

The Biggest Thing At NAMM? Five Girls With Guitars

A spontaneous jam session taking place at a guitar exhibit during a NAMM show is about as newsworthy as french fries on the menu at McDonalds, partisan bickering on Capitol Hill, or the sun coming up in the morning for that matter. It's such a commonplace event that it usually goes by with little notice, much less comment. For as long as we can remember, at NAMM shows, at music stores, or anywhere else where there are a lot of guitars on a wall, guys congregate, start plucking away individually, and before too long, start harmonizing on "Hotel California," "Smells Like Teen Spirit," or any number of generational anthems. What made one of these ad hoc ensembles noteworthy at this year's Nashville NAMM was the fact that the participants were five 20-something young women. And instead of tunes by Eric Clapton, or Neil Young, they were having a great time covering Taylor Swift hits. At first, we didn't pay much notice. Then we did a double take as it dawned on us that we were experiencing a "first" that could portend an important industry trend.

Since the Beatle boom began 50 years ago, the guitar has been pretty much a boys' club. There have been some prominent women players of note, but they have always been a distinct minority. And while women represent 51% of the U.S. population, they represent a far smaller fraction of the guitar market. Was the all-girl jam session we witnessed at NAMM a once-in-a-lifetime freak accident signifying nothing? Or did it reflect the emergence of an expanding female market segment? Bold predictions are usually just invitations to be proven wrong, but we'd go so far as to say that girls playing guitars at NAMM suggests a shift in the marketplace.

We'll leave it up to the sociologists to pinpoint the societal changes that may be prompting more women to gravitate towards the guitar. In the meantime, we'll offer up a more limited explanation: Taylor Swift. Accessible three-chord songs have been the foundation of rock 'n' roll, and they have also driven the guitar industry at least since Bill Haley and the Comets, if not before. Like most other rock/pop/country classics, Swift's music is eminently accessible. What's more, the lyrics speak directly to young women. Five girls in Nashville, effortlessly reeling off Swift hits like "Mean," "We're Never Getting Back Together," and "You Belong With Me,"

lend some credence to this observation.

Since the financial meltdown in 2008, there has been a non-stop conversation about the economy, its sluggishness, and its impact on music sales. Like every other business selling discretionary, deferrable products, our industry has felt the brunt of the downturn. However, music sales have never been entirely captive to the nation's economic health; there have been numerous periods in the past where, thanks to technology, musical trends, and tastes, sales have boomed at times when the result of the economy was struggling.



1935 was arguably one of the bleakest years in U.S. economic history, with unemployment at 26%, breadlines on the streets, and widespread despair. Yet that year Hammond Organ introduced the first commercially available electric musical instrument, and experienced meteoric growth. In 1969, the Vietnam war was intensifying and the economy was slowing down, but the managements at Gibson and Fender hardly noticed: They were too busy trying to fill back-orders for a generation that had been galvanized by the "Summer of Love" and Woodstock. Soaring energy prices sent the economy into the tank in 1974, but the home organ industry posted record sales that year: Apparently, slick electronic technology and the promise of learning to play quickly was enough to get hard pressed consumers to spend.

The U.S. Census reports that the 10-24-year-old age group numbers about 63 million. At present, the guitar industry does a credible job reaching the 50% of that group with XY chromosomes. If five girls jamming at NAMM really signifies a new market segment, and the industry is poised to make meaningful inroads with the other 50%, retailers and manufacturers alike would be too busy to worry about the economy. And one more thing: Every major trend starts small. Let's hope this one-time event signifies something bigger.

Brian T. Majeski

Editor

brian@musictrades.com