



EDITORIAL

GOING FORWARD LOOKING BACKWARD

In any past era, years, decades, or even centuries ago, you'll find two constant forces at work in the evolution of the music products industry: a desire for increased volume and a passion for more features at a lower price. Just about every notable industry breakthrough can be traced to one or both of these deep-seated desires.

In the years since AT&T's Western Electric division introduced the first sound system in the '20s, legions of engineers and scientists have been ceaselessly experimenting with new materials and better designs, all with an eye towards delivering more volume and better fidelity. As a result, professional audio has evolved to a point where it's possible to fill a stadium with high-quality sound, and at the coming NAMM show an entire hall of exhibitors will be boasting about their ability to deliver an unlimited quantity of crystal-clear sound pressure.

Three hundred years ago, on a far more modest scale, Bartolemo Cristifori was driven by a similar quest for volume when he refitted a harpsichord with an escapement action to create the first piano. Cristifori's invention was louder than a harpsichord, but not loud enough, and for the next two hundred years some of the world's best scientific minds harnessed cutting-edge technology to make the piano sound even bigger and better.

In a *Music Trades* interview a few years back, Les Paul, the electric guitar pioneer, put this quest for volume in a more human perspective. He recalled that as a kid playing in a roadside joint in Wisconsin, "When I stuck a record needle in my guitar top and played it through a radio set, people could hear it, and my tips got a lot bigger."

A century ago, when piano prices began to plummet as the industry adopted rudimentary mass production techniques, *Music Trades* Editor John C. Freund commented, "The days of a small group of artisans making a large profit on low volume are over. Competition, and the public's insatiable desire for cheap pianos, has forced profits down to the point where survival depends on large volume." Ever since, the "insatiable desire" to get more for less has prodded manufacturers in all quarters to constantly produce more efficiently, keep a lid on prices, or go out

of business.

Pessimism has been the third constant in industry history. For the past 110 years the columns of *Music Trades* have been filled with predictions of the industry's imminent demise. Echoing current concerns, in 1907 newly elected NAMM president F.B.T. Hollenbeck worried, "Parcel Post will have the effect of concentrating all business to a few large centers. Unless we band together and fight, the small-town merchant will be a thing of the past." When talking pictures put thousands of theater musicians out of work in the '20s, William F. Ludwig Sr., founder of the Ludwig Drum Company, wrote, "It is doubtful that the industry will ever recover from this blow." The launch of Sputnik in 1957 and the start of the "space race" was another cause for alarm. Joe Grolimund, president of The Selmer Company, wrote, "Citizens clamor for more science and math in the school room as tax groups call for eliminating frills like music. It is a worrisome trend." Amidst slumping guitar sales in the early '80s, a Gibson vice-president declared, "We're getting our lunch eaten by the video game industry. We don't stand a prayer."

The hype surrounding the millennium and "Y2K" has become pretty insufferable, but if it prompts a little reflection on just how far we've come, then it's not without some value. Anyway you look at it, the history of our industry has been an unbroken upward trend. With each passing decade, we have managed to increase the number of music makers everywhere, add to the ranks of the gainfully employed, bring bigger rewards to shareholders, and make the world a better place. As the grim predictions in our columns and the routine business casualties indicate, achieving these benefits has never been easy; however, if the past is any guide, we are entering the year 2000 poised for continued progress. The new millennium will bring winners and losers, but for those who can manage to serve the public's needs, the opportunities will be bigger and better than we can even imagine from our current vantage point.

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