

# Dizzying

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It's not easy for a business to become an institution. There is nothing that any business owner can do to guarantee it, and for every successful entrepreneur who is asked their secret – a dozen others followed the exact same recipe and failed. The reason for that is simple – the institution-ness of the place, isn't in the business itself – it is in the ideas that it's patrons have about it. A shopkeeper can influence this a lot, by making sure that people have a good experience there, but they cannot determine the flows of interest in the world at large.

Are those ideas rational ones? No. Not mostly. The really important ideas that make a place mean more than any shop should, are the emotions one associates. It's *feel-good*.

Rune Audio was most definitely an institution – even though, if one counted by the number of times that it had gone bust and been re-floated by new owners over the first twenty years of it's operation, you would have to say it was not a very solid business.

It didn't have the ambience of a cheap high-volume mass-market equipment-dealer. You would never see a cardboard box on the floor, nor was anyone polyester-vested, baseball-capped, or even plastic-name-tagged. The feeling was most like that of a modern art gallery, only cozier. Perhaps a design boutique. Soft, elegant.

Many of it's customers came primarily as worshippers. They knew that the extraordinary gear on-offer was well outside of their means, but they liked to be able to see a ten-thousand-dollar turntable, or consider the merits of rare-earth drivers, as seeing and hearing and talking-about such totems of perfection made them feel *fine*.

Some of those people were also obsessives. Devotees of the ideal, who would embark upon the construction of an 'optimal' (unaffordable) system, piece by solitary piece, even knowing that it would take them a decade to assemble all the components they 'needed', before they could fully appreciate any. Some were silly posers, absolutely fooling themselves – buying a three-hundred dollar stylus, for a ninety-nine dollar record-player, then convincing themselves that the minute improvement was discernible, even through the grotesque distortions of the rest of their lousy stereo.

Then of course there were the real, full-on, 'full system' customers – people who were wealthy, or who were so committed to epicurean sound, that they spent a completely weird proportion of their total income in-pursuit of the flawless reproduction of a frozen moment. They, more than anyone else, kept the doors open.

Most of those were people who truly enjoyed music – but all of them liked knowing that other people's ears weren't anything like so beautifully pampered as theirs.

I worked just next door to that great and rarefied institution, at the absolutely not decorated, but highly practical service-shop that had begun as their repair-department, then become it's own free-standing business. Our repair-shop actually was the stable business that Rune never was – and we had some institutional prestige as well. But a big part of that was by-association-with the main temple.

Rune sold magical items that were beyond most people's means – and we technicians were the mystery-initiated elves who peeled-open and tinkered those enchanted boxes.

Not just doing repairs, either. One of the things that I always found the funniest about audiophiles as customers, was how often they would study and plan and research for months, save for years, buy an absolutely incredible piece of gear – then, first-thing, before they'd even taken it home to enjoy it once – they'd bring it over to our workshop and ask us to modify it according to some theory or other, so as to make it just that much more fantastical a creature.

Some of these custom-mods actually had some basis in reality – even though the majority of people who requested them, lacked the trained-ear sensitivity to discern the miniscule improvements that could be achieved with great expense. Some of them were absolutely bonkers – and still also expensive (or they couldn't be amazing, right?). But the vast majority of 'mods' lay somewhere in the realm of mysticism, in-between.

I was just the apprentice, so I had to take my cues about which things were which, from the master I was training-with. But as my own skill grew, my opinions did too. Technicians usually get a bad rap as being unscrupulous, but the fact is that they are actually among the most idealistic of all the practical trades that demand intellect.

We would not take money for doing things that could not possibly help – the stupidity of the underlying nonsense-ideas was just too offensive to us. We did occasionally indulge insistent customers who were really just looking for emotional reassurance that their tweaking-theory was original or interesting – but there had to be some basis in reality – *no violations of thermodynamics, at very least.*

As far as I can tell, the fact that we had principled credulity-limits in that way, was why the main Rune store, after cleaving-us-off as an independent shop, ended up gradually building up it's own custom modification shop in the store's basement.

Not that they were trying to con anyone. It was just that their top salesmen, always tuned-in to every exotic and obscure new theory going (so as to always be able to impress their customers) ended-up believing a lot more of them than we ever could.

We had training in electronics – a hard-science. But for a salesman, the art is to attain perfect empathic communion with the customer. When they could feel what their client wanted, they could sell them anything. *But that required them to fully adopt the beliefs of the audiophiles.* Us service-folks were more like janitors in the church. Our skills were useful-enough that we were not *absolutely obliged* to pray (though it still helped).

I stopped-by their small but interesting lab many times to see what they were into. They had a stereoscopic microscope that was an absolute joy to look-through, and I knew I could always count-on their latest project to be intriguing, useful or hilarious.

