

The Last Picture Shop: How the Lobby Survived the Video Store Apocalypse

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The Last Picture Shop

How The Lobby survived the video store apocalypse

By Katt Adachi

Kevin Martin sits alone in his deserted video store, staring blankly past the bills stacked on his desk. No customers. No money. No hope.

“It’s better to burn out than to fade away,” says the action hero on the old tube television in the corner. It gives the lonely clerk an idea.

He starts with the gasoline.

Then he reaches for the matches.

It’s only fitting that they go out together.



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HIS IS HOW Kevin Martin's latest web series, *Straight to Video: The B-Movie Odyssey*, begins. Shortly after he attempts to torch his place, he's sucked into a vortex that drags him into the world of B-Movies, a sentence he must face for his treachery.

Martin isn't at this point just yet, and neither is his shop. But how long can an independent video store last in today's digital landscape?

If there's one thing The Lobby has proved, it's that it will take more than Netflix to take her down.

Tucked underneath a daycare centre between 108th and 109th Streets on Whyte Avenue, The Lobby is the last survivor of an apocalypse – much like the main characters of many of the horror flicks the store stocks.

"When I opened up, it was a different landscape," Martin says from the red couch in a cozy corner of his store, surrounded by mountains of memorabilia and some rare Japanese laser discs. A life-sized animatronic Pinhead from Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* franchise stares down at us.

"There was still Blockbuster, Rogers, Movie Studio, Sneak Preview, Alternative Video ... They were all still around," he says. "It was like, 'I'm just another video store, so I have to do my best to stand out from other video stores.'" Now, with the closure of the Movie Studio's last location in September, The Lobby is the last of its kind.

An early decision to cater to a special audience is what has set The Lobby apart for the past 10 years, making it a cornerstone of Edmonton's horror and genre film community and helping it survive the crunch of the digital age.

"Why compete with other stores? Why not just focus on one thing?"

Cinema had its hooks deep in Martin's soul long before he became the owner of The Lobby. Coming from a military family, it was always something that set him apart.

“My dad never understood my obsession with movies,” he says “But, in the end, it’s all his fault. He took me to my first movie.”

The movie was *Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan*, back in 1982, and Martin remembers it fondly: “I cried when Spock died.”

Despite the tears, it’s a happy memory – and it was the turning point that would eventually shape the rest of Martin’s life. “From that moment on, I fell in love with movies,” he says. “They were my religion. Theatres were my church.

“So video stores are like secondary church.”



Lobby owner Kevin Martin worries that the next generation won’t even know what a video or record store was.

Martin’s love for video stores dates back nearly as far, to when he used to rent five movies and a video game for about \$10 for a weekend solo marathon. In fact, he hung out at his local Video Spot enough that he was able to convince the girls who worked there to give him free rentals in payment for helping to restock the shelves. Eventually, his first real job was at a 24-hour video station.

As Martin grew older, his father grew impatient with his obsession.

“I never blamed him – he was having a rough time – but one day, he came in and he actually ripped all my posters down,” he remembers. “He was like, ‘It’s time to grow up. You’ve got to do something new with your life.’ ”

Fast forward about a decade to the first or second year of The Lobby, when Martin's father came from out of town to pay him a visit.

“He took a look at the shop and just said, ‘Well, I guess you never grew out of it, eh?’ ”

He gestures to the dungeon-esque space around him, covered floor-to-ceiling in posters, magazine covers, and other hanging memorabilia. “The store kind of looks like my room did as a kid.”

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HE LOBBY HAS been a fixture on Whyte Avenue far longer than many of the neighbouring businesses. To help keep it alive, Martin splits his time between three Whyte Avenue bars, DJing, bartending, hosting and emceeing events five nights a week. This long-standing relationship with one of Edmonton's most tight-knit communities has made Martin a well known figure on the strip.

In fact, his relationship with the neighbourhood dates back even further than The Lobby. When Martin was looking to purchase the store – which had been open for less than a year and was then known as Oddity Cinema – the loan was given to him by the owners of Whyte Ave's DaDeO diner and bar, after the banks had turned him down.

“That was very generous of them,” he says. “In two years, I paid them back.”

Martin has paid his good fortune forward by using his shop to help grow the arts community in Edmonton. Just beyond a fake wall at the back of the The Lobby is a space he rents out for a full-blown recording studio run by Brad Simons of Tupelo Honey. It is also the former practice space for local Edmonton music legends Ten Second Epic. It doesn't hurt that he gets to help out his friends – and that it helps with the rent.

Martin is, of course, a huge figure in the Edmonton film community as well.

“A lot of cool things have come out of the shop,” he says. “Moneywise, no, but – we started a film festival because of the store, which has been going for eight years. So that’s pretty sweet.”

Martin is referring to DEDfest, the weeklong horror and genre film festival that runs every October. This year, it featured an appearance from one of his long-time heroes, Henry Rollins, who actually paid a visit to Martin’s humble store.

“I met a lot of cool young filmmakers because of the store and the fest, too,” Martin says. “And this year we did our web series.”

Straight to Video: The B-Movie Odyssey was sponsored by Telus after winning the company’s Storyhive Web Series Competition. After the pilot was streamed, fan voting led to directors Cody Kennedy and Tim Rutherford being awarded \$50,000 to make their vision a reality. Kennedy and Rutherford’s creative collective, House of Heathens, had already been making shorts about Martin and The Lobby for about three years.

