

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

The Music Man

Zeb Billings passed away Dec. 6, 2010, in Naples, Fla., after a long struggle with congestive heart failure. He was 80. Too young to fight in WWII but very talented with the tenor saxophone, he formed a dance band and became a 13-year-old celebrity in his hometown of Milwaukee.

His first band had 11 pieces — 10 guys named Bob and him. By the time he was 30, he had a popular TV show and the largest piano and organ dealership in Wisconsin. By 35, he had established a successful music publishing company. He pioneered multimedia instruction by convincing Bell & Howell to produce a cassette player with pitch control and then persuaded leading organ manufacturers, including Hammond, Wurlitzer and Lowrey, to build them into their instruments. When organs acquired automatic chord features, he created the first big-note E-Z Play Speed Music books.

As the organ industry faded, he changed his focus to creating interactive children's books that reproduced musical sounds. The first book had a color-coded keyboard mounted below easy transcriptions of children's songs. The second generation used synthesized barnyard animal sounds, and later versions used sampled sounds of cartoon characters under licenses from Warner Bros., Disney and Sesame Street. In the early 1990s, he sold his firm to industry giants Western Publishing (Golden Books) and Hal Leonard.

A fine musician, he chose the path of business rather than performance. While he wrote and arranged songs until the very end and loved to sit in with small jazz groups, he never worked as a musician after he opened his first piano store in 1956.

In retirement, he organized several jazz vocal groups and recorded two fine CDs, but it was more hobby than business, and many of the performances were for charity. Just weeks before his passing, he completed 25 vocal arrangements and recruited musicians for a new group.

This brief résumé, while chronicling his career, misses the essence of the man. Zeb Billings believed that everyone had a natural inclination to make music. Anyone who came near him

was encouraged to play or sing. If you couldn't do either, he would hand you a set of maracas or a tambourine. If he had just written a song, he would ask you to write lyrics. I probably became a bass player because Dad was always looking for sidemen.

When he decided to produce a hit TV show, he formed a house band from his buddies and the salesmen who worked for him. Guest artists were teachers and students from the store or any celebrity who happened to be passing through Milwaukee.

When he launched his publishing company, some of those same teachers became writers and arrangers. A few are still writing and arranging today. One of them, Keith Mardak, went on to make Hal Leonard the largest print music publisher in the world. Keith and Dad, though competitive rivals for a time, remained friends. Keith sent a wonderful condolence note that referred to Dad as his "mentor."

Keith wasn't the only industry titan to be touched by Dad's influence. In the days following his demise, I heard from Bob Jones and Dennis Houlihan, both of whom referred to Dad as their hero, and from Ikutaro Kakehashi, who praised Dad's creativity.

Many people who worked for Dad went on to great success, and all considered their time with him defining. Art Jensen



**Remembering
Zeb Billings — industry
pioneer, father and
ambassador of
music making**

left to start Jensen Publications, Bob Zenoni started Uncle Bob's Music Center, Lane Zastrow formed Heritage Guitar and Chuck Faas went on to purchase Guild Guitar and Randall Amplifier.

And there were many others. When I bought back the retail store he had sold 18 years earlier, almost all my competitors had worked for Dad. They adored him but resented me (until I left town, of course).

There is a reason why even people he'd fired loved him and their time working with him. He was usually the best musician and the smartest, most creative guy in the room, but also the kindest, gentlest and most generous. He focused on giving the spotlight to others. Whether it was musicians, writers, salesmen, teachers or a guy he'd just met at the first tee, he was always praising and encouraging. I never heard him say a bad word about anyone.

He had an interesting duality to his music. Everything he wrote or arranged for his groups was complex, sophisticated and relatively difficult. But everything he produced for the public, from his original organ course to the first E-Z Play Speed Music books to the Sound Story books, was aimed at making music easy and accessible for everyone.

Here are two short stories no one knows that give a measure of the man.

I remember closing the store on a Saturday during Christmas season when I was about 12. Dad told me to go to the car, and he went back to talk with one of the teachers who was also leaving work. After a moment, Dad took out his wallet and gave the man a \$20 bill (about \$100 today). When I asked what happened, Dad said, "Oh, he's had a little trouble with drinking, but he is doing really good now." I learned years later the man had been his high school band teacher. He taught at the store for many more years.

The second story is about a girl singer. Parties at our house inevitably turned into jam sessions. When I was a teenager and gigging myself, I really started to appreciate them. One night, a young girl sat in and just bombed. The other musicians dissed her, and she moved off to a corner to become invisible. Dad discretely went to her and said, "Honey, you need to get a 3 by 5 card and write down your 10 best songs and your keys. Keep it in your purse, and when you

call your tune, also call your key. You have a great voice, but you were just in the wrong key tonight."

Being the son of celebrity has its own set of challenges. Doors open and opportunities present. But life in the shadow of a great man can make it hard for a young man to find his own identity. Only in later life do

we realize that we were not standing in his shadow. We are standing on his shoulders.

Rest in peace, Zeb Billings. The world is a better place, and has more music in it, because you were here. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Fla. He has set up a tribute to his father at zebbillings.shutterfly.com.

Kyser + Klassics

K-Lever

Series of Partial Capos

Alternate guitar tunings are catching on fast. That's why we decided to go all out and bring you four new tools to create sounds you never thought possible. The K-lever is a partial capo with the ability to press down the uncapoed string/strings whenever you want. All you have to do is press the lever... It's just that easy.

Dbl Drop D Open G (DADGAD) Short-Cut Drop D

What's Your Color?
WWW.KYSERMUSICAL.COM