



EDITORIAL

LIKE SELLING TENNIS RACQUETS WITH NO TENNIS COURTS?

AS WE NOTE ELSEWHERE IN THIS ISSUE, the exuberant growth that characterized the guitar industry for much of the past decade has abruptly vanished, leaving manufacturers and retailers baffled and searching for some answers. In an ideal world, everything would go up forever, and there would be no disappointing quarters; however, sometimes by prompting some sober reflection, a business slowdown can be a blessing in disguise. The case study books are full of stories about industries that retooled after brushes with adversity and emerged stronger than ever. It's hoped that this will be the case in the guitar business.

A recurrent theme that emerges in our coverage of the guitar industry is that a lackluster popular music scene is having a negative effect on store traffic and sales. There is a lot of truth to this. Unfortunately, the direction of popular music is beyond the control of anyone...record execs, politicians, Hollywood, and the comparatively puny music products industry...so there isn't much to be done about the problem. This is not to say that we have no control over our destiny.

Between 1978 and 1983 U.S. guitar sales hit the skids, dropping by nearly 40%. The rise of disco and "techno" music certainly contributed to the sales decline, but, in retrospect, the industry deserves some of the blame. During those years ill guided manufacturers relentlessly jacked up prices while reducing quality on some of the industry's best selling products. The state of retail merchandising at that time also left a lot to be desired. Many of the retailers who got their start catering to rock-and-rollers in the late '60s weren't prepared to handle a more mainstream customer as the baby boomers grew up. Based on our photo files, a lot of the stores of the period looked like dumpy head shops. Overpriced products and uninviting stores are two pretty powerful ways to screw up a market.

Fortunately, the industry has done an admirable job in correcting these problems. Competition has pushed quality and value standards in guitar manu-

facturing to all-time highs. Notwithstanding the astronomical prices paid for vintage guitars, the quality of current models, at every price point, is unprecedented. On the retail level, remarkable strides have also been made in store design, marketing, and merchandising. As documented in our pages, the industry has benefited from scores of sparkling retail showplaces across the country. So, what's left to be done?

We would suggest that one important area the industry has overlooked is providing venues for kids to play their guitars. Just as the availability of tennis courts helps the sale of tennis racquets, it only stands to reason that opportunities to play would stimulate guitar sales. In our Retail Update section, we cover the 16th annual "Stairway to Stardom," sponsored by Skip's Music of Sacramento, California. This tremendously successful eight-week program groups kids with comparable skill and musical tastes together in bands, where they rehearse and ultimately perform. Skip Maggiora, who created the program, sums it up succinctly: "If you give them the chance to experience the excitement of playing, the sales will take care of themselves."

We live in a vast country with 260 million residents, so the experience in a single market like Sacramento may not transfer well nationwide. But if manufacturers and retailers applied themselves to the task of "giving kids the chance to experience the excitement of playing," it's possible that the industry's sales woes could quickly disappear.

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