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EMBRACING DIVERSITY THROUGH FASHION

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## Midwest Trader – Favourite Hang for Touring Bands

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BY COCKTAIL REVOLUTION ON MAY 30, 2017

LATEST, OUR SAY

Midwest Trader has been described as the place where “it would feel just as natural to crack open a beer and play a round of darts as to browse through the racks of leather jackets and plaid shirts.” To Adelaidians, it needs no introduction. For everyone else, it’s a popular and very unique American vintage fashion retailer in Adelaide’s CBD, also stocked to the brim with contemporary music industry merchandise. We caught up with co-owner Kate Tomkins to find out why Midwest Trader has such intergenerational appeal and why it’s such a popular hang for touring bands.

### Tell us a little bit about why you opened the shop?

Jarrad (Green) & I opened Midwest Trader in 1992 because in the 90’s the only specific stores aimed at a younger market were surf shops and we felt there wasn’t anything unique or cool or underground happening in Adelaide at that time. There was nowhere that we’d want to shop in SA for our style of clothing so we opened up originally as a franchise of rock n roll boutique Wheels & Dollbaby from Sydney. After several years of being a franchise, we wanted to be able to add our own ideas and clothing lines to our store so we parted ways as a franchise, kept stocking the brand Wheels & Dollbaby but changed our

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name to Midwest Trader and started dealing with another iconic Melbourne store, Route 66, to build our store towards focusing on American vintage clothing.

### How were those early days of opening? Did things pick up quite quickly?

The early days of trading were probably similar to today – up and down, its tough to start out as a new business but at that time Adelaide was crying for a more rock n’ roll store with some heart & soul. Jarrad and I were only about 19yrs old so we had no experience at all but his father was in the fashion industry and my parents owned retail stores so we knew some basics through family. Overheads weren't that high in the 90s so it was worth giving it a go, we were basically kids just out of school trying something new – I'd never recommend that today to any young person unless they have huge financial backing behind them as times have changed and these days you need to be able to survive purely to keep ontop of overheads. You need to love what you are doing and really believe in it as the pay off in retail is minimal – its more doing it because you believe in your vision. I still have to work 6 days a week and we are open 7 days so it is a true labour of love.

**Midwest Trader has had strong links with music and cultural movements over the years – how has this shaped the development and identity of the shop?**



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We have always had a strong tie in with music in our store – this comes from our love of music. Jarrad toured the world with bands, he was a roadie, he was in bands that played USA & Europe – he worked in the music industry on different levels while running our store. I've always gone to a live gig at least once a week for as long as I remember and still do – for this reason organically the store has always been tied in with the music industry. We've had touring bands thru our door from Patti Smith, The Cult, The White Stripes, The Darkness, Guns n Roses, You Am I, Magic Dirt, Marlon Williams, The Living End, The Divinyls, Jon Stevens, Kate Ceberano, just last month – Billie Joe from Greenday – the list goes on.

**Why do you think Midwest Trader continues to be held in such high esteem by people in Adelaide and beyond?**

I think if we are held in high esteem – it's maybe because we have a clear and unique vision for our store and always have for over 25 yrs and it's not a copy of anything else – it's just true to a style we've always loved – it's not swayed by trends. I've always sold cowboy boots, denim jackets, western shirts, rock n' roll and biker gear – it's classic iconic pieces. The other part might be due to the way we fit out the store, with cool old motorbikes, Gretsch guitars, pinball machines, neon and taxiermy – to walk in here you can see it's come from an organic passion for a style and its not contrived or cookie cutter. Most independent stores tend to struggle to survive past 3-4 yrs so some respect may come from us being established in the East End for 25yrs which is probably the thing I'm most proud of – determination to survive against a chain store culture.

**You'd have seen the east end of Adelaide go through many changes over the last few years along with the shop. What do you think keeps people coming back to Rundle Street East?**

Yes we've seen many changes in the East End over 25yrs. We originally opened here as it had a grimy, underground feel to the area - these days the area is a lot more refined, clean cut and more chain stores obviously where independents once stood. I miss the 90's east end but these days the area is known to be a little more hip & trendy. I think the focus is on food down here which brings people to the area. The thing I like most about the area is The Fringe time with all the artists and punters excited to be around here and the Ebenezer night markets during that time are fantastic and I'm so glad we have that event to look forward to.

**What does the future hold for Midwest Trader?**

These are temperamental and difficult times for independent businesses like mine, I've seen so many come and go. My main objective is to keep enjoying my store, meet interesting people and with some luck make it to 30 years of business - who knows if I can hit that goal but I'd be proud to if I can.

Photos & Interview: Dimitra Koriozos

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