

ALR

CONSUMING PASSIONS

CD or not CD?

Sydney seems to have as many specialist record shops as Melbourne has specialist bookshops. Two of the best are side by side in the Town Hall Arcade, under Sydney Town Hall.

At Shop 19 is *Michaels Music Room*, among whose 8,000 titles there isn't one record - like most classical music shops these days it's compact discs (CDs) only, plus a few cassettes.

Ms McPhee, who runs *Michaels*, says they stocked records until 1989 but they were selling so few by then that they could no longer justify the space. While the classical music fans did go off records, she also believes that the recording companies killed off the LP. They stopped releasing new recordings on LP and pushed up the prices for LP titles. By the time the average classical LP cost \$20 and CDs were only \$25, no-one wanted LPs any more.

Michaels has a well-informed, helpful staff and a superb range of music. Their phone number is (02) 267 1351.

But if you prefer *Cats* to Chopin and *Showboat* to Stravinsky, then you try next door, at shop 20. *Ava and Susan's* specialises in musical and movie soundtracks and nostalgia - and is the only shop in Australia that does.

While I was talking to Barry Stahl, who runs the shop, Nancye Hayes, the star of *42nd Street*, rang to ask for a record and Barry, of course, agreed to take it 'round to the theatre and leave at the box office for her. It's that kind of service that has made the shop - and its mail order service - world famous.

Ava and Susan's still sells lots of LPs. They've had to let the little silver discs in, but are still restricting them to a couple of racks. Stahl, too, is certain that the LP is being killed off. His CDs cost about \$26 on average, while the LPs have crept up to \$19.

The Prices Surveillance Authority (PSA) is currently investigating Australian record and CD prices and, inevitably, some people are arguing that a complete deregulation of imports would bring down prices.

None of the specialist shops like the idea. Much of their range is too specialised to be in direct competition with cheap imports. A shop like *Ava and Susan's* earns its bread and butter from the big selling soundtrack hits, like *Les Miserables* and *Chess*. If the mainstream chain stores all have cut-price import copies on sale, they'll take a lot of the specialist's turnover.

Barry Stahl is certainly not panicking, but he's not overjoyed by the prospect of deregulation. If it does come, he's concerned that no specialist will be able to match the clout wielded by the big chains, who will undercut the independent shops on most top-selling titles. While it might mean cheap best-sellers for the mass market, the specialist shops may gradually disappear and with them, the range of music they sell.

Ava and Susan's is absolutely unbeatable in its field and the shop's atmosphere is terrific. Its phone number is (02) 264 3179, or you can fax your mail order requirements on (02) 264 3177.

Sydney's ultimate specialist music shop would have to be *Folkways*, at 282 Oxford Street,

Paddington. They have over 40,000 titles in stock and offer a mail order service that covers the globe.

Folkways was built on the belief that "there's more to music than the Top 40" - especially when the Top 40 was dominated by British and US music. Australian music of every kind is their speciality and they'll sell it to you seven days a week, up until 9pm on weekdays, or 6pm at weekends.

Their stock also covers everything from Brecht to the blues, Inti-Illimani to songs of the Spanish Civil War, Woody Guthrie to the Watergate hearings.

Warren Fahey, who gives his job title as "chief larrikin", reckons that the stock is now about 50% LPs, with the remainder being half CDs and half cassettes. But he also feels that CDs are gradually taking over and has noticed that more and more of the more obscure titles they stock are now being released (or re-released) only on CD and cassette.

Fahey is deeply sceptical of the PSA's investigation into record prices. He shares Barry Stahl's concerns about keeping the independent retailers afloat but - since *Folkways* is also the home of the Larrikin recording label - he's also worried about how independent Australian labels and wholesalers will survive deregulation. A small company like Larrikin may not be able to keep up in an import-based price-cutting war with the multinational major labels. While Fahey has no doubt that cheaper records would be better for everyone he's certain that they'd mean fewer Australian records and fewer specialist shops.

Folkways' policy has always been to refuse to stock sexist or racist material and they've even given up plastic bags in favor of paper ones. Wrap up warm when you shop at there - its customers are so cool you may catch a chill while shopping, but the staff are eager to help. Their phone number is (02) 361 3980.

- Jim Endersby