

LESSONS LEARNED | BY GERSON ROSENBLOOM

# The Next Big Thing

For anyone who has been in the music products industry for some time, there is a truth born out by history that is somewhat frustrating. Many of our greatest successes and most dramatic spikes in business have been caused by factors outside of our own control. They are unpredictable and unanticipated, and therefore we are often ill-prepared when they happen. This article explores some of that history and the lessons we've learned from it.



What do Arthur Godfrey, the Beatles, Billy Redden, and Van Halen have in common? Each of them drove significant business to our industry ... each of them caught us by surprise. In the 1950s, the wildly popular television entertainer, Arthur Godfrey, played his ukulele and even gave a few on-air uke lessons. That drove sales of millions of ukuleles. And no one saw it coming.

On Feb. 9, 1964, the Beatles made their first U.S. appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. I clearly remember the next day. It was a day off school for parent-teacher conferences, and so I went to work at Medley Music with my parents. As we approached the store an hour before opening, there were already people queued up waiting to come in and buy guitars. We literally sold every electric guitar in the place within the first couple of hours, and we played catch-up for years as manufacturers struggled to meet the sudden demand.

No one saw it coming.

On July 30, 1972, "Deliverance" hit movie theaters. Billy Redden's character, Lonnie, delivered a performance of "Dueling Banjos" (opposite actor Ronny Cox on guitar) that became a smash hit and remained near the top

of the charts for four weeks. The resulting demand for banjos became one more example of an industry not ready for the surge. And, again, no one saw it coming.

In the early 1980s, Van Halen released "Jump" and the simple synth anthem took the market by storm. The electronic sounds that had previously been the domain of avant garde music be-

came mainstream, thanks to the infamous eleven-chord vamp. As a result, sales of the Oberheim OBXa (that it was recorded on) and other synthesizers of the time (including the legendary DX7) really took off. This may be the first example of products where supply was adequate, but dealer knowledge was often the roadblock. Those of us fortunate enough to have taken the time to learn the new technology were rewarded with torrid sales growth in the category.

Gene Joly, former Guitar Center executive and past NAMM Board member, said he recalls this period fondly, as well as the subsequent times that followed when MIDI began to take hold.

"I clearly remember the boom in synthesizers, samplers and sound modules after the first MIDI synths were shipped in the summer of 1983 ... roughly 50 percent per year sales increases from 1984-89."

Joly was another one of the pioneers who was willing to learn the new technologies. The rewards he reaped are obvious.

The common thread through all of this is that the entertainment industry drove these big boons for our industry. We may have built the products, but the promotional impetus for the sales growth each time came from outside our sphere of influence.

**Don't let the MIDI train pass your store by — jump aboard now**