Turning Misfortune into Music

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Uptown record shop is brimming with vinyl records and life lessons

Tori O'Campo
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Uptown Whittier, with its locally owned hole-in-the-wall stores, fashion boutiques, art studios, restaurants, weekly farmer’s market, historical landmarks and annual community events, provides a bit of small-town respite in the middle of our vast, urban landscape. When recently wandering through a walkway off Greenleaf Avenue amongst the barber shops and cafes, a wall covered in record stacks, a glowing pink “open/abierto” sign and a window decal that read “Mxxnshine Records” caught my attention. Curious, I went in hoping to speak with the owner to see what was up and maybe leave with a new record. Instead, he put some early-jump blues on the record player and opened up about life, loss, music and the meaning behind Mxxnshine Records.

The way Mxxnshine Records owner and local DJ, Manny Martinez, tells it, Mxxnshine Records is a testament to turning hardships into inspiration, following one’s passion, good timing and community.
Martinez started collecting records while he was working his way up the corporate ladder at Bank of America. “When people were giving them away, I didn’t need them, but I couldn’t pass them up. I just started hoarding these records, never thinking I would start a shop,” says Martinez.

Martinez’s smooth corporate ascent, though, was interrupted by a wave of misfortune. “My brother passed away, my niece passed away, my best friend passed away, and my mom passed away, all within six months,” he says, speaking with the familiarity of an old friend, even though we’ve just met. “I lost interest in going to work.”

We are talking across a counter, surrounded by carts and shelves piled high with records. Martinez says his losses, and with them the realization that life can be fleeting, spurred him to reexamine how he could combine his passions with his professional life. “I had money saved up and investments I sold, and with that I started this shop,” says Martinez, smiling.
Though he had no previous experience in music or with record shops, Martinez banked on his strong background in sales and on his conviction, especially in the wake of his recent losses, that he should do something that makes him happy. “I realized that you have to do what you want to do,” he says, “You shouldn’t be doing anything if you’re not loving what you’re doing.”

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Martinez originally planned to open up the shop on Second Street in Long Beach, but the managers of the building where he was interested in leasing a space didn’t think it would succeed. “They asked me, ‘Can you afford this? Do people buy records?’ And I couldn’t prove how successful or unsuccessful it would have been because I had no previous business experience with it. So they decided not to take the chance on me.”

Things then began to fall into place when he was visiting American Vintage Barber in Uptown, which had been owned by Martinez’s friend who passed away a few years prior. His friend was able to start as a barber and build it into owning two barber shops. He was an inspiration to Martinez, who had always respected his friend’s work ethic and that’s who Martinez was thinking about while walking through Uptown on that day.
As Martinez wandered through the small alleyway while taking a phone call, he found himself standing in front of a record shop at 7028 Greenleaf Avenue, Unit H. A woman was placing a “closed indefinitely” sign on the window. “I called the number of the building and it seemed like everything was working out,” says Martinez. “A record shop was going out of business while I was going into business. The owner said, ‘I believe in what you’re doing. I have this computer, this desk, the record bins,’ and he sold everything to me. It was passing of a torch. Or, that’s how I saw it.”

So, rather than fight his way into the already established Second Street neighborhood in Long Beach, Martinez decided to grab what seemed to be destiny at his doorstep. Mxxnshine has now been open for two years and Martinez is happy to be part of the effort to reinvigorate the Uptown area.

“After ending up in Uptown, I realized that this is where I should have been since the beginning,” he says. “I know the demographic, I grew up in the area. Uptown has a lot of work to be done and I want to be part of that.”
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Not only are the stacks nearly wall-to-wall with records spanning all genres, but customers can be sure that they are buying quality products since Martinez does not just put any record in his shop for sale. He gets his inventory from individuals, estate sales, and collections. “I usually try to strike up a deal, but since I am a small shop, I get to be a bit choosier,” he said.
Music you can touch!

Not only does he hand pick which records he think his customers will enjoy the most, he also listens to every record before pricing it and placing it in the stacks. Martinez will spin the discs customers are interested in so they can buy records knowing they will get the good quality sound they are looking for.

“I’ve had a lot of cool stuff come in,” he says. “There was this Ralfi Pagan record. [He is] really popular in the Latin world, but he was killed in the middle of touring . . . When pulling the record out, an autographed napkin falls out — which is extremely hard to get. The autographed ones are the ones that get me. Sometimes they’ll have a personal message to that person, which makes it more interesting.”

Another thing that sets Mxxnshine apart is their sales, popular with both walk-ins and their most-dedicated customers. “We have sales randomly. I tell customers to follow us on Instagram because sometimes I wake up and I’m like, ‘Okay let’s have a sale!’ Just to wake things up a bit, or if things are slow.”

There was a 25-percent-off storewide sale while I was there. One customer, who Martinez greeted by name, came in for the sale and began flipping through the disco section looking for his next special record to take home.

“I am also known for the 50-percent-off sale at 3 a.m., which we call the Insomnia Sale,” says Martinez. “It is fun, it brings the hardcore guys out. I’m still a record collector myself, and I know that if my local record store had 50 percent off, I would be there. People will say, ‘I wouldn’t normally get a record but for three dollars, I’ll get it.’ I still make my dollar, so everyone’s happy.”

