

Remembering the heyday of record clubs

There has been much written about the demise of the recording industry and the rise in downloading and/or streaming. Long before there were streaming services, music fans had another way to get tons of free music, and all they had to do was join a record club.

In researching this story, I was surprised to see that record clubs existed up until just a few years ago. The last gasp was an online site called yourmusic.com that offered \$5.99 CDs with free shipping and no obligation to buy anything else.

At their height, record clubs like Columbia House

and BMG accounted for around 15 percent of

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MUSIC NOTES

commercial recordings. Like the problems with streaming services, many artists, including Meat Loaf and Hootie & the Blowfish, sued the record companies for royalty payments.

If you are too young to remember how a record club worked, you paid one penny for 13 records, tapes or compact discs, whatever

the most popular medium was at the time. Later you had to buy four to nine more units at highly inflated prices over a set period of time; if memory serves me correctly, it was typically over three years.

It was an easy way to build up a record collection quickly, even though some audiophiles thought the record club versions of albums were inferior in sound quality.

In addition to the mandatory purchases, you received a selection of the month, which you either purchased or sent back. This was where many young people got into trouble, and in some cases, it led to their first experience with a collection

agency.

Record companies started to fall out of fashion in the late 1970s, but saw a healthy revival in the 1980s when the industry introduced the compact disc format. Early CDs were significantly more expensive than vinyl record albums, and people like me who wanted to replace their old album collection with compact discs saw clubs like the BMG record club as an easy and cost-effective way to do it.

Over the years, I managed to get the “free” stack three time — the CDs were free, but I had to pay for shipping and handling. The 13 compact discs usually satisfied my

musical needs for at least a couple of months, even though there were at least one or two albums that wound up being terrible even though the single was strong.

With the conversion to the digital download format, there was no suitable format for the record company model. The closest model I can think of is a service like eMusic, which started out with limitless downloads of independent label releases until morphing into a model that limited the amount of monthly downloads based on the price.

The service recently removed all of its major label releases while

keeping its subscription cost the same. After being an eMusic subscriber for most of the 21st century, I am finally considering ending my subscription.

While some people may not have appreciated the tactics or the business model of the record company, it served an important function in the record industry and no suitable replacement for the delivery of new music has emerged — that may be because the clubs realized it would be impossible to tape a penny to an email.

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Niagara Hospice manager of bereavement services Jennifer Amor and Niagara Hospice volunteer Rita Beitz prepare a Thanksgiving baked-goods package for a Niagara Hospice caregiver.

Surviving the holidays when we’re grieving

HOSPICE: *Here are some suggestions for building new memories, honoring old ones.*

BY JENNIFER AMOR
Niagara Hospice manager of bereavement services

The holidays can be a particularly difficult time for those who have lost a loved one. They are usually a time of joy and celebration, a time to come together with family and friends to share traditions and to make warm memories.

After a loss, the holidays may instead feel cold and lonely. What was once a happy season now serves as a painful reminder that your loved one is not here to share it with you. You may not feel like celebrating at all. What’s worse, just when you are at your lowest, you may even feel pressure from others to “get in the spirit,” and celebrate anyway.

When everyone else is filled with the holiday spirit, it can make us feel isolated in our grief, like there is no one who understands how we feel. Rest assured that there are many other grieving people going through the same struggle. Since we cannot make the holidays disappear, here are some tips for how to get through them.

Make a plan. Sit down with your family and discuss how you will celebrate this year. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to express what things are most important to them, and what things might be difficult. Having an open discussion in advance can help eliminate potential stresses and hurt feelings of having different expectations for the holiday season.

Do things a little differently this year. Not all holiday traditions have to be kept exactly the same. Decide which things are special and important to you, and which you could do without. And remember, what you choose to do this year, you can always do differently the next year.

Realize your limitations. Maybe this year it’s too overwhelming to have holiday dinner at your house, or

to spend lots of time picking out gifts. Don’t push yourself too hard. Consider some ways to lighten the load, like asking another family member to host dinner or giving gift cards.

Understand your needs, and make them known. Don’t feel like you are letting anyone down by making some changes to your usual holiday schedule. Know what you need to help make it through this difficult time, and make those needs clear to your friends and family.

Honor your loved one’s memory. The holidays will never be exactly the same as they were before. Creating a new holiday tradition to remember and pay tribute to your loved one is a good way to embrace the future as well as acknowledge the special place your loved one will always hold in your heart and mind. Here are some suggestions:

- Light a candle at meal time in memory of your loved one or hang a special ornament on the tree.
- Make a donation to a favorite charity in your loved one’s honor.
- Share stories about your loved one, maybe remembering special moments from holidays past.
- Give a special gift of a framed photograph of your loved one to another grieving friend or family member who will cherish it.
- Bring your loved one’s favorite food to holiday dinner, and include their name in the blessing.
- Spend the holidays helping those who are less fortunate. Volunteer at a local soup kitchen or other charitable organization.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Reaching out for extra support, especially around the holidays, doesn’t mean that you are weak. It means that you are strong enough to know what you need and to seek it out. Consider attending a grief support group, which are often available through local churches or community groups. For those who have lost a loved one in the Niagara Hospice program, the Niagara Hospice bereavement department offers a variety of support groups and workshops. There can be great comfort in coming together with others who are also grieving a loss.

