I wouldn’t be the first, and I won’t be the last, to note the irony of nostalgia for Barnes & Noble, the book retailer whose purchase by a private equity firm has staved off the possibility of bankruptcy, at least for the moment. (Full disclosure: Paul Singer, who runs the hedge fund that bought the bookstore chain, is a backer of the Washington Free Beacon, where I work full-time.) Barnes & Noble and its defunct competitor Borders were, once upon a time, themselves the disruptors and destroyers, big box stores driving mom-and-pop shops out of business. Now, however, Barnes & Noble is the final bastion of hope, the tiny remnant of an industry that has traded cramped stacks delivering instant gratification for distant warehouses offering you anything your heart desires — albeit 24-48 hours later. The shuttering of once-mighty video-rental chain Blockbuster, store after store, in the face of competition from Netflix and other streaming services prompted similar twinges. Gone were complaints about the chain’s refusal to stock unrated fare or the company’s habit of going after indie stores with a sort of vulgar delight. All that’s left is kitschy remembrance of the blue-and-yellow color scheme and the laminated card that granted access to thousands of titles for just a couple of bucks over a handful of nights. Yes, this is easy to poke fun at, but the loss is real. As someone who enjoys strolling through a store and experiencing the sense of discovery that comes from learning about a new release or seeing a hand-picked recommendation by a staffer hoping to share his enthusiasms, I cheer the salvation of Barnes & Noble. And the simple fact of the matter is that streaming is, as of yet, unable to serve as a replacement for the vast oceans of VHS tapes and DVDs that cluttered up your local rental shop. As Kate Hagen noted last year in a post on the Black List Blog, Seattle’s Scarecrow Video has a video collection more than 131,000 titles deep. “They carry more than twice as many titles as the 57,351 movies and television shows currently available on the 44 streaming and rental platforms that JustWatch tracks,” she wrote. The quantifiability of that very real loss is what’s so fascinating: Some films, particularly those that aren’t profitable to reproduce in a new format, are simply getting lost over time. Chris O’Falt highlighted this problem for Indiewire last year in a reported feature on the issues surrounding films that helped define the indie boom of the 1990s and 1980s. Between rights issues and the degradation of negatives, movies like “Household Saints” may never be distributed again. And Jody Rosen’s stunning feature “The Day the Music Burned” revealed a more dramatic example of cultural destruction. In it, Rosen revealed for the first time the extent of the losses to music history that occurred during a fire at Universal Studios in 2008 that burned the masters of many important musical works. Or, at least, a range of losses: The sad fact of the matter is that we don’t really know how many original recordings by the likes of Chuck Berry and Duke Ellington and Elton John and Iggy Pop were lost. Universal claims the number of “assets destroyed” was under 120,000, while a former employee says the figure is closer to 175,000. “If you extrapolate from either figure, tallying songs on album and singles masters, the number of destroyed recordings stretches into the hundreds of thousands,” Rosen wrote. “In another confidential report, issued later in 2009, UMG asserted that ‘an estimated 500K song titles’ were lost.” This sort of cultural loss isn’t simply an American problem. When I discussed the matter with a film-historian friend, he passed on this amazing story out of India. The numbers aren’t terribly shocking, especially if you’re familiar with similar stories about the early years of the film industry in America: “About 1,700 silent films were made in India of which the National Film Archive of India has only 5 to 6 complete films and about 20-25 films in fragments. The film industry in Madras made 124 films and 38 documentaries in the silent era. Only one film survives. By 1950, India had lost 70-80 per cent of its films.” More surprising, though, was the fate of silver nitrate film stock. “Bipin Silver has earned his name from his choice of livelihood: extracting silver from black-and-white films,” wrote Shivendra Singh Dungarpur. “In a darkened room piled high with 16 mm and 35 mm film cans, I watched a thin old man systematically strip these films bare of silver, leaving ghostly, translucent white strips of nothing scattered on the floor.” The literal physical destruction of film stock for its more-valued component parts feels like a fitting metaphor for the general willingness to let cultural heritage dissolve into the ether. With such pressures all around, is it any wonder that the fate of our brick-and-mortar purveyors of art, music and literature triggers the pain from an old wound?