

# IKUTARO KAKEHASHI, AN INSPIRED LIFE

**D**uring his six-decade career, Ikutaro Kakehashi was often referred to as a “visionary” due to his remarkable skill pushing the boundaries of technology. Whether it was creating the first programmable rhythm machine, developing a touch-sensitive keyboard for digital pianos, or paving the way for the use of computers in music by co-authoring the MIDI standard and developing the MPU-401 computer interface, he ranks as one of the most consequential pioneers in electronic music history. However, technical prowess was only one of his talents. His salesmanship, inspirational leadership, and pragmatism also fueled his amazing rise from abject poverty to the pinnacle of success.

Kakehashi, who died last month, defied the stereotype of the socially awkward engineer. He could read a schematic and was proficient in numerous programming languages, but he could also communicate the most complicated concepts with a pithy wit that transcended linguistic and cultural differences. These persuasive skills enabled him to secure financing for Ace-Tone, and later for Roland Corporation; inspire thousands of employees; and convince consumers worldwide to buy the products he created. They also proved invaluable in establishing MIDI. Although Dave Smith, founder of Sequential Circuits, was the first to envision the universal instrument interface, it fell to Kakehashi to convince competing manufacturers to agree upon a standard, and make it a practical reality.

His communication skills were augmented by a level of tenacity that bordered on the superhuman. Maybe it was the product of learning to survive in the ruins of post-World War II Japan, where he pushed a plow in exchange for a daily ration of rice, or maybe it was in his DNA. Regardless, he persevered in the face of daunting odds. Like in 1979, when Brodr Jorgensen, Roland’s largest customer and distributor for much of Europe, abruptly went bust. Between lost revenues and a major write-off, the Brodr Jorgensen collapse, on paper at least, rendered Roland bankrupt. Had it not been for Kakehashi’s herculean efforts rebuilding a distribution network and securing forbearance from creditors, Roland surely would have failed. Age and failing health had no adverse effect on his tenacity, as evidenced by the launch of his latest venture four years ago, ATV Corporation. As he explained earlier this year, “I have work left to do.”

Finally, a pragmatic nature kept him focused on products that were both technically and commercially feasible, reflected by the fact that Roland Corporation turned a profit in its first year.



*John F. Majeski, Ikutaro Kakehashi, Dennis Houlihan, then president of Roland US, Brian Majeski.*

As he liked to remind his colleagues, “Engineers who set out to make ‘dream product’ usually make ‘nightmare product.’”

These insights into a remarkable character were gleaned some years ago, when Kakehashi was my house guest. He had a reverence for Laurens Hammond, inventor of Hammond organ, and was en route to paying his respects at Hammond’s gravesite in nearby Connecticut. It was a Hammond organ on the radio that first sparked his interest in music, and he saw Laurens Hammond as both the father of the electronic music industry, and the inspiration for his career. My late father and predecessor at *Music Trades*, John Majeski Jr., had had some personal contact with Hammond, and Kakehashi was keenly interested in any anecdotes he could share. The stories about Laurens Hammond proved disappointing—he was imposing, aloof, and responded to inquiries with either a distracted stare or a monosyllabic answer. But the long evening together was an education, as Kakehashi, with his special brand of humor, explained the hardships of post-war Japan, the obstacles to industry collaboration, and musicians’ appetite for innovation.

Outwardly, Kakehashi and Hammond couldn’t have been more different. Where Hammond grew up in privilege, dividing his childhood between Lake Forest, Illinois and Geneva, Switzerland, Kakehashi lived a life of acute privation, orphaned at two and shuttled between foster parents in war-torn Japan. Hammond breezed through Cornell University, while Kakehashi taught himself engineering during the two years he spent in a sanitarium recovering from tuberculosis. Yet in important respects their careers followed similar trajectories. Hammond achieved early success with an innovative electric clock, but saw his business collapse in 1930, a victim of the Depression and inexpensive knock-offs. Kakehashi’s first venture, Ace-Tone, also failed due to the lapses of his partners. Just as Hammond shook off his first failure, using his clock motor technology to develop the tone wheel that powered the Hammond Organ, Kakehashi applied lessons learned at Ace-Tone to launch Roland. Both had that rare gift for finding the commercial sweet spot, developing products that had broad appeal and could be profitably produced. They also achieved considerable success, in the case of Kakehashi, building Roland into an industry-leading enterprise.

Kakehashi collected a Technical Grammy for his work developing the MIDI standard, a lengthy list of honorary doctorates from esteemed educational institutions, and the unqualified respect of colleagues and even competitors around the world. But more than anything else, I think he would like to be remembered as Laurens Hammond’s successor. His lengthy list of “firsts” and exceptional commercial success unquestionably qualify him for that designation. And just as Hammond inspired Kakehashi, I suspect that there will be future entrepreneurs who cite Kakehashi as their inspiration.

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