CATS ...

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with very saggy bellies running around, moms with a long line of kittens trailing behind them and mothers nursing babies under boat trailers.”

In late July, she started a Go Fund Me site for Operation: Island Cats, aiming to raise \$5,000 ... and raised \$13,555. Donations came in from throughout Western New York —and throughout the state, the country and even the world as the story spread.

While kittens can often (but not always) be socialized — and Coogan and others have taken dozens off the island to foster care and new homes since the summer — most adult feral cats will never be pets. Her aim was to trap as many cats as possible, have them vaccinated and spayed or neutered to reduce the never-ending cycle of kittens, then return them to the island.

But there was a problem: The City of North Tonawanda, at the time, prohibited “trap, neuter, vaccinate, release” practices in the city. The operation expanded to a campaign to change the law.

The Humane Society of the United States now recommends TNVR (or TNR) in its guide for municipal leaders on managing feral cats, as opposed to the trap-and-remove (either to a new location or to shelters, generally for euthanasia) methods used for years.

“Those conventional approaches are now widely recognized as mostly ineffective and unable to address the larger community animal control issue,” the guide notes about “trap-and-remove” methods. “New research ... reveals that this non-targeted, selective response to a population which is reproducing at high rates doesn’t help to reduce cat populations and nuisances in our communities, improve cat welfare, further public health and safety or mitigate the real impact of cats on wildlife.”

However, under TNVR plans, feral cats are trapped, spayed or neutered, vaccinated against rabies, marked (often ear-tipped) and returned to the area in which they’ve lived. A caretaker generally maintains a supply of food and water and keeps an eye on the health of the colony.

“That’s been the answer for years. It doesn’t work,” Merritt-Braciak said of the old trap-and-kill policies. “It does not work because more un-neutered, unvaccinated feral cats are going to move in.

“It’s called a vacuum effect. If catch-and-kill worked, we wouldn’t have the issues we’re having. I’m a cat lover, and a cat advocate. But we need to control the population.”

Coogan agreed. “So many people just turn a blind eye,” she said. “That’s sort of what’s happened on the island.”

While some feral cats may be socialized and re-homed as pets, that’s generally only feasible for kittens.

“Prime age is 8 weeks,” Merritt said. “If you can’t get your hands on them by 8 weeks, it’s very hard to ‘flip’ them.”

Clara Miller, president of Pets Alive WNY, a non-profit organization based in Pendleton, said TNVR is a humane way to control feral cat populations.

“The cats will become fat, sassy and they’ll still stay away from people,” she said,



MIA SUMMERSON/STAFF

A cat peers out from a trap Nov. 10 on Tonawanda Island in North Tonawanda.

“but you won’t be sitting at Shores watching sickly cats, you’ll be sitting at Shores watching a contented, fat cat lounging in the sun, well fed, no more disease.”

Miller also noted that so many of the problems with feral cat populations are dealt with through TNVR: Yowling, spraying, fighting, much of the roaming, etc.

“All that stuff people complain about with cats all has to do with mating behavior ... get rid of the mating and you get rid of all those behaviors,” she said. “We might as well tackle the problem in a humane way that has been scientifically proven.”

A stable population will also keep other cats out of the territory, Coogan said.

“Feral cats, well-maintained and vetted, can live 15 to 16 years,” she said. “A stray on the street has an average lifespan of 3 years.”

Representatives from the University at Buffalo’s Animal Law Pro Bono Project, which helped change the City of Buffalo’s law to allow for TNVR, heard about Coogan and reached out to her. Peter Reese, an attorney with UB’s project, attended city meetings and worked with the council to change the law.

In early October, the NT Common Council became one of the first municipalities in the area to approve a TNVR resolution, as well as granting permission to those who feed the colony, to cheers and accolades from the waiting crowd.

But the hard work had only begun.

PLANNING THE OPERATION

There was a lot of do to get Operation: Island Cats ready to go ... but one of the first things Coogan wanted to deal with was Cloud.

“Cloud is an old guy who’s always lived on the island,” she recalled, describing the elderly, deaf, white cat who was an island institution. “He was in rough shape.

“He was a trial... because he had been trapped and neutered before. A very, very long time ago, about 14 years ago.”

Volunteers, some experienced trappers, armed with mackerel and sardines, descended on the island to try to capture the cat, to no avail.

“He sat under an RV and watched us and laughed,” Coogan said. “Cloud wasn’t having any of it.”

Volunteers eventually had to use a net to capture the cat, who was taken for a full check-up, vaccinations and to have his “nasty” ears cared for. Then, he was adopted by his caretaker of 10 years.