Martinez updates the Mxxnshine Record Instagram page (@mxxnshinerecords) almost daily for events and sale news.
Even in this digital age, where nearly any song can be heard for free or basically free online or on streaming sites, it can be surprising the vinyl record business is not only around, but making a comeback. According to the Recording Industry Association of America’s 2017 revenue statistics report, the vinyl LP sales increased by 10 percent in 2017, generating $1.5 billion in revenues. Digital downloads, by comparison, generated at $1.3 billion. Last year was the twelfth year in a row that vinyl album sales have increased nationwide.
Martinez, though, was onto the vinyl tip way before it was hip. He credits his older sister for sparking his passion for records at a young age. “Instead of waiting up for her [when she went out on a date], she said, ‘Here you can play my records. Here is how you put the needle on the record.’ And I would sit there and watch how this thing would spin around and voices come out of it. I was pretty amazed by it.”

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Martinez is confident that vinyl will continue to sell. “It is something tangible. You can feel this record. You can really look at who made it. When you’re listening you can look at it and say, ‘Oh I didn’t know this was made here.’ Or, ‘I didn’t know Michael Jackson wrote this song.’

“Unless its vinyl, or even CD, then you aren’t getting that best quality,” he continues passionately. “The bass isn’t as full, it doesn’t have the warmer sound. Here, you have to physically put the needle to the record. You can have a conversation over it. You and I are looking at Tina Turner right now and we can talk about Tina Turner. We can have a
couple drinks over Tina Turner. You can say, ‘Hey, this reminds me of my record.’ It starts up a conversation. No one is like, ‘My mp3 is better than your mp3.’”

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Martinez isn’t just an inspirational story about overcoming adversity and following your bliss — he is also something of a philosopher, dishing out advice for budding enthusiasts.

“Don’t let your friends dictate what you listen to. Your music is your soundtrack,” he says. “Whether a song reminds you of your mom, dad, ex-boyfriend — that music is personal to you. That’s the beauty of music. It brings you those emotions.”
Some of his essential beginning-record collection recommendations are *Off the Wall* by Michael Jackson, James Brown, and any Beatles record after the first two albums. “You gotta trust your ears. Sometimes you’ll know from the first note whether you like it or not. Your ears will never lie to you.”

As for his personal soundtrack, Martinez tastes are eclectic and fluctuate with his daily moods: Anita Baker, Sam Cooke, James Brown, The Flaming Lips, Madness — he credits various artists with contributing to the soundtrack of his life.

He also admitted, oddly, that he does not listen to music when he is in the car. “People are always like, ‘Yo, why is it so quiet in here?’ But I listen to music all day long. So when I am in the car, I like to listen to the sounds of the road. To me, that’s music too. Just taking in the sounds of the earth,” he laughed.

Martinez plays DJ sets at local venues around Uptown, especially at The Commoner. Mxxnshine Records hosts shows of their own, highlighting local talent. Martinez has
even begun building relationships with local bands looking to perform and sell their music.

“Whether it’s hip-hop, or just instrumentals, I want to tap into that. I want to tap into the college. You want to do a monologue outside my shop? We can handle it. We will bring out the spotlights for you. Whatever you guys want to do here, I’m cool with it. We will make it happen,” he says. “We are also starting to have producers come in here on Sundays where they’ll show you how they make beats on the spot … We are slowly trying to turn this alley into something of a place to be on Sundays.”

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Martinez grew up in Santa Fe Springs and many of the local business owners went to rival high schools. He says they have similar backgrounds and are passionate about Uptown’s potential. “I love those guys to death,” he says. “We always watch out for each other as business owners.”

Regular customers also add to the sense of community that Martinez is hoping to create. “People come in all day. Sometimes they don’t even buy anything, and we just talk. We talk music, I sometimes become the counselor. They tell me their personal stories and I will give my opinion. I try to help draw it out for them. I won’t b.s. them. It’s all about being genuine.

“Flipping through records can be therapy for people. You can just focus in on getting ‘that’ record. You aren’t focusing on the b.s. of life. You can feel the therapy in here sometimes.”
Therapy session
Martinez has some advice for anyone looking to start a business and, not surprisingly, to start a life. “The most important thing is that you have to sacrifice. You have to realize the things you don’t need in life. Step one in working towards my goal was calling the cable company and saying that I don’t have time for TV anymore. If I am watching TV, that is time I could be using on my shop. It was that and removing myself from anyone who said I couldn’t do it. If anyone said, ‘Well I don’t know about what you’re up to,’ I’m losing their number that night. I don’t got time for that.”

Eventually, it’s time to leave, but not before taking the opportunity to browse the stacks. I find a gem — *Tales of Mystery and Imagination (Edgar Allan Poe)* by The Allan Parsons Project — and start to make my way home. As I do, something Martinez said as our conversation wound down is ringing in my ear as much as the music he played in his shop.

“You realize how short and beautiful life is and you gotta get at it. You have to work hard too, it’s not going to be given to you. If it is given to you then you don’t know how to appreciate it. If you are working hard, you might as well being doing something you love doing.”