Akio Morita – Made in Japan

The recent and sad passing of Sony founder, Akio Morita, saw the loss of one of the greatest innovators and visionaries in the world of audio. From humble beginnings, Sony, under Akio’s leadership, has grown to be one of the world’s true corporate giants, and there’s hardly a studio on the planet that doesn’t possess Sony equipment – at the very least a PlayStation! Over the years various items of Sony equipment have become the defacto standard in recording, post pro, MI, and broadcast. It’s worth noting some of the contributions he and his company have made to the music industry.

My first example is quite recent, and rather than demonstrating Sony’s uncanny prescience (which it showed with the introduction of the likes of the transistor radio and walkman, but more on that later), it shows how flexible the company is in its thinking. In 1987 the DAT recorder was introduced to the market. Sony optimistically expected it would replace Philips’ Compact Cassette. But the major record labels saw DAT as a threat since consumers could make perfect CD and DAT duplicates. The record industry flexed its considerable legal muscle and blocked the wide introduction of the DAT on grounds that it would have a catastrophic effect on copyright ownership. The legal wrangling prevented major investment in the development of low cost DAT recorders and players. So Sony redesigned the unit and turned it into a professional product. (It’s also worth noting that the opposition to the DAT format was led by record giant, CBS. The consumer DAT battle may have been won by CBS, but Sony won the corporate war. CBS was subsequently bought by Sony Music)

On the other hand, another digital delivery system developed by Sony in association with Philips was embraced wholeheartedly by the record industry. The Compact Disc was introduced at the 1977 Tokyo Audio Fair. Japanese manufacturers flooded the market with players which quickly dropped in price. This new technology gave the consumer a reason to rebuild their music collections, and record labels to re-release on CD every imaginable recording of any significance. The consequence of this was a revitalisation of a world wide record industry. The 25 to 45 year old audience that the record companies had just about written off returned to the record stores to buy CD reissues of the music of their youth.

Even more recently, the fate of another Sony consumer digital delivery medium wasn’t (unlike CD) met with open arms. Minidisc was designed and released by Sony 1993 to offer the same functionality as CD in a more compact format. [A compact compact disc? I’m surprised they didn’t call it CCD. When it was released that would’ve really confused the market, CCD v CCD – GS] A compression algorithm (called ATRAC or Adaptive Transform Acoustic Coding) was devised to pull off this digital sleight of hand. The advantages of Minidisc were many: it was smaller, with its casing it was robust; being a magneto-optical medium it was less susceptible to skipping. MD tracks could be titled in a table of contents; it had the capacity to be recordable; and Sony saw it usurping the role of the humble and out dated music cassette. Initially the consumer was indifferent. Sony continue to push the MD as a consumer format and inroads have been made, particularly as a Walkman/Discman replacement, but it is in the professional sphere that the Minidisc has gained most acceptance. Minidisc audio may be compressed but the convenience of the format meant broadcast and theatre have taken on MD, while, increasingly, recording studios will give their staff a portable MD recorder each to conveniently demo any on-going project.

Currently Sony continue to fight the good fight. Sony along with Philips are now in the midst of a struggle for the high density disk format supremacy. Sony’s offering is the Super Audio CD, using DSD (Direct Stream Digital) rather than more traditional PCM to provide high bandwidth, high resolution two-channel and surround sound audio. Their plan is to provide hybrid discs which include a standard CD layer in addition to a new high density DSD layer, ensuring backwards compatibility with the millions of CD players already in the market. The struggle for supremacy continues, but if we can learn anything from the company’s history it’s that Sony don’t mind a bit of a stoush.

Sony’s first major triumph came early on in life and ironically it was based on an American invention the Japanese soon made their own. the transistor. In 1955 Sony brought out the first battery powered transistor radio and included an ear plug speaker. Soon after, it was so inexpensive that any teenager could own one, and its portability meant it could be taken anywhere. The availability of these radios provided access for a new generation of youth to hear a new form of music: rock’n’roll. Initially its light weight was seen by the public as indicating a lack of quality, so for the first few years Sony glued lead weights to the inside of their radios!

Another Sony product, the ‘Walkman’ has been one of the most successful consumer products ever made. In 1989 Sony produced its 50 millionth ‘Walkman’. Its miniature headphones let the listener move inside their favourite music with the result that they were able to hear more of the subtleties of the production, a wider range of frequencies, and in particular stereo placement, separation and sonic effects – as well as risk permanent hearing loss! This in turn stimulated the producers to become more stereophonically aware and expand their use of the stereo image, and digital effects.

Just before the release of the product, it was officially named ‘The Walkman’. There had been disagreement on the name by the US, English and Australian dealers who pointed out that it was bad English. The English wanted to call it ‘The Stowaway’, the Americans ‘The Soundabout’, and the Australians would have called it ‘Freestyle’. But the eternal visionary, Akio Morita, would have none of it, and in 1986 the Oxford English Dictionary included ‘Walkman’ as a noun in the English language.