

Record: 1

Video store rich in black cinema history By: Jean Nash Johnson. Dallas Morning News, The (TX). 03/10/2005. (AN: 2W62311592017)

Database: Texas Reference Center

Video store rich in black cinema history

Mar. 10--If the four yellow walls at the teeny Alternative Videos store on Exposition Avenue could talk, they would detail how in 1989 they were primed for a good life.

How the shopkeeper, Beverly DeBase, a passionate person, lined them with shelves to hold her growing collection of black cinema magic. And filled surrounding wire racks with everything from the early, gut-wrenching Spike Lee documentary *Four Little Girls* and arty Sonia Sanchez profile to the silky Thelonious Monk concert and the sassy *Liberation of L.B. Jones*.

How Ms. DeBase, as she settled in, hid imperfections in the space, basically a rundown hallway leading to an elevator shaft, by painting the long pipes zigzagged along the drywall with shades of pink, yellow, orange and lilac. How she arranged merchandise around the six utility meters affixed to the walls to make it all look like art.

How for several years, business bustled and appetites for African-American culture were fed, at a time when films about black life were not considered mainstream video.

Alternative Videos had its season in the sun.

Driving up today to the storefront, tucked into a stubby strip near the popular Crayton's Restaurant, there's a tease of the urbane that arguably is out of place in Dallas. With the giant State Fair of Texas Ferris wheel in the near distance, you quickly find reality.

This is a neighborhood Ms. DeBase knows well. She grew up not far from Fair Park in the '60s.

The store was born out of frustration. Ms. DeBase had unsuccessfully searched the city for *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, a 1975 movie about a radical black takeover of the government.

"There weren't video stores in South Dallas, but they were growing everywhere else. Nobody had it, and I thought, 'This is ridiculous.'"

The ridiculous sometimes spawns a passion. Ms. DeBase had an appreciation for black artists and actors, but she didn't know it would turn into obsession. She began looking for *Spook*, and the research and hunt led to a longing to be included in the growing industry. She also wanted as much of an edge as she could muster.

She scouted for locations in the neighborhood she knew best. When she found it and had enough money saved, she began seeking rare videos in more progressive cities such as New York, Chicago and Washington. She browsed catalogs for one-of-a-kind stock and added the more accessible titles that mainstream places elsewhere had started to get.

"Many of those stores were selling off inventory and didn't know what they had. So I scooped them up."

She found titles such as Redd Foxx: *Video in a Plain Brown Wrapper*, Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, 1929-1941 and Ray Charles *Ballad in Blue* ("The only film I've ever come across starring Ray Charles.")

The day she opened the door, she knew success. From Monday through Saturday, customers would flock to the store. It became something of a gathering place, particularly on weekends. Film notables and other arts celebrities would stop in, and patrons would hang out for discussion of new and old releases.

"When I got in the business, I lucked up. You couldn't even find Roots in the mainstream stores -- and it was available. But I guess the demand wasn't there. I was all there was for a time, and so was VHS."

She found a niche. But almost 16 years later, Blockbuster and Internet retailers showcase the same films she worked so desperately to get for her community. She has become a dinosaur.

"Guess you can say I'm hanging on for dear life."

Much of the business now is rental, mostly to faithful customers and friends who know they won't have to search far if they need a culture fix. She has sold much of her surplus, keeping one of each title. The shop is only open Saturdays. She works nights as a Delta Air Lines customer service representative to support herself.

But Alternative Videos is still alive.

Turn the knob on the slightly weathered French door and you enter the space no bigger than a generous walk-in closet. Stepping inside is like going through a time warp.

Ms. DeBase greets you as if you're her most valued customer. She walks you through her movies, concerts, lectures and documentaries -- all on VHS with no apologies.

As she talks about a prized possession, The Sophisticated Gents, a 1992 video copy of the 1981 TV movie starring "Paul Winfield, Rosey Grier, Bernie Casey, Melvin Van Peebles, Raymond St. Jacques, Ron O'Neal," she rolls off the names, tenderly clutching the box.

"This is truly rare. I hadn't had it for a hot second before it was pulled because of a rights dispute," she says.

She won't talk about how long she'll try to keep the little store open. For now, she's content to share the love -- and show off her walls -- every Saturday.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Visit Alternative Videos, 837 Exposition Ave., at www.black-video.com.

To see more of The Dallas Morning News, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.dallasnews.com>.

Copyright (c) 2005, The Dallas Morning News

Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News.

For information on republishing this content, contact us at (800) 661-2511 (U.S.), (213) 237-4914 (worldwide), fax (213) 237-6515, or e-mail reprints@krtinfo.com. BBI, DAL,

Source: Dallas Morning News, The (TX), Mar 10, 2005

Item: 2W62311592017