“Everything comes back to the store,” Martin says.



Martin works long hours at jobs outside of The Lobby to keep it alive, but he says it's worth it.

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NSURPRISINGLY, it hasn't all been easy.

"I remember being so dumb and naive in '05," he says with a laugh.

"Like, OK, finally. Once the loan's paid off, I can quit the bars and I'll be on the gravy train. But, no. Still working at bars five nights a week."

Martin's stubbornness has had a lot to do with the store's success – that is to say, sometimes he has just been too stubborn to close up shop.

"I've never seen anybody so dedicated to one project for so long, when other people would have already given up on it," says Brian Kirr, a friend who sometimes fills in at the store – free of charge. "The love he has for those movies and for that store is amazing."

Martin is more pragmatic. “It’s one of those ‘you lay in the bed you made’ kind of things with me,” he says. “I’m a realist. I’m just like, ‘Man, if I quit the store, what are my other specialties in life that I could get a good gig at?’

“It’s like I pigeonholed myself or painted myself into a corner. You just have to embrace it and be like, ‘This is who I am and this is what I do.’ ”

Being who you are and doing what you do certainly comes with sacrifices. Not just money, Martin explains, but time, too.

“She kind of owns me,” he says. “Good thing I love her equally back.”

Martin has had two (other) long-term relationships since opening the store a decade ago, and both ended because The Lobby demands so much of his time.

To Martin, The Lobby isn’t just a store; it’s a lady. It’s reminiscent of the relationship between a commander and his ship.

“It’s commitment, but I’ll treat her right,” he says. “She won’t let me leave.”

And, like the famous shipmasters before him, this captain admits that he just might go down with her.

“It’s a gamble in life. Who knows, I could be homeless in five years if this thing craps out. But, at least I can say that I had a lot of fun.”

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ARTIN IS THIS story’s Homeric hero, but he admits that sometimes he feels more like The Crypt Keeper.

The self-proclaimed “professor of useless pop-culture knowledge” loves teaching the next generation of horror fans about movies they may not have been exposed to, but is sometimes faced with a different sort of horror – that people will simply forget.

“It’s already at the point where young people will come in and not know what the term ‘rented’ means,” he says. “The day will come when people literally will forget what a video store is, what a record shop is. And I think that’s kind of sad.

“Technology is good, and everything is at your fingertips. But there’s something to be said about physical media, and there’s also something to be said about making a trip out of it.”

Erin Shaw knows a bit about that personal connection. She has been frequenting the store for more than a year, and she says she has found something the Internet can’t replace.

“The Internet is great, but it’s a bit cold and impersonal. It’s the same reason we still need libraries and librarians. People need a book or movie buff to help them expand their entertainment choices.”

That’s what makes The Lobby special. Martin’s expansive knowledge of his catalogue allows him to craft personalized recommendations for anyone who ventures into the store. It’s something that has made a regular out of Brooklyn Boehme for nearly three years.

“He gets to know your current tastes, expands from that to find things you’d probably enjoy, and then encourages you to widen your scope to even grander things,” she says. “He is my Movie Sensei.”

Martin’s involvement in independent Canadian arts and film and his friendships with various creators have helped him forge new connections for Boehme. She and her sister, Lindsey, are now co-associate producers of an upcoming Canadian horror film called *The Void*.

“It’s a dream come true for Lindsey and I,” she says. “We’ve always wanted to support and produce independent Canadian arts, and it’s all thanks to Kevin.”

Lobby regular Shaw agrees that Martin’s personal touch and his connection with his customers are what make the shop special.

“His zeal and earnestness about what he does is why I love his shop,” she says. “And why it’s important.”

Though he might get a flash of hope every time he teaches a 16-year-old about the classics, Martin still has his doubts about the future of physical media.

“I can’t tell if it’s just me being nostalgic and getting old,” he says, “or if it’s seriously something that’s going to be missing out of society.”



Much like his childhood bedroom, Martin has the walls of The Lobby plastered with movie memorabilia.

The final question is this: If The Lobby has survived this long, how much longer can it go? With Martin’s passion and dedication behind it, can it survive forever?

If not optimistic, the answer is at least hopeful.

“The dream is still alive,” Martin says. “Whatever weird dream that is. I’d like to be the optimist and go OK, here’s to another 10 years, but—”

Though that “but” is left incomplete, it’s clear. Maybe you die first, or maybe you die last, but in the end, everything dies – sole survivors included.

“Honestly, I always want to be involved with these movies,” he says, “but maybe not in this same capacity.”

“All I can say is this: I hope if I ever have to close the store it’s for the right reasons, not the wrong reasons. Not: I just couldn’t do it any more; my life sucks; I’m bankrupt; it’s over.

“I hope it’s more: ‘The store had a good run, and because of the store this happened, and now we’re going to move on to this.’

“It would be nice to one day have something in life where I’m not stressing about money every day of the week. But until then, this is the reality, and I’ll try to make the best out of it.”

At the end of *Straight to Video*, Martin is sentenced to suffer his damnation until the end of days. Luckily, Martin won’t be spending eternity in B-Movie hell.

At least, not against his will.

Photos by Katt Adachi