

Mike Kovins And Why This Business Is Special

For those who have committed their career to the music industry, there's more to work than just punching the time clock in pursuit of a weekly pay check. There's a special sense of conviction that comes from knowing you're serving a higher purpose—delivering the tools that bring music into the world. This conviction is hard to explain to people who don't share it, which can make the industry feel more like a fraternal organization than a “conventional” business like, say, banking or hardware. It's also why industry “lifers” tend to view outsiders with deep skepticism, and why passions run so high, as regularly reflected by the correspondence in our letters to the editor column. [I doubt that there are independent clothing merchants writing to Women's Wear Daily expressing genuine concern about the teenagers buying their jeans at Wal-Mart without the benefit of proper service.]

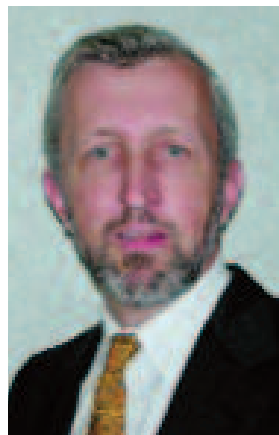
Precisely defining the higher purpose that makes our industry special is difficult. It's a little bit like Louis Armstrong's definition of jazz: “If you don't know it when you hear it, I can't explain it to you.” But for a better understanding, you only have to consider the life and career of Michael Kovins, who died last month after a truly noble nine-year battle against leukemia. Mike's leukemia was a closely guarded secret because he couldn't abide the thought of people worrying about him.

Mike's career trajectory was like many others in the business. A gifted trumpeter in high school, he went on to study at a conservatory, and after casting about for a while after graduation, took a job at a Sam Ash store. His abilities on the retail floor quickly attracted the attention of suppliers, leading to a job offer at M. Hohner. Six years later he joined Unicord, the predecessor of Korg USA. For the past 12 years he served as president of Korg.

With a facile mind, a high energy level, and a commitment to excellence, Mike developed into a skilled businessman. He also had a strong competitive streak, as anyone who ever played golf with him will vouch for. The dramatic growth of Korg USA stands as testimony to these abilities.

Like anyone entrusted with a large enterprise, Mike was focused on sales, market share, and profit. But what really motivated him was the opportunity to serve music and musicians. He had experienced firsthand the thrill and satisfaction that comes from the act of music making, and he viewed Korg as a vehicle to deliver that experience to others.

This deeply felt belief in the power and value of music led Mike to help found the Technology Institute for Music and Education (TI:ME), which promotes the concept of augmenting school music programs with keyboard labs and recording studios. As longtime president of the International Association of Electronic Keyboard Manufacturers (IAEKM), he continu-



ally prodded NAMM, NEMC, and every other organization associated with music education to embrace technology. Some might dismiss these efforts as self-serving, but anyone who knew Mike knew that they sprang from a deep and genuine desire to spread the gift of music.

Mike could be blunt, to the point of intimidating some. He also had little patience for anyone who couldn't fully grasp why the whole music making experience was so vital. (Katherine, his wife of 29 years, was a music teacher and he reserved special contempt for the administrators who didn't appreciate her efforts.) But for those who shared his passion, he was unstinting in his support and friendship. It was this character trait that earned him the deep loyalty and respect of his co-workers. It's no accident that Korg had one of the lowest employee turnover rates of any large company in the industry.

Mike embodied all that is best in our industry. For those who knew him well, he is a genuine friend who will be sorely missed. For those who didn't, his life helps illuminate why this is a special business and why we all care so much.

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Editor

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Get Ready For Austin

NAMM is pulling out all the stops to make the Summer Show in Austin a uniquely satisfying event. The chance to meet with key suppliers, see what's new, and take the pulse of the industry should be reason enough to attend. If you're looking for a few more reasons, consider the planned Town Hall meeting, where retailers will be invited to grill a panel of suppliers and association heads. At a time when there are widespread concerns about the direction of the industry, this is a unique opportunity to be heard and make a difference. Austin bills itself as the live music capital of the country, with plenty of justification. If that's not enough, we'll point out that NAMM and Fender have upped the ante by presenting Jimmy Vaughan in concert.

Don't miss the show. For more details, contact NAMM at www.namm.com or 1-800-767-NAMM.