events. Unfortunately, money won't allow expansion yet. But with a staff willing to do everything from shellacking the shelves to promoting the store on the radio, Marvelous knows that he has the right team behind him.

And it is for that very reason Marvelous considers his staff invaluable, "These guys bring a sort of snobbish knowledge to the public in a humble way. They're culturally diverse and they're passionate."