



Dror Sinai is closing the downtown Santa Cruz Rhythm Fusion after 20 years in Santa Cruz.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Will the beat go on?

Longtime downtown percussion store set to close this week

By CATHY KELLY

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SANTA CRUZ — Price cuts run deep these days at the downtown music store Rhythm Fusion, which is set to close Dec. 31.

But it was clear during a recent visit that the depth goes way beyond discounts at a shop that has enlivened a Pacific Avenue courtyard for more than 17 years, bringing exotic instruments from around the world and educating hundreds of drummers.

One customer put a hand to her chest and rolled her head skyward for a moment as she said, "This is so sad; it's terrible." Others caught owner Dror Sinai's eye across a sea of instruments and customers, smiling in compassion, raising a peace sign, a wave. One musician carried

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DROR SINAI, owner, Rhythm Fusion

away a large white and pink conch shell that had been drilled into instrumentation, squeezing Sinai's hand as he left and stopping for a moment to say he just had to come buy something. He became impassioned as he talked about a note and how some convergence had made a gong "sing

forever."

Sinai smiled, nodding, fully understanding.

The longtime-friend customers were easy to spot amid the ones who wandered, drawn by the discounts of 50 percent or more. The store will be open daily from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. through New Year's Eve.

Sinai, 46, said his closure plans stem from several things, including a family illness and a slump in sales that began after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and worsened during the recession.

And he said he just needs a break from the financial struggle of it all, yet would love the support to keep the shop going.

Either way, he plans to continue teaching and lecturing and is organizing a tour

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to Morocco featuring music and more planned for the end of May, after being deeply inspired by a summer trip to the Sacred Music Festival in Fes, Morocco.

The Israel native conceived Rhythm Fusion in tents erected downtown after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and sees it as more akin to a music-filled community center than a simple store — a place

where people meet and play music and connect.

He and his wife, Nancy, have two young sons. Sinai is a noted musician and teacher who loves to travel and who popularized and designed some of the statue-like bases for gongs that grace many gardens and homes.

Until about three years ago, Rhythm Fusion supplied instruments to hundreds of stores including the Guitar Center chain, he said. He laughed recalling how a woman spotted him in the middle of a desert in Moroc-

co and gave him a huge hug after realizing he had been the one who supplied her music store in Chicago.

Back in Santa Cruz, during this winter week, one man who bought a drum for his 20-year-old son spoke of how Sinai had taught his son, Matt, about drumming years ago.

Another customer, Tim Bell of Ben Lomond, signed up for lessons and bought a djembe drum from Ghana because he is a woodworker and was drawn to the ripples in the drum's wooden base.

Sinai was beset by ques-

tions from well-wishing customers who wanted to know why the store was closing, but he had no easy answers. Sinai said he is unsure how it will all play out, but he talks of keeping things alive and of peace and joy and doing what you really want to do, and about how he might just be able to find it.

"I'm trying to figure out my life," he said, in a voice that is low and thoughtful. "It's a huge question for me right now."

The store was set to close last year as well, he said,

but the community rallied behind him, and that energy sustained him. Some 500 people signed up for an e-mail list, Sinai said.

"My life is about music really and it's natural for me to be in this environment, but I'm kind of burned out after 20 years," he said. "I get millions of compliments, but not enough support."

He said it all seems surreal and unfocused, but that he was brought to tears early this week by an 8-year-old who had come in, asking his dad if he could just get a little bell in memory of the

store. The boy then brought the bell to Sinai and put it in his hand, asking him to rub it for him. Then he gave him a hug.

"I was crying," Sinai said, shaking his head.

But then he smiled.

"Anyway, welcome to our second annual moving sale," he said. "I'm open for miracles, and I'm trusting the magic of the flow."

Rhythm Fusion is at 1541-C Pacific Ave. Call 423-2048 or visit rhythmfusion.com. Those interested in the tour to Morocco can find information at drorsinai.com.