

Paul Ash (1929-2014)

A Catalyst For Positive Change

Over the past five decades product value and service levels in the music products industry have steadily improved. Some attribute this undeniable progress to large impersonal forces like “technology” and “productivity.” We would argue there is nothing impersonal about progress; it is a by-product of the efforts of talented and insightful individuals. To make the case, we cite the example of Paul Ash, the long-standing president of Sam Ash Music who died suddenly on February 5 at the age of 85. Paul was a quiet man who shunned the spotlight and instinctively deflected praise to his associates. But this unassuming manner masked a keen intellect and relentless work ethic that elevated Sam Ash Music from the front parlor of a Brooklyn apartment into a national chain with 46 stores and more than 1,300 employees. Paul’s legacy, however, extends beyond building an admirable business, serving customers well, and providing gainful employment for a multitude. During his lengthy career, he took music retailing to a higher level, prompting thousands to emulate his innovations, and in the process gave buyers a better experience and advanced the industry.

Would progress have occurred in the absence of Paul Ash? Probably, but that’s like asking if great music would have occurred had the Beatles never gotten together. The fact is, during his years at Sam Ash, Paul was undeniably a catalyst for positive change and thus deserves a share of credit.

Paul Ash was literally born into the music industry. His father Sam had immigrated to the U.S. from Austria in 1907 and made his living as a violinist. Like many musicians, after getting married, Sam decided he needed a more stable income. In 1920, he and his wife Rose opened a small music store in the living room of their Brooklyn apartment. Five years later, Paul was born, and occupied a bedroom behind the store for the first 18 years of his life.

Paul displayed both a talent for retail and an entrepreneurial drive early in life. After his older brother Jerry entered the armed services during World War II, he created a record department. He’d dash home from high school, quickly dispatch his homework, and then work on the record business till 10 P.M. It was a demanding work pace he sustained until the day he died. With the advent of the LP and the emergence of larger record chains, the Ashes left the record business in the early ’50s to concentrate on musical instruments, but Paul

continued his restless search for new opportunity.

By 1956, Sam Ash Music was bursting at the seams in a small Brooklyn storefront. Paul noticed three empty store fronts down the street, and at age 20 negotiated favorable lease terms. Then, without the help of an architect, he totally redesigned the space to create the best music store in Brooklyn. Increased sales and profits from the new location fueled six decades of growth, first with stores on Long Island, then a presence in Manhattan, and later large stores from coast to coast. When he wasn’t responding to customer queries, negotiating with hundreds of suppliers, keeping tabs on inventory, and managing store build-outs, Paul also found time to launch Samson Technologies, a wholesale division that pioneered wireless technology and has evolved into a major industry supplier.

Paul’s commercial success alone would be reason to celebrate. But what made him such an exemplary figure was a lifetime of quiet generosity, compassion, and rock-solid integrity. He liked to say that his overriding goal was to “keep the reputation we inherited from our father...it’s the most important thing we own.” In daily practice this meant treating everyone like a friend. This attitude extended beyond Sam Ash Music. Paul

and his wife Cobi were generous patrons of jazz artists worldwide and supported numerous other charities. As his brother Jerry noted, “Paul didn’t do it because he wanted to have his name on a building or to score points, he just followed his heart.” A standing room only crowd at a memorial service with heartfelt tributes from family members and friends testified to this generosity of spirit.

Progress can be rightly defined as the accumulation of knowledge. By that measure Paul Ash undeniably made a contribution. By pushing Sam Ash Music forward, he found ways to elevate merchandising practices, improve service levels, and ultimately deliver a better consumer experience. Through strength of character, he also inspired legions to follow his example. It’s a legacy that will hopefully inspire imitation.

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Paul Ash, the late president of Sam Ash Music Company.