JUKEBOX HERO

With the imminent demise of iTunes and the resurrection of vinyl, perhaps it's time to revisit the classic jukebox.

By Ben Keeshin

Who hasn't fought with a Bluetooth speaker?

I mean, really tussled. Assailing God, hailing Satan, wishing your Spotify and sound system would cooperate just long enough to play the languid intro to McCartney's "Band on the Run," because you work hard and deserve to unwind to the guitar sounds of a former Beatle.

And then there's the privacy issue. Say you'd like to hear The Pointer Sisters' "Jump (For My Love)" six times back-to-back, whipping yourself into a synth-fueled froth, an ersatz Hugh Grant with thinner hair. Nowadays, that's no private dance but rather an algorithm-wrecking evening, dooming you to endless variations on a 136 BPM theme. Somewhere, a server hums judgmentally, knowing that on Friday, May 3rd you had 10 scotches and the house to yourself.

No, much better to have a jukebox. They're stylish, loud, and allow you to curate a selection of 50-or-so records to your liking — this last feature comes in handy with guests brandishing iPhones full of their nephew's ska singles. Plus, with a juke, you luxuriate in warm, analogue sound without bleeding user data. The only evidence of your selection is the wear-and-tear on the vinyl.

So where does one buy an antique, coin-operated music player originally intended for truck stops? Does Best Buy deliver 50-year-old nickelodeons weighing the same as 900 iPhones?

One option is Los Angeles–based Jukeboxes Unlimited, owned by Don Muller. He's been buying, repairing, modifying, and selling jukeboxes (with warranties!) since 1971, when he had a shop on Wilshire and Bundy. These days, he operates out of a ranch home north of the city, among a number of jukeboxes known only to God.

In the living room/showroom are Wurlitzers, Rock-Olas, and Seeburgs, with designs and technology spanning decades. In one corner, shellac 78s spin under incandescents; across the carpet, a 1986 CD jukebox pulses in "Attract Mode," fluorescent lights strobing "come hither" like a Reagan Era sea anemone.

Amid this diversity, Muller has a favorite. (There's always a favorite.) Pride of place — between the mantle and the ficus — belongs to a 1948 Seeburg M100A.

It's the machine that changed the industry. When contemporaries like the Wurlitzer Model 1015 "Bubbler" could muster only 24 selections, a mere 72 minutes of music, the Seeburg boasted 50 records and 100 selections, or over five hours of uninterrupted boogie. An innovative Select-o-Matic mechanism allows the records to display and play vertically, all under curved glass.

To Muller, Seeburg is the brand to buy. His admiration was reinforced in 1980 at the dissolution of the company, when he purchased the entire parts department, shipping it to LA on a train. There, confidential papers confirmed that during World War II, Seeburg was commissioned by the military to build sensitive aviation technology. Afterwards, they brought some of this high-tech expertise to market, leaping ahead of other companies. In postwar America, the kids would be dancing and prefer to do so for no fewer than five hours.

With the latch-bar solenoid on the M100A disabled — allowing coin-free operation — Muller punches two of the red buttons: J-7 summons a rocking rendition of "Goody Goody" by Frankie Lymon. After a couple of clicks and whirrs, the record comes forward, the arm makes contact and, after the initial, evocative "shush," sound pours out. Through the Seeburg's original needle and cartridge, the 1957 record sounds much closer than 62 years away.

More than their abundant visual charms, jukeboxes offer the chance to hear rock'n'roll — booming, fresh — as you might have heard it in the 1950s, chewing a patty melt at a diner, bewildered at how much noise was produced by a glorified cabinet.

Asked about advice for potential buyers, Muller offers a single line: "Buy it from someone reputable, who knows what they're doing, who gives a warranty." More than a convenience, a warranty is an assurance that a seller has confidence in the complex mechanicals behind the chrome. For, while robust, these are complex, mid-century machines — to adjust the tone arm on a Seeburg is 13 steps. Or, the only 13 steps you're not going to want to dance standing next to your new jukebox.

DON MULLER
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1952 SEEBURG M100C

Approximate Price: $9,500

With colorful pilasters plus the ability to play 45s, this is an evolution of Muller's beloved M100A. The "C" has a "popularity meter," meaning you can analyze your own data. And, yes: this is the jukebox from *Happy Days*.