



May 18, 2009

At three Louisville businesses, a simpler past never seems to have gone away

By Tamara Ikenberg
tikenberg@courier-journal.com

Turn off your various 'pods, camera phones and Wii for a spell, and go back in time with three local companies inspired by the past.

These nostalgia marketers aren't just in it for the novelty they're devoted to reviving beautiful, simple pleasures, such as black-and-white photo booths, classic Crosley radios and letter-press printing.

And some are doing it with a modern twist, making the good ol' days look, feel and sound better than they ever did.

Crosley Radio

1220 E. Oak St., 583-4246

The showroom of Crosley Radio on Oak Street is a retro audio Candyland. The shelves are populated with shiny, rounded pink and purple clock radios, candy-apple-red radios reminiscent of the '50s, carved wooden turntables and gorgeous neon jukeboxes. All the equipment looks charmingly old-school, but inside, it's state-of-the-art.

You can dock an iPhone into some of the models or burn vinyl onto your hard drive. How utterly Jetsonian that would seem to the families that used to gather 'round the radio for entertainment.

"(Crosley) is a reflection of simpler times," says Bo LeMastus, president of Crosley Radio. "Today's electronics are all disposable. A Crosley, with what we do (to them) today, is meant to last forever."

Crosley was founded in 1920 in Cincinnati by inventor, industrialist and entrepreneur Powel Crosley Jr. "It was the largest maker of radios back in the day. Go back to the 1920s: There were no TVs. Radio was the new media," LeMastus says.

"You had all these giants like G.E. and Zenith making radios, but they were very expensive, and Crosley came up with a lower-price-point radio, and it just took off like crazy." Crosley created a "radio for the masses," LeMastus says.

Crosley also makes radio cabinets with turntables, which, with the resurgence of vinyl, has been a real boon for the company. But youths getting into vinyl records for the first time aren't the only ones seeking them.

"What never went away was the older demographic that held on to the vinyl, but not the record player," LeMastus adds.

The Oak Street location is not a retail space. The Crosley pieces can be purchased at stores

including ear X-tacy, Target, Pottery Barn and Kmart. LeMastus notes that a lot of folks use the exquisitely designed radios, phones, jukeboxes, etc. to accessorize their homes. "You might just take our radio and put it on a bookshelf and enjoy the design," LeMastus says.

It's a challenge to maintain the vintage look and keep in tune with constantly morphing technology, he says.

"It's constantly changing. Everyone wanted our jukebox that docks the iPod, and now that's gone," LeMastus says. "Now they want one that docks the iPhone."

Hound Dog Press

Mellwood Arts and Entertainment Center, 1860 Mellwood Ave., 896-1230, hounddogpress.com

With his bushy mustache, cap and long denim apron, Nick Baute looks right at home working his circa-1900 letterpresses with his foot on the treadle.

He and his business partner, Robert Ronk, both University of Kentucky graduates with bachelor of fine arts degrees in printmaking, prefer to take their time, setting type by hand and making plates to create stationery, invitations, business cards, coasters, bookmarks and more.

They opened their space at Mellwood Arts and Entertainment Center last October.

Baute is the first to admit: "It's not a very commercially viable business. You can get 10,000 business cards for 50 bucks off the Internet." Still, he and Ronk are passionate about preserving the method.

"It's an art. That's how we got into it," Ronk says. "Every job is a different experience."

They say they feel a real connection to everything that goes into the process. "I personally fell in love with the equipment the first time I saw it, the first time I used it," Baute says.

Hound Dog's authentic presses include a Golding Jobber from 1916 and a Golding Pearl from 1881.

In an amusing conflation of eras, the business partners purchased one of their presses on eBay.

"All this stuff was pretty much thrown away in the '60s and '70s, but a few people out there who appreciated it saved it," Baute says.

Ronk and Baute want to do more with their business than make money. They think of their shop as a mini-museum.

"We want schoolkids to come through. I think it's important to teach them about this," Baute says. "There's something to be said about keeping tradition alive."

Louisville Photographic Booth Co.

714 E. Market St., 930-0043, www.louisvillephotobooth.com

"Gentlemen, please comb your hair and mustache" is written on the charmingly nostalgic black-and-white photo booth inside Louisville Photographic Booth Co. on Market Street.

Just looking at the timeless machine conjures up giddy feelings of climbing in and being goofy with friends.

The privacy curtain makes it much easier to make love to the camera.

"You can close the curtains and be yourself — or somebody else," says operations manager Victor Hicks. "There's something childlike about making silly faces."

The company, co-owned by Peter Tower and Daniel Sanders, rents out its revolutionized booths for events, corporate clients and others, at a rate of \$1,000 for three hours. The only time people can drop in to the headquarters and sit for a booth shot is during First Friday Trolley Hops. The booths, designed by local artist Ty Kreft, resemble the familiar ones from carnivals, amusement parks and such, but the inner workings are up to date.

The machines process the pictures digitally rather than with liquids and chemicals, and the images come out in 3-by-5 or 4-by-6 sheets rather than the traditional strips.

When the men bring a booth to an event, they supply silly props to maximize the experience. On one wall at company headquarters is a series of images of a little girl who went wild with a pair of bunny ears. People can also get a photo-booth picture album with time-stamped images chronicling the night.

Co-owner Sanders says he was quite a fan of photo booths in his youth. He recalls using one at Showcase Cinemas and another at the now-defunct music venue Sparks on Main Street.

To Tower, Sanders and Hicks, mixing old-time fun with modern technology makes perfect business sense. "You get everything that's classic and traditional about a photo booth, but it's much faster," Hicks says.

So tend to that 'stache and smile.

Reporter Tamara Ikenberg can be reached at (502) 582-4174.