Sometimes they'd be loading putty into the inside-corners of a speaker-cabinet, in order to remove all the hard-vertices, and 'cancel the waves' (always a popular hymn). Sometimes they were making arbitrary changes to drivers and crossovers (*speaker brains*), in units that dozens of people had sweated for years to develop and perfect, and then judging the results on nothing more than an ear-test in the listening-room.

That one really tended to infuriate me. Their arrogance – thinking that they could hear adequate detail to evaluate the results of their random tinkering, was truly awesome. Then again, so was their listening-room. And that exact quality of conceit was perhaps the only common denominator between all true audiophiles.

Whatever they might be heard to say aloud, each of them secretly thought that their own ears were the one true reference-baseline for sound – *in the entire world.*

Now, when I mentioned before that some people just liked to drop-by Rune to look at a ten-thousand-dollar turntable, I wasn't kidding. *And those were real dollars back then.* The speakers that I liked best in that listening-room, were priced at just a little over sixty-five-hundred dollars for the pair – roughly a half of my year's wages – and for all that expense, they were still somewhat fragile. Not meant for party-listening.

A quarter of a century later, I still get excited remembering how much detail, a perfect analog audio-chain could reveal. I brought in a recording that I knew very very well, and suddenly, I could not only hear everything about the performance in a new way, I could also hear the live crowd that that ensemble had played-to. The full ambience of the room, the players, and the witnesses to the performance. *Thrilling.*

But there was a constant current of gripes about that sublime listening-room, too.

Crazy as it will probably sound, that holiest of holies, was also the owner's bedroom. I forget the exact story, but a lot of people ran with their eccentricities to the fullest back then, so let's just make his arriving and staying-there, blameless.

What really mattered, was that the salesmen were constantly embarrassed by the fact. They knew quite-rightly that the more well-known it was, the less sacred and ideal a place that listening-room would seem. *It was enough to damage the institution they loved.*

There were attitudinal differences too – but I really think that the main reason the two top salesmen from that shop decided to buy it from its then-owner, was so that they could evict him, and thus maintain the place as a purist's temple of excellence. *Even if some of their own ideas about excellent, were a little wacky.*

They were nice guys, too. As their plan took shape and the financing seemed to come together, they began to get very excited about giving the store a grand re-launch.

For their official 'welcome to the new Rune Audio' party, they booked the finest vintage ballroom in the whole city – the Palais Royale, a real nineteen-twenties dance-hall, with an original 'sprung' dance-floor, perched down-by (and out-over) the lake. Customers, musicians, celebs, industry-people, even press was invited to that gala event – and they booked *Booker-T.* which was extra-incentive for anyone unsure, to try to attend.

But before that, on the night of the big paper-signing, they had another smaller party planned – and as much as I always appreciated a chance to see the Palais Royale, this one really got me drooling. They had booked a whole big block of seats for a Dizzy Gillespie concert at Club Berlin, a fancy uptown night-club where I had never been.

I would have happily pleaded to be included, but they were generous guys and figured we sister-store techies, should feel ourselves Rune family intimates. And so, before they'd really even occupied the wheel-house of the great ship, they were acting like they deserved the helm. *And my wife and I had tickets to see a long-time hero of ours.*

Of course, even though it was a last-minute invite, I wanted to arrive with my missus, so I headed-out a bit early to pick her up. That meant I missed sitting-around the shop and celebrating the signing of the paperwork with a few drinks from a very fine old bottle, then travelling up to the club with the whole big group of Rune people together.

My wife and I got to the club just as quick as we could, but we still arrived a good bit later than the Runeers did. They were already seated at a cluster of pushed-together tables on the packed ground-floor, right by the side of the stage – and when we peered through the busy crowd, there wasn't any sign of extra room for us.

The set-up was intimidating. Not only was the decor all ultra-fancy metalwork and hardwood, and expensive lighting-panels – and the prettified clientele all dressed in designer duds and wearing jewellery to die (or be killed) for – they also had a glaring hawk-eyed fellow stationed by the entrance, who was not at all happy to see us.

He was extremely tall, and his sharp-chinned face was model-perfect. Every hair in place, eyebrows immaculately groomed (long before metrosexuality). *Picture a watch advertisement in vogue.* Anyhow there he was, dressed-up like a royal-purple version of the great-coated doorman from the wizard of oz, with a soupcon of nazi- style.

"We're with the party from Rune," we explained to the looming fellow, who looked down on us from both height, and an extra few feet of disdain-elevation as well.

"Check your coats and wait by the bar," he said, "I'll see what I can do."

