

Could We Survive With Government Help?

With any group of small business owner operators, like the majority of music industry members, government bashing is a favorite pastime. Get a group of entrepreneurs together in the same room, and after a while the stories inevitably start to flow about idiotic zoning ordinances, corrupt local politicians, exorbitant taxes, intrusive and ineffectual regulations, not to mention shameful waste. When the time comes to assess the Federal government, the intensity ratchets up a notch or two. Heated denunciations of the Savings & Loan debacle, ridiculous agricultural supports, \$600 toilet seats for the Navy, the IRS, the EPA, the Fed, the DEA, Irangate, "Kitegate," and all those other "gates" predictably follow.

Yet ironically, when our industry associations begin looking for ways to increase the number of music makers, the first suggestion is always, "Let's get local and state governments and the Fed to provide money and moral support for music programs. Then our problems will be solved." Calls for government intervention are nothing new. Back in the early '20s player piano makers introduced legislation in several state senates that would have mandated a player piano for every 200 students. Talking machine makers pushed a similar program in the '30s, and in the intervening 60 years the columns of *Music Trades* have been filled with impassioned pleas for government "support of music."

Amidst all these cries for government help, no one ever seems to ask, "What can government really do for our industry?" If you assess how state and federal governments have tackled other issues, the evidence at hand is not encouraging. Take the question of poverty. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson declared "War on Poverty." Twenty-two years and several hundreds of billions of dollars later, however, poverty is as much a problem as it ever was, but there has been a radical increase in the number of unwed teen mothers and homeless, along with the complete collapse of inner cities across the country. Closer to home, look at the situation with education. According to the current census, since 1980 the total public school population has increased by just 2%, yet outlays on education have increased at more than 2.5 times the annual inflation rate while student performance has continued to decline. Looking at these and countless scenarios, we as an industry might do well to ask, "Could we actually survive a heavy dose of governmental support?"

NAMM is currently lobbying to increase support for school music at local, state, and federal levels. The above commentary is not meant as a criticism of these efforts, but rather as an attempt to encourage the industry to look beyond governments as a means to build the market. School music programs have benefited every segment of the industry over the past 70 years, and they are unquestionably deserving of support. However, those who see increased government support of school programs as a means to rekindle industry growth are going to be sadly disappointed.

Firstly, all indications are that there is very little money to be had from any level of government to fund anything new. Secondly, even if the money was there, would it make a difference? The question is highly debatable. But as the industry wrestles with the daunting challenge of how to create a greater public interest in making music, this focus on government aid obscures a basic fact: As an industry, we are ultimately responsible for our destiny. In other words, if we are to grow, we have to look inward and determine how we can better serve the needs of our customers, what problems are going unsolved, and what new opportunities are not being tapped. Answers to these questions will provide growth in a way that no amount of government aid can.

Dealing with the gritty aspects of running a business more effectively, or offering better products and services, is a tough proposition that requires lots of time and effort. Sitting around hoping for some enormous government largesse is comforting because it shifts these heavy responsibilities to someone else. Every great breakthrough in the music industry, not to mention other industries, was the result of someone taking initiative and responsibility. To think otherwise is wishful thinking. And, as the old saying goes, "He who lives on hope, dies fasting."

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