

The Individual's Vital Role

Much has changed in the music industry over the past few decades. However, for all the change that has transpired, there is at least one constant: the vital importance of creative individuals who can harness new technologies. Since *Music Trades* began publishing in 1890, improved technology has been the driving force behind virtually every major advancement in industry fortunes. And behind every technological breakthrough has been at least one inspired and imaginative individual. Elsewhere in this issue, an interview with guitar pioneer Les Paul graphically illustrates our collective debt, as an industry, to these visionary individuals.

In operating a business, most of us tend to look backwards to past performance for guidance in dealing with new challenges. The industry is fortunate that exceptional individuals like Les Paul did not let a reverence for precedent interfere with their exploration of new frontiers. In the late forties, Les Paul was one of a handful of creative inventors that included Leo Fender, who was convinced that the electric guitar was the way of the future. Les's commitment to the electric guitar was not based on reams of market data or elaborate research. Rather, it was based on his successful experiences as a musician and the opinions expressed by his colleagues.

A lack of hard data on the market potential of the electric guitar did not bother Les, but it certainly unnerved most of the industry's guitar executives. The electric guitar is such a fixture in the industry today that it is hard to imagine that it was ever very controversial. However, with no exceptions, the instrument was initially dismissed as "a passing fad" by virtually every major manufacturer.

Fortunately for The Gibson Company, Les was both compelling and persistent, and he eventually persuaded Gibson to ignore the past and give the new idea a try. The rest is history: The electric guitar went on to become a mainstay of the music industry, benefiting thousands of retailers and literally millions of musicians worldwide.

Products and technologies have changed radically over the years, but the inventive spirit and commitment to an idea that galvanized Les Paul is still very much with us. A recent illustration of this creativity can be found in the Kashio brothers, founders of

Casio Electronics. After achieving international success building calculators and watches, the Kashios hit upon the idea of utilizing advanced electronic technology to produce low-priced portable keyboards.

In 1980, Casio unveiled two portable keyboards that were generally dismissed by the music industry. The lackluster sales performance of the company's first product offerings reinforced the prevailing industry sentiment that "portable keyboards have a limited future." History once again contradicted the experts as portable went on to become one of the greatest successes in music industry history.

Nature tends to dispense great talent sparingly. Consequently, for every inventor like Les Paul who struck it big, there are usually hundreds who strike out. In the early stages of development, it is difficult to predict which ideas will fly which will crash. Over the years, millions of dollars have been dissipated on "great ideas" that ultimately proved to be totally unworkable. Conversely, some of the truly lasting and significant breakthroughs were initially achieved in obscurity without any major funding.

As an art form, music stimulates great passion and commitment. Consequently, it is a safe bet that our industry will continue to attract creative and determined individuals who are dedicated to furthering the art form by developing new tools. Unfortunately, there are no ready guidelines for positively identifying these gifted individuals. We can only hope that they are out there toiling away and that we will be able to recognize their brilliance at the appropriate moment.

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