

A Biblical Explanation Of Industry R&D

For the better part of a century, the flat top, steel stringed acoustic guitar, as refined by the Martin Guitar Company, has been deeply woven into the world's musical culture. A list of the inspired music that's been recorded or performed on these instruments would fill volumes. They are universally loved, their tonal character has been proven to stir the heart and soul, and at the risk of using a tired cliché, they could even be called iconic. Why then would anyone waste time trying to improve something that many already consider perfect?

Answers to that question are offered up in articles in this issue about two companies that are introducing a new take on the much beloved flat top acoustic. Taylor Guitars has unveiled a new bracing pattern that represents a sharp break with tradition, while the people making Breedlove and Bedell guitars have adopted a new approach to the production process. Taylor's Andy Powers says the new bracing pattern was inspired by a desire to create an instrument better suited for a musical environment populated by electronic instruments and vocalists using Auto-Tune. Tom Bedell contends that a better understanding of the inherent nature of wood led him to rethink long-held assumptions about guitar building. Both are eminently plausible arguments that will be put to a critical test in the months ahead when players make purchasing decisions.

However, there's more at work here than just two businesses striving to differentiate their product in the hope of securing market share. This refusal to let the status quo stand speaks to something deep in the human psyche. Maybe it has to do with the perpetual state of discontent that prompts some to never leave well enough alone. There's a sizable amount of ego involved as well: the belief that "I" have a better way is a powerful motivator. Wherever it springs from, it's certainly not a new phenomenon. Consider the story of Adam and Eve. They were given a Paradise—comfort, abundance, and eternal life—but even that wasn't enough to placate their dissatisfaction. They couldn't help themselves and they reached for more. You don't have to be a Fundamentalist to appreciate this insight into human character.

This human trait will be on prominent display at the

NAMM Show where there will be close to 2,000 companies, most of which will be offering "new and improved" products. It's easy to make fun of the public relations hyperbole that surrounds many of these product launches. Is another distortion pedal really going to "change the world?" Will the redesign of a 75-year-old tube amp "redefine the definition of great tone for generations to come?" Can the latest piece of software really turn any talentless clod into another Quincy Jones? But, if you strip away the over-inflated claims and disregard some of the truly dumb new products, it's hard not to see something wonderful at work here.

From one year to the next, the strident claims of "revolutionary," "innovative," and "unprecedented," don't always square with the reality of incremental product improvements. There will be a lot of great stuff on display in Anaheim this year, but it's not as if last year's product offering was so woefully inadequate. Over time, though, these incremental improvements, driven by human restlessness, really add up, and enhance the human experience.



Our memories tend to be short. What is initially hailed as a great innovation quickly becomes seen as commonplace, and eventually is taken for granted as a basic necessity, like air. Or broadband, once viewed as a marvel, now considered a basic human right. Within the music industry, extremely functional guitars for \$200, 64-note polyphonic keyboards for about the same price, and a multi-track recording app for \$4.99 are just a few of the products that not too long ago inspired wonder and awe, and are now greeted with a yawn. This quest for improvement has been evident in the distribution channel as well. While it's commonplace to bemoan the margin compression that has taken place at retail, it's really just a reflection of improved efficiencies, moving goods into the hands of the public.

Just as Adam and Eve's discontent came with some adverse consequences, there are also downsides to the contemporary quest for continual improvement. More precisely, it creates a pretty unforgiving environment for those who fail to keep up. Much has been written about the need to manage change in a rapidly evolving world and the dire consequences of getting passed by. But for the moment, we'll put those musings aside to celebrate the ingenuity that underpins the tremendous array of products on display in Anaheim. The world would be a lot less interesting without it.

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