



## EDITORIAL

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# THE ULTIMATE MOM & POP OPERATION

**O**ur industry is largely comprised of small, family-run companies that are motivated as much by love of music as by profit. Chuck Levin, who died on December 22 after a protracted battle with cancer, epitomized the music industry entrepreneur, except that he was better at it than just about anyone else. His career is particularly noteworthy because over a five-decade span he built an exceptional business, helped transform industry practices, and, as indicated by the 300-car procession at his funeral, provided outstanding service to his community.

The people who use the term “mom and pop” business derisively obviously never paid a visit to Chuck Levin’s Washington Music. As management teams go, Chuck and Marge, his wife of 51 years, were as capable as any. They started with a modest pawn shop on H Street in Washington D.C. In 1958 they opened Washington Music to concentrate full-time on the musical instrument market. With the baby boom in full swing and school music programs growing rapidly, Chuck earned the respect and patronage of band directors throughout the greater D.C. market with a combination of competitive prices, deep inventory, and flawless service. A few years later, when the Beatles initiated the first guitar boom, he applied the same basic formula to take a dominant position in the m.i. business.

Washington Music was a story of unbroken sales growth until 1968, when the H Street store was burned to the ground during Washington’s race riots. Undeterred by the setback, Chuck quickly reopened in suburban Wheaton, Maryland, just outside the beltway. During the difficult transition, industry suppliers stepped up to assist in any way they could because Chuck was someone you could trust implicitly. Their faith in Chuck was not misplaced because the move to Wheaton allowed him to come back bigger and better than ever.

Aggressive pricing was always part of the Washington Music strategy. But competitors who attributed the company’s success to low prices alone missed the point. Chuck believed in the maxim “you can’t sell from an empty wagon,” and he always maintained an immense inventory. If it isn’t in stock

at Washington Music, chances it doesn’t exist. He also made a point of surrounding himself with good people on the sales floor and in the service department. Indicative of the type of people he attracted, Paul Reed Smith, founder of PRS guitars, did guitar service work at Washington Music early in his career. Finally, there was Chuck’s integrity: He was genetically programmed to take care of the customer, and people sensed it the minute they walked into the store.

Washington Music helped define what we now refer to as the “superstore.” At a time when most m.i. dealers took their merchandising cues from the local head shop, Washington Music was wiring sound systems and electronic musical instruments so customers could try them in the store. To this day, there is no better environment for a customer to try a guitar, sound system, or keyboard. Chuck’s drive to keep improving ultimately helped raise retailing standards industry-wide.

Making an adequate profit when you carry a tremendous inventory and work on a tight margin is no small feat. Chuck managed it through a relentless attention to detail. In buying or leasing stores, he found creative ways to sublet space to keep occupancy costs down. No cash discount ever went untaken at Washington Music, and no expenditure was too small to escape his scrutiny. The result was a lean, mean selling machine.

The success of Washington Music made Chuck a prosperous man, and he could have easily retired years ago. But he loved the industry and his store, and he cheerfully showed up for work until the very end. Perhaps his crowning achievement was training capable sons Alan and Robert to carry on the business he started. Chuck is also survived by his wife, Marge, a daughter, Abbe, and two grandchildren. He will be missed, but his memory provides an inspiring reminder of the opportunity available within our industry.

**Brian T. Majeski**  
Editor