*Wow. This guy actually hated us. Right away. Even though we were incredibly excited to see Dizzy Gillespe, and at least half of the people that we could see, looked like they couldn't care less who was playing that night, only what everyone thought of their outfit.*

I didn't want to budge. I didn't want to drink expensive drinks. We were (as usual) pretty damned broke. If we had to do a couple of drinks, we'd be screwed, trying to pay for a decent (overpriced) dinner, or we'd be embarrassingly short at tip-time.

"We'll wait-here a bit," I said. "The Rune group." I held up our tickets, but did not give them to him, when he made a half-hearted reach.

He looked infuriated, but there was a large crowd, and as anyone who's worked in a restaurant or club knows, you cannot ever let one person monopolize your time for too long. *He had to see to this party's reservations, then answer questions from that one.*

Meanwhile, we disgusting unwashed street-urchins, were cluttering-up his otherwise beautiful entrance-way. Back then I wore a great big (eight-pound) fifties wool coat, that I'd bought from a thrift-shop. My sweetie was a lot cuter-dressed than me, with a big green leaf-coat and her spiked-up hair and triple-pierced ears., but neither of looked like money. *He had to shift us off – we were messing-with the purity of his institution.*

A waiter came by and touched my elbow. "We don't want to check our coats," I said. He smiled, "Follow me, we've got you a table."

Upstairs, completely separate from the Rune-group of guys. A romantic table for two, right at the edge of the balcony, looking down onto the centre of the stage. *Lovely.*

Now we were really excited. I felt as if I'd just shot back about ten cups of good coffee. We were sitting there, smiling at each other like we'd just spent three hours making love. *Totally connected and buzzing with shared-pleasure, just from the anticipation.*

Of course we did a little looking-around too, and soon a bit of sotto-voce sniping at the other patrons. But that was only because we couldn't see anyone else who was as happy to be there as we were – which made them (to us) seem like total idiots. *Come on folks, wake up and smile, this is Dizzy we're talking about!*

Then a trio of big older black gentlemen came up the stairs to the balcony. The guy in the middle had a beautiful camel-hair coat, like something from an old photograph, only brand-new and immaculate. When our eyes met, I finally saw that exact smile of excitement-for-the-evening that I'd been searching in vain to find around us.

"See?" I turned and saw that my darling too was smile-trading the joy of the moment with the guy. *That's one of the things I love most about certain kinds of fine music – those who really dig-it, recognize each other like a tribe, and always enjoy silently saluting each other's appreciation and respect.*

The guy walked smoothly by us and through a door. I stirred my coffee, sipped, then said. "Now we can finally watch the show properly. *We know that at least one other person is here for the right reason.*"

Catherine smiled beautifully (something she is very good at) and said, "Say, you don't think that was maybe....?"

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Yes it was. As he took the stage (sans camel-hair) we realized that it was Dizzy himself who had been grinning at us. *I like to think he was glad to see a couple of real keeners, even at such a ritzy poser-club.* He'd certainly played both – so many many times.

The dinner was nice – the coffee creditable, and the musical performance was among

the finest that I've ever witnessed. The whole band backing-up that great master, were all leaders of their own groups – and each soon proved they deserved it.

Of course, Dizzy was not a young man anymore. He brought Arturo Sandoval with him as a second trumpet, and Arturo handled some of the pyrotechnics that Dizzy himself would surely have played a decade earlier. But I wasn't disappointed by that. What Dizzy did play was masterful, subtle, controlled, expressive – *complete, in a way very few musicians ever attain.*

And even when he played one of his standards, with almost a half a century 'on the clock' since it was first composed, he always played it with a new arrangement, some daring twist – *he showed that the music was still alive with him, and in him.* Not fossilized.

By the end of the show we were sky-high, fully-inflated with aesthetic elation.

As we sailed down the stairs and thanked the Rune people a million times for the tickets, I made a mental note to buy new reeds for my clarinet and sax, because I knew I would be playing the hell out of them for the next few weeks.

Heck, I even thanked that looming purple goon on the way out. *Not that I got a smile.*

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Funny thing about businesses and institutions. Think I mentioned it earlier. You can ask a highly successful businessman exactly what he did to achieve that success, but whatever list he gives-you, you can always find someone else who did that exact same combination of right-things, and failed anyhow.

Unpredictable fortune is always a serious factor.

Those classy, generous, intelligent and passionately idealistic new owners of the grand Rune institution had everything right – philosophy, reputation, products, attitude.

The only real problem was that the owner that they had just purchased it from – the bearded monkish hobo, squatting in the sacred listening-room like a deadbeat hippie, had failed to remit his business-taxes. *For the better part of the previous decade.* And that is why Rune is no more.

Damn though, they sure went down with some serious style.  
*And here, my friends, endeth today's lesson.*