

Ikutaro Kakehashi >

Who's the Boss?

The Roland Corporation in Australia recently marked its 25th Anniversary in April with a huge weekend of celebrations in Sydney which were hooked on to the 2001 product releases. An event of such importance brought the company's founder, Mr Ikutaro Kakehashi to our shores. He has much in common with musicians everywhere as it was in a humble garage where he and a few others got together to build Roland's first rhythm machine and a guitar amplifier. Australian Musician's Rob Walker spoke to Mr Kakehashi during his recent visit about yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Ikutaro Kakehashi came from humble beginnings in much the same way as did his products. Born in 1930, he was orphaned by the age of two and left in the care of his grandparents until, at age fifteen, they too had passed on, and he was left to his own devices in a country decimated by World War II. Four years later he contracted tuberculosis and was confined to a sanatorium for four years, where at that time, fewer than one in four survived. It was here that Mr. K (as he is affectionately known all over the world) learnt the rudiments of English, the basic principles of electronics and where he studied world history. It was shortly after his recovery that he made a living repairing watches, and from there, moved to radios, both skills learnt from trial and error.

From listening to the radios he built from old parts he developed a love of music, and started making crude musical instruments. He began working on an electronic organ while running his radio shop in the day. But parts were rare and he was forced to narrow his horizons to building rhythm units. By 1969 he was involved in a team which built Hammond's first "easy-play" single-manual organ. In 1972 Roland was officially born. Why the name "Roland"? – Mr K always had the world market in mind and wanted a western name. It was while browsing through a phone book in English that he landed on Roland and the brand was born. He didn't think at the time that the Japanese language had no "L", and Roland employees in Japan still have to get coached in its pronunciation. But whilst pronunciation may be a problem, musicians have no problem recognising Roland as being synonymous with innovative and musician-friendly products.

Australia is close to Mr. K's heart, as this was the first country in which Roland established a joint venture company in 1976. The US was 2 years later, and today 23 joint venture companies world-wide plus 7 joint

venture companies in Japan are established. "Australia is a very interesting country, there is virtually no manufacturing, so every product here starts on the same footing. It is a very interesting test market. The world is very interested in what happens in Australia in the music products market." He explained.

Roland's success has a close relationship with the musicians it exists for.

Roland's R & D has always closely involved musicians. "I am not a musician myself", laments Mr. K, "so I had to always ask for their opinion. The main requirement from musicians is that the equipment is easy to use. Simple single function operation is our feedback. Our customer is the musician, we must discuss our R&D with musicians. Without such connections it is impossible to develop new instruments which succeed in the market."

Fortunately for musicians, the innovations will keep coming according to Mr. K. "I don't think technology in music will slow down. Today, many technologies are computer based, and computer technology continues to change very rapidly. Music technology very much depends on the computer industry, many of the same components are involved. We have to look at things in six-month blocks to keep up with developments in computers. It's not such an easy time. New interfaces and new media like CDR make things easier, and therefore it is likely that more products will come. The capacity of media like CDR is 500 times what the floppy disk was. This brings much opportunity to the music industry. Ten years ago recording devices came from audio companies. But now recording devices come from music companies. We listen to what our musicians need in a device. It is easier for musicians today. More and more, recording equipment will be a part of the music industry."

Mr. K is most enthusiastic about Roland's latest technology. "We have just released new technology called "Vari-phrase". This is a most beautiful technology in my opinion, because it can be used to manipulate the human voice. The musician can control pitch, duration, attack, all kinds of expression. The human voice is the most perfect instrument, and technology has not been able to control this in real time. But now with vari-phrase we can divide pitch, duration and format real time, then edit, then assemble – this is vari-phrase technology. This will increase the quality of music created by musicians. This technology will save musicians time and give more time to create music and maximize their ability."

Ikutaro Kakehashi is well-known for his home spun wisdom all over the world. To conclude, one such pearl is well worth the paper it is written upon. "Over 20 years we developed hardware, then over the last 10 years software was developed to interface with the hardware and is now working well together – in amongst this we need education of course, but in between software and hardware we are missing "art-ware" our challenge is to develop "art-ware". Art ware is very difficult to explain to computer people – this is our challenge"

