



# The King of Cookman

Billy Meisch - The King of Cookman

## Reigning monarch of downtown Asbury surveys his domain...

ASBURY PARK – Every so often, we make sure to check in with the King of Cookman Avenue.

We refer to the reigning monarch of the downtown: Billy Meisch, the owner of the House of Modern Living vintage furniture store.

Meisch has operated on Cookman Avenue for 28 years since 1980. That makes him the longest surviving downtown retailer along with Cooper's Creations jewelers.

Meisch is important because he always stood for what we envisioned in downtown Asbury Park – long before we even envisioned it. His vintage furniture store is a legendary collection of merchandise from the 1930s through the 1970s. It's always packed with tons of fascinating and beautiful stuff.

In fact, directors often have called on the King to provide furniture for their sets. His biggest movie was "The Ice Storm" – a critically-acclaimed film by director Ang Lee that takes place in the early 1970s.

So Meisch embodies the dream of revitalizing downtown Asbury Park with broad-minded artists and creative types. He was the first. Meisch has even lived in Asbury all these years. Now he resides up above his store. He owns the building.

Meisch has always been an incisive observer of the downtown Asbury scene. He's well liked. And the King has just a magnificently great eye for design, architecture and aesthetics. The guy is one of Asbury's treasures.

That's why we periodically check in for the Monarch's views about the downtown. And Meisch says there have been lots of changes since our last report about two and a half years ago.

"It's just a weird mix of people now," said Meisch, in reference to the increasing numbers living in the downtown as more residential units come on-line. "You have like ultra-conservative and then completely the opposite of that moving in, both in terms of their personal style and even politically."

"Even the people shopping here now, that's changed," he said. "Years ago, you'd never have families coming through on a Sunday afternoon. Now you'll have lots of families."

Meisch says that this "extreme diversity" of people is a "great thing."

"That's what it should be," he said. "Like the whole art scene – even that runs from the 'way out there art' to really conservative 'photos of the beach art'."

But the King says that, predictably, there are conflicts as more people work and live in the downtown.

"In the past, you could do whatever you wanted to do, which a lot of people think still goes on," Meisch said. "But you can't do whatever you want, and you shouldn't."

"I think everybody is going to have to figure out a way to get along. There are issues over noise and lifestyle. A lot comes down to common consideration. Like you can't put your trash out in front of your neighbor's house."

And it's not always easy for the King to go both ways with his dual identity.

"Being both a resident and a business owner is really trying at times," Meisch says. "A lot of what people don't understand is that we have a City Council that wants people to live downtown. That's great. But unless you're going to enforce noise ordinances and stuff like that people aren't going to be happy here. And that creates tension between business owners and residents."

We asked the King about triCity's push for creative businesses in the service sector for the downtown.

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After all, they bring the broad-minded urban types as employees that we see as the perfect fit for our city. And they don't need walk-in traffic.

In this newspaper's vision, those creative businesses, along with new residents, would be the driving economic force in the downtown. Eclectic restaurants and some highly niched, specialized retail would round out the mix.

"I think those in the creative service sector are great," says the King.

"Take Knockout (the downtown marketing and branding firm that employs close to 20 people), they actually shop in the downtown. God bless them," Meisch said. "They're willing to get out on the street and walk around - and not just their staff, but their owners do it too. They hit all the stores."

And the King also says that any retail that opens has got to be highly niched.

"You've got to save space for retail in the downtown. But it's got to be specialized retail," he said. "You can't just open up a little candy store - there's got to be something specialized about it. Especially with the internet. That's what people often don't realize."

For example, Meisch says he's doesn't sell his merchandise on Ebay. "If you're selling all your best stuff on Ebay, what's in your store?" he said.

Obviously, Meisch understands that retail these days is about giving the customer an experience - and they definitely get a unique one walking into his place. The King says others are coming to the downtown with the same philosophy.

He praises Shelter Home that opened this summer a couple doors down which features housewares, gifts and some furniture. To the King, Shelter Home and his House of Modern Living are a great example of a positive symbiotic relationship between retailers.

"That was exciting to me," Meisch said of the Shelter Home opening. "They were really willing to take a chance and do something. It's very, very cutting edge style. Like right up to the minute style, and it's with everything they have."

"Gene Mignola and Scott Hamm (the owners of Shelter Home) have a great eye. There's a sense of really interesting design. Whether you have a modern

home or a Victorian, there's something there you can find. And they priced it to stay within anyone's budget," he said.

"My clients love their store. People who I've been dealing with for years have been happy to see them. They're nice guys and they get involved in the community."

As for other positive developments, Meisch cites the use of the vintage VFW building by the acclaimed Revision Theater. "Revision is going in the right direction at the VFW. Hopefully, they'll become a major presence. Culturally, it brings what you want."

In the near term, Meisch predicts people will stay close to home for economic reasons, which should benefit downtown Asbury Park. "I think in the summer things will pick up again. Local areas will be in. People will go to the beach here, and you have the great restaurants downtown that will draw them."

And if the King of Cookman had real powers, what would he do in the downtown?

"I would force landlords to drop their rents," he said. "I think they need to get tenants into the stores, even if it's a temporary thing. There has to be some type of incentive to fill up a store. I know it's hard because they have to pay taxes, electric bills. But anything you gain out of even a short term rental is probably better than sitting empty."

Finally, with close to a thirty year reign, is the King yet ready to abdicate to, say, those who run the triCityNews?

Not a chance.

"I still love it," Meisch said of his business. "I love meeting people. I love hanging out with people. In the warm weather, I love sitting on the sidewalk with groups of people that always come by for lunch, that type of thing."

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