

# Music Trades At 100

Exactly 100 years ago, *The Music Trades* magazine was launched as the first publication devoted exclusively to the musical instrument industry. On the editorial page of the first issue, founder John C. Freund wrote:

*"Some years ago, I saw that the music trades of this country had entirely outgrown the representation accorded them by the musical papers, and I determined to start a paper in the interests of all those who were engaged in the manufacture or sale of music and musical instruments generally. I have now returned to my original project of making a purely trade paper and so have started 'The Music Trades,' which will be devoted exclusively to all such matters as are of interest to music publishers and musical instrument makers and dealers. In short, the new paper will use its utmost endeavor to so worthily represent the industries after which it is named, as to enable all engaged in them, without exception, not merely to support it, but to most heartily endorse it."*

Freund's fledgling venture represented a radical departure from existing practices of the day. Specialized industry publications are commonplace today; however, in 1890 they were still something of a novelty. Before the founding of *Music Trades*, over two dozen trade and general interest publications had provided marginal service to the music industry by combining with other fields. "*The Musical Courier Extra & Sewing Machine Gazette*," as a typical example, sought advertising from concert artists, music schools, and musical instrument manufacturers, as well as sewing machine manufacturers and wholesalers. Its editorial content ran the gamut from concert reviews to sewing tips. A number of other music publications were secretly funded by manufacturers to attempt to discredit competition. Blackmail was also a common practice, and many early publishers were successfully prosecuted and served jail terms.

For the past century, and three generations of my family, *The Music Trades* has endeavored to fulfill Freund's credo, "To worthily represent the industries after which it was named." One measure of success in fulfilling these ideals lies in the value readers continue to place on *The Music Trades*. Since our inception, we have always merited a paid audience of interested subscribers.

Effectively representing the music industries for the past century has required a high degree of flexibility and a willingness to embrace change. The 2,794 back issues of *Music Trades* provide a rich and detailed chronicle of the ceaseless change that has characterized the industry's evolution. Buffeted by abrupt shifts in musical fashion, technological advances, and changing economic conditions, the industry has seemingly undergone a complete metamorphosis at least every 20 years.

In 1890, when the first issue of *Music Trades* was released, the Union consisted of 38 states, and 65% of the 62 million American citizens lived on a farm or in a rural area. The reed organ represented the mainstay of the industry, with an estimated 70,000 sold annually. Like so many products, however, the reed organ's primacy was short lived. Thanks to vastly improved manufacturing methods that halved selling prices, the piano became the home keyboard instrument of

choice by 1895.

In 1905, The Edison Phonograph Company added a lucrative new facet to the industry, introducing a 65 lb. "portable" phonograph that retailed for a mere \$22.95. Backed by a \$500,000 ad budget, phonograph sales took off, enriching thousands of music retailers. Two years later, eight leading player piano makers established a standardized player piano roll configuration, and overnight the player piano emerged as the music retailer's most profitable item. By the mid-twenties, however, the lush times in phonographs and players had passed. Players were rendered obsolete by the radio, and competition from large department stores had taken much of the profit out of phonograph sales.

During the first two decades of the century, *Music Trades* reported that there were some 20,000 local bands, funded by streetcar companies. By the late twenties, with the demise of the streetcar imminent, band instrument makers were confronted with the possibility of losing the majority of their market. Proving that adversity is the mother of invention, a few far-sighted individuals rallied together to launch what would become the school band movement.

For much of the forties and fifties, the accordion was a mainstay of the industry, and some 250,000 were sold each year. However, with the advent of Elvis and rock and roll in the late fifties, the accordion was doomed, and the guitar emerged as the primary instrument of popular music.

The fifties also saw the emergence of the home organ as an important factor in the industry. For nearly 25 years, home organs sales enjoyed torrid growth. By 1980, however, organ sales had peaked and began a long, painful downward slide.

Most recently, microprocessors have had a profound effect on the industry, creating an entirely new family of keyboard instruments and signal processing equipment. Still in their infancy, the ultimate effect of these products remains to be seen.

The events briefly outlined above illustrate just a few of the countless changes that have transformed the industry over the past century. Unfortunately, for those on the wrong side of the trend, abrupt change has resulted in serious personal hardship ranging from losses to bankruptcy. Our columns are filled with obituaries of all the enterprises that failed to react to changing markets.

Throughout all the upheavals, though, the music industry has never lost its vibrancy, because aside from being a business, it serves one of mankind's oldest social needs and institutions: music. The future shape of the industry is impossible to predict. However, as long as music remains an integral part of our culture, the industry's future is secure, and opportunity awaits for those endowed with resourcefulness, tenacity, and a commitment to serving the musical world.

Brian T. Majeski  
Editor

*To celebrate 100 years of continuous publication, The Music Trades will publish a special 13th issue, chronicling the evolution of the music industry in America. The issue will be released in the fall of 1990, and more details will be announced in the coming months.*