On record: VinylCentric Gallery offers weird and wonderful history of the record player in Canadian homes

By Eric Volmers — Published February 13, 2026 | Updated February 14, 2026



Owner Ken Murphy with his collection during the grand opening of VinylCentric Gallery and Archive located in Bankers Hall. It is is dedicated to preserving and sharing original musical artifacts through storytelling. Darren Makowichuk/ Postmedia PHOTO BY DARREN MAKOWICHUK / DARREN MAKOWICHUK/Postmedia

When Ken Murphy was growing up in Montreal, his family would buy records and hold dance parties in their house.

It was in the 1960s, and Murphy's parents would host a combination bridge and dance night. The latter was based around the hulking phonograph in the living room. As in many Canadian homes in the day, the record player was a central part of the decor in the Murphy household. They would dance to folk, country, big band and Calypso records.

"I can still smell the smoke," says Murphy, in an interview with Postmedia. "They all smoked. I can still hear the ice in their glass. But they would play their bridge. They were all dressed up and then they would dance."

Murphy's walk down memory lane is part of a tour he conducted for Postmedia earlier this week of the VinylCentric Gallery and Archive, located on the third floor of Bankers Hall in Calgary. A former television executive who moved to Calgary in 2012, Murphy is curator of the gallery and its inaugural exhibit: PhonoSphere: A Brief History of the Record Player in Canadian Homes 1948-1978.

It's a stunning display, full of posters, vinyl records, ephemera and other artifacts that trace the history of the phonograph in Canadian homes starting with the first long-playing records in 1948. That era more or less came to an end in the late 1970s, when equipping homes with large consoles fell out of fashion in favour of buying stereos in components.

Phonosphere also includes dozens of actual record players, tracing the wild designs through those decades. Remarkably, all of the players on display were made in Canada, and all come from Murphy's private collection, which also includes 100,000 pieces of vinyl, posters, and pieces of advertising.



The grand opening of VinylCentric Gallery and Archive located in Bankers Hall is dedicated to preserving and sharing original musical artifacts through storytelling in Calgary on Wednesday, February 11, 2026. Darren Makowichuk/Postmedia PHOTO BY DARREN MAKOWICHUK /DARREN MAKOWICHUK/Postmedia

The collection was built over 60 years of Murphy "searching, scrounging and digging" for lost artifacts. There is a brief history of recorded sound in the exhibit that includes a photo of Thomas Edison at the White House in 1877 as he was about to present his new audio recording and playback invention to President Rutherford Hayes, and the creation of pre-vinyl 78s, which were made of shellac.

But the focus is on the decades when homes were fitted with behemoth phonographs that were generally regarded as furniture rather than sound systems, at least at first. Which is why the majority of the advertising from that period was aimed at women.

“It was a woman’s prerogative to purchase because it had to fit into the decor of the home,” Murphy says. “It was a big deal to bring in a console, this new piece of furniture.”

So much of the advertising from the day featured Norman Rockwell-esque images of women and families gathered around the consoles. The exhibit even uses A.I. — albeit sparingly, Murphy says — to bring two of the old ads to life. One early image, taken from an RCA Victor calendar that was only issued in Quebec in the late 1940s, shows a beaming former RCAF pilot with a pipe flanked by his approving wife and “baby boomer” children as they gather in front of a huge console. When stereo sound was introduced in the 1950s, the advertising became focused on the somewhat sexist idea that the look of the new record players would please wives while the sounds would please husbands: “She looks, he listens” was the tagline for a Sonograma ad from the period. The exhibit covers some of the weirder, and perhaps largely forgotten, chapters in the history of records. That includes the “speed wars,” when the two largest record labels — Columbia and RCA — went head-to-head offering different formats of vinyl. Columbia invented the 33 1/3 rpm speed or LP in 1948 to replace the old 78 format. RCA countered with the smaller 45rpm records in 1949, selling them as a cheaper and more compact way to enjoy music. For a brief period, this forced consumers to choose between formats since each demanded its own record player.

“This put pressure on the two titans to get their house in order because this was crazy,” says Murphy. “It was a classical composer who was on the RCA roster who finally said, ‘If you don’t adopt the LP, I’m out of here.’ That’s when their corporate ego gave way to market forces.”

But gearheads, and those interested in the vagaries of interior design going into the 1960s, will likely be most excited by the actual record players on display. Some were designed to look like furniture, with the player fully concealed inside cabinets. Others offered bolder designs. That includes examples from Clairtone, a Toronto-based company that presented relatively outlandish players in the mid-1960s. One of them on display — futuristically dubbed 7000 Project G — looks like something from the original Star Trek series with a cabinet and hovering speaker-spheres on each side.

It cost $2,000, which was a princely sum in 1964. These days, they are “almost impossible” to find.

“There were about 400 made, mostly sold in the U.S.,” Murphy says. “It was bold, radical, expensive. Most were purchased by movie stars or recording stars. This was $2,000 in ’64. You could have bought a nice car for that.”

Murphy established VinylCentric Gallery and Archive as the public brand of the Canadian Museum of Recorded Music and Culture, a registered charity. He hopes to get funding from philanthropists and foundations to help preserve and promote the collection. He would like a permanent home for the collection and to archive the artifacts. In the near future, events planned for the Bankers Hall location include one based on Black musical styles from 1947 to 1977, the rarest vinyl records in the world and a 2017 exhibit celebrating the 150th anniversary of recorded sound.

Before moving to Calgary, Murphy worked in Canadian specialty television. He is the past president of Discovery Channel Canada and was part of the management team that launched TSN. So what sparked his 60-year love of vinyl and record players?

“I’ve asked myself that a lot,” Murphy says. “To be honest with you, I didn’t see my father much. When I did, he would come home and play records. He would bring out his show tunes. It was so beautiful. I asked myself that question: What has driven me my whole life? It’s such a passion. I think that was the genesis of it.”