



GHOST MALL

The Wayne Hills Mall

by Phil Buehler

When the Wayne Hills Mall opened in 1973, Walt Frazier made an appearance at the opening, along with Ronald McDonald and Mayor McCheese. It was quite an event.

Malls were once a central part of our culture, even the settings for movies beginning with *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Dawn of the Dead* and more recently with the Netflix series, *Stranger Things*. Throughout the '70s and '80s, malls replaced Main Streets as our community gathering places.

The anchor store at Wayne Hills Mall was Meyer Brothers department store. Other stores over the years included: Burlington Coat Factory, Sam Goody, Waldenbooks, Karin's Kurtains, Toys 'R' Us, Foot Locker, Champs Sports, Ruki Jewelers, Joyce Leslie, The Towne Mouse, Payless Shoesource, the Watch Tower, McDonalds, the Cutting Crew, Columbia Bank, Hot Topic, Select-a-Ticket, Foxmoor, Puppy Palace, Fun Palace, Quiznos, Pauly's Pizza, GNC, Avenue, Ambiance, Consumers Distributing, Kinney Shoes, Fun N' Games, Pearle Vision, the Cook's Attic, the Cheese Chalet, TCBY, ArtWorld, and Thom McCann. I'm sure I missed a few.

Opening Year

1973 was a very interesting year. The Watergate Hearings were on TV every day—we'd even watch them in history class. *Roe v. Wade* was settled by the Supreme Court. The Endangered Species Act was signed. The Yom Kippur War in the Middle East led to the Arab oil embargo with oil prices



Photos by Phil Buehler

shooting up 400%, which led to gas rationing and long lines at the pump. The World Trade Center opened. The American Psychiatric Association issued a resolution stating homosexuality was not a mental disorder. Hip Hop music was started in the Bronx. And perhaps most important to me personally, the Paris Peace Accords officially ended the Vietnam War and my friends and I no longer feared being drafted.

The year the mall opened was also special for me I got my driver's license and could drive to the mall with my high school friends. I also first started photographing abandoned places around New Jersey and New York City that year, and some of those photographs have been in *Weird NJ*.

Death of Mall Culture

Malls across America are now dying, and along with them the culture they inspired. With Amazon, box chains, online music, digital books, streaming video, Facebook and Instagram, people have fewer and fewer reasons to leave their homes and meet people face-to-



