

How Big Was The “Beatle Boom?”

One of our standard interview questions is “How did you get involved in music?” If the interviewee is a member of the baby-boom generation, there is a high probability that the response will be something like, “It was a Sunday night and I was sitting in the living room watching the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*. There and then, I decided I had to be a musician.” The number of individuals who trace their interest in music back to that fateful evening, February 9, 1964, is beyond calculation. This is why, 40 years later, people in our business still talk reverently about the “Beatle Boom.”

Books have been written meticulously documenting the Beatle’s impact on society and subsequent generations of musicians. Less well explored, but of special significance to readers of this column, was their significance for the music products industry. If the Beatles upended notions of music within larger society, they had an equally transformative effect within our industry. Before the Beatles made their U.S. debut, the industry had been dominated by wind instruments and acoustic pianos. Afterwards, the guitar became the preeminent solo instrument. Before February 9, 1964, the industry was in the middle of a steep cyclical downturn, brought on by recent memories of the assassination of President Kennedy and the lingering effects of a nationwide steel industry strike. Immediately after February 9 retailers and manufacturers were struggling to fill an unprecedented groundswell of demand as millions of teenagers clamored for guitars and drums.

This overnight, 180-degree shift left many in the industry dazed and confused. NAMM’s president at the time, Eldred Byerly, who ran a chain of full-line stores in Peoria, Illinois, summed up the prevailing view among retailers in a *Music Trades* interview: “This has changed everything...what we need in inventory, how we sell, how we run our business. I’ve never seen a change like this.”

Amidst all the Beatle lore, what gets overlooked is how far our industry has come in the 40 years since. The Beatle boom deservedly occupies a special place in industry history. In quantifiable commercial terms, however, it’s completely dwarfed by the current scale of the business.

Just consider a few numbers: In 1965, when Beatle mania was at its peak, Ludwig Drum Company sold 22,000 drum kits; arch-rival Slingerland turned out approximately 10,000 kits; and Gretsch production was at 6,000 units, putting the entire U.S. drumkit market at under 50,000 units. By contrast, in 2003 U.S. drumkit sales topped 215,000 units. In guitars, sales estimates compiled by the Guitar and Accessories Manufacturers Association placed



the market in 1965 at a little over 1 million instruments. Last year, m.i. dealers sold 2.3 million guitars, and we estimate that mass-merchants sold another 1 million. Also consider that in 1965 there was no audio market to speak of; recording equipment existed only in studios owned by record companies; and synthesizers, digital pianos, portable keyboards, software, and computer music products did not even exist in the imagination.

Last year, these categories alone generated nearly \$2 billion of the industry’s \$6.9 billion in retail revenue. Even taking recent price deflation into consideration, the industry during the “golden age” of the Beatles was, at best, about a third of size it is today.

Since we began publishing in 1890, our columns have regularly attracted fretful types who express concern about “grave” issues threatening the industry’s future. By 1967 these commentators began to worry that the Beatles were another “fad” that would pass like the hula hoop. In an interview that year, Ed Targ, president of Targ & Dinner, then one of the country’s leading wholesalers, warned, “The inevitable passing of the guitar boom poses a serious problem.” Despite a few bumps along the way, the industry managed to successfully weather each “serious problem” to become larger and more prosperous than anyone in 1967 could imagine.

Over long periods of time industry growth has consistently confounded the naysayers and outpaced even the most optimistic assumptions. The Beatle boom took the post-war generation by surprise; the four decades of subsequent growth were equally unexpected. Amidst the daily challenges of running a business, it’s worth keeping this in mind. Space precludes a complete collection of all the reasons why we think the industry will be larger and more successful a decade hence, so we’ve narrowed the list down to one: In any ten-year period between 1890 and the present, sales of music-related products have increased in real dollar terms, and those predicting doom have always been wrong. The future will be great.

Brian T. Majeski
Editor

email: brian@musictrades.com