“He’s never going to be the type of cat who comes to sit in your lap,” Coogan said. “But he’s an old guy, and he doesn’t have to be out on the island anymore. He has a room, he has his own bed.”

Then the focus turned to the island at large.

Miller of Pets Alive WNY had reached out to Coogan

when her campaign had just begun, offering assistance.

“One of our volunteers sent me a link to her Go Fund Me because she so much admired what Danielle was doing, so I reached out and said, ‘If you need some help, let me know,’” Miller recalled. “It all spiraled from there.

“The fact she was able to gather the money and we had the expertise ... it just kind of all brought us together with the ability to help.”

Merritt-Braciak, Pets Alive WNY’s TNR specialist, joined the campaign. By a week before the operation’s beginning, they had 15 pages of willing volunteers, who then met the day before to be trained in how to take part in a mass trapping project.

Traps had been acquired, through Pets Alive WNY, Feral Cat Focus of WNY and other groups. Trap covers had been made; supplies had been gathered to ensure the safety and comfort of the trapped cats as much as possible.

Plans called for the teams to trap as many cats as they could on Monday and Tuesday of that week, with a mass transport of felines Wednesday to Operation Pets spay-and-neuter clinic in Blasdell

“They’re pretty much shutting down for us,” Coogan said of Operation Pets. “It’s huge.”

The cats were to recover, monitored by members of Feral Cat Focus, as other volunteers cleaned traps and returned that Friday to trap stragglers. (Which would then be spayed or neutered Sunday at Transit Valley Animal Hospital in East Amherst.)

Then, the vetted, spayed/neutered cats of the Tonawanda Island colony would be returned to their 84-acre home.

“If we show Western New York how successful this project has the potential to be,” Coogan said, “other municipalities will want to change their laws.”

THE OPERATION BEGINS

Throughout the day Nov. 10, the tally of captured cats continued to rise. Fourteen turned into 19, then 23, then 30. The volunteers kept checking traps, then baiting new ones and putting them out in more heavily trafficked areas.

Roxie Amsden of Pendleton, one of those who spearheaded the project, spoke of sitting on the island and watching the paths, where the cats came from and where they go.

“(It’s) just to help the animals,” she said. “In the fall and spring, you see all the babies die.”

Joyce Giglio of Amherst showed a photo of a 2-week-old kitten, rescued from the island with an upper respiratory infection and eye infection.

“If that doesn’t get you the service recently removed all of its major label releases while

that?”

The day ended for the volunteers at 10 p.m., with 55 cats trapped and transported to Pets Alive WNY’s Pendleton adoption center to be cared for until spay/neuter day.

Tuesday proved to be more challenging, with wind blowing covers off traps and cats being a little more cautious. Still, by the end of the day, a total of 67 cats were ready for the transport to Blasdell on Wednesday, in a vehicle volunteered by a man from Alden.

Operation Pets was ready for them.

“It is our mission to spay and neuter as many cats and dogs as we possibly can to reduce the numbers and population in a very humane way,” said Linda Robinson, executive director of the not-for-profit clinic, “as a prevention tool as opposed to rounding them up ... and doing something else.”

Robinson noted how relatively healthy the Tonawanda Island cats were, and credited the volunteers from Pets Alive WNY and Feral Pet Focus for all they’ve done.

“It really was a collaborative effort among three groups, including their volunteer support,” she said. “It was all those little pieces of volunteerism that made it all come together to save those cats. I think it was a wonderful effort.”

By Thursday afternoon, the clinic had performed 68 surgeries, neutering 36 male cats and spaying 32 females. That includes some of the Tonawanda Island kittens previously rescued and finally old enough for the surgery, and does not include some of the cats that wound up being already sterilized.

By Friday morning, Coogan said, the tally was up to 76 cats trapped, not including the multitude of kittens rescued by herself and others. A few traps remained on the island, in hopes of catching stubborn (and possibly already spayed or neutered) stragglers, but for the most part, Operation: Island Cats was finished.

To have a TNR operation considered a success, Miller said, “you have to go in and get more than four or five cats. You have to get what’s called the population threshold, which is about 90 percent. We’re pretty sure we got 90 percent, if not closer to 100.”

She offered kudos to everyone involved, including the businesses on the island, which she said were on-board and supportive. “It really takes a community to get something like this done.”

Except for the latest ones trapped, the majority of the colony was released Nov. 15, less than a week after that sunny fall morning, but than more three months after Coogan first visited Tonawanda Island. Volunteers will maintain the colony’s food and water supply, as well as provide some shelter for the winter weather. (Donations of “dog igloos” are sought to provide that shelter.)

Coogan now gets many emails about Operation: Tonawanda Cats and has been asked to share her experience with other groups looking to run similar operations. It’s something she couldn’t have guessed back in early July.

“I really just saw there was a need,” she said. “At the time, I thought no one cared — and so many people cared.

“There was just a need. Someone had to step up.”