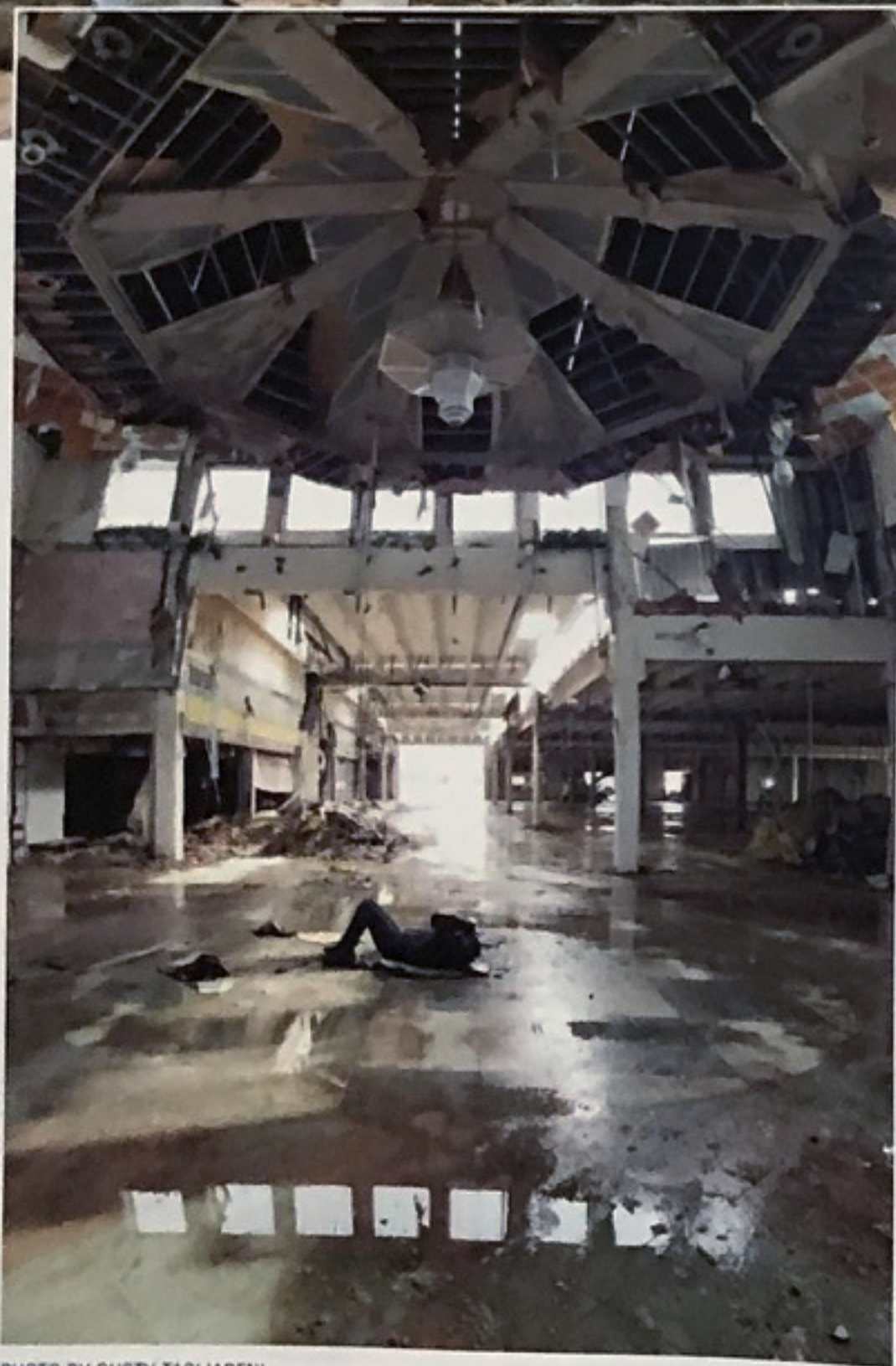


PHOTO BY RUSTY TAGLIARENI

face.

The last stores at Wayne Hills Mall closed in 2009, but the mall building itself had been slowly dying for years. About five years ago the large AC units on the roof as well as much of the flashing covering the roof seams was removed, and water came in, which brought down the drop ceilings and created a post-apocalyptic scene that was very different than other empty malls, which are usually just vacant.

Exploring

I'm always on the lookout for more abandoned spaces to explore, photograph and research, so when I heard about the Wayne Hills from Rusty Tagliareni and Christina Mathews, two fellow ruins explorers, I was thrilled. I made the first of a half-dozen trips in February of this year.

Once inside, I was drawn immediately to Sam Goody, where there were still signs up from before it went bankrupt in 2006. Walking around brought back memories of the countless hours I'd spent flipping through albums in bins with my friends. 1973 was a great year for music—the number one album on the Billboard chart that year was Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," followed by "Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon." It was also the beginning of a new era, as The Beatles released two greatest hits albums while George, Paul, John and Ringo released solo albums. Bowie, Zeppelin, The Who, Eagles, the Stones, Queen, Dylan, NY Dolls, even Elvis and Sinatra

had albums that year. And of course, Bruce Springsteen's first two albums, "Greetings from Asbury Park" and "The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle" were on *Rolling Stone* magazine's top album list. And you could buy an LPs for \$3.69!

There were ghost signs of other bankrupt retailers throughout the mall: Waldenbooks, Joyce Leslie, Avenue, Payless, Toys 'R' Us, GNC and Quiznos. The "Art World" sign above an empty mall gallery perfectly fit this weird scene, so I just had to put "Dark Side of the Moon" on my earphones and go with it.

Demolition

Demolition began at the end of 2018, and really picked up over the winter. They demolished the interior walls, then the roof, and finally the exterior walls. All that's left as I write this is a large pile of concrete rubble where a Shop Rite will soon be built. The empty Toys 'R' Us building still stands, along with the Burlington Coat Factory, which will stay open and used to anchor the mall.

Upcoming Gallery Show

But the story of Wayne Hills Mall is not over. I'm having an exhibit in New York City with many more photos than the ones seen here. The opening reception will be on Black Friday, November 29 (naturally!) and the show will run until Sunday, January 12. It's at Front Room Gallery and admission is free. You'll even be able to pick out a vinyl album from my collection from 1973 and play it on the vintage record player in the gallery. You can find more information at FrontRoomLES.com or at my website, modernruins.com.

