

ON THE ORIGINS OF BRANDS AND THE PEOPLE WHO BUILD THEM

Perspective

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THE HEADPHONES

Most stereo headphones of the late 1970s weighed 14 ounces or more, but the Walkman's were a mere 1.6 ounces and could be worn comfortably.

THE PADS

Supra-aural headphones (in which the foam pad rested on the ear) were a technological marvel in the early 1980s and would rule until the coming of earbuds.

BRAND NAME

The Sony Walkman

BEFORE CDS AND MP3S, THIS LITTLE PLASTIC MACHINE TAUGHT US HOW TO GROOVE ON THE MOVE.
BY ROBERT KLARA



THE TUNES

The so-called "compact cassette" made its debut in 1965, mainly for use in dictation. But by 1980, the cassette had locked down 19 percent of music sales.

THE MODEL

Introduced in 1981, the WM-1 arrived two years into the Walkman craze. Before the boom was over, Sony wound up making hundreds of variations.



PHOTO: NICK FERRARI

BRAND NAME



4LBS!

1

1. 1978
The TC-D5 was the Walkman's bulky predecessor that so frustrated Masaru Ibuka.



2

2. 1979
The TPS-L2 began the portable audio craze. Later models took the name Walkman.



3

3. 1981
Sony's Walkman II came with a belt clip and stylized buttons.



4

4. 1986
The WM-55 included a radio and came in pink. You gotta love the '80s.



5

5. 1987
The D-20 Discman marked the arrival of CDs.



6

6. 1988
The Walkman Sports WM-B52 was water-resistant.



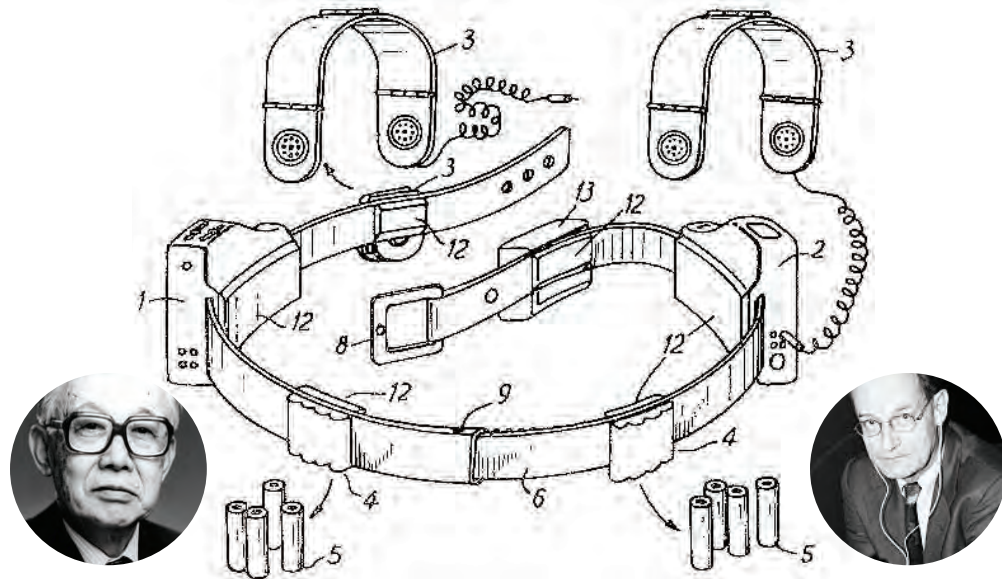
7

7. 2004
Sony entered the MP3 era with the \$400 NW-HD1.



8

8. 2015
The NW-ZX2 is Sony's "high-res" Walkman.



Founding fathers Masaru Ibuka (l.) told Sony's R&D team to develop a lightweight portable cassette player with headphones, even as Andreas Pavel (r.) had already invented such a device. He called it the "Stereobelt" (above), and in 1977, electronics brands thought the idea was crazy.

Andreas Pavel was getting tired of being laughed at. It was 1977, and the German-born inventor had made appointments at all of the major electronics companies—Yamaha, Grundig, ITT, etc.—and each had sent him packing. Pavel was trying to interest them in a device he'd invented called the "Stereobelt," a portable cassette player equipped with headphones. It was a novel invention, but the big brands were having none of it.

"They all said they didn't think people would be so crazy as to run around with headphones," Pavel told *The New York Times* in a 2005 interview.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, Sony Corp. co-founder Masaru Ibuka—who liked to listen to music during his frequent business trips—was tired of lugging his unwieldy TC-D5 cassette deck around, and asked his designers to produce something smaller. They came back with the headphone-equipped TPS-L2, which they dutifully brought to chairman Akio Morita.

"Try this," Ibuka said. "Don't you think a stereo cassette player that you can listen to while walking around is a good idea?"

On July 1, 1979, the 14-ounce device hit the market, priced at \$150. Sony called it the Soundabout, then changed the name to the Walkman, hoping the 30,000 it had made would sell. They did. In fact, consumers



Fast Facts

\$150 Cost of Sony's first Walkman in 1979
400m Estimated number of Walkmans sold
2.6% Walkman's 2012 market share
\$1,199 Cost of the 2015 Walkman

wound up buying 400 million of them. Today, with half of smartphone owners using their devices to listen to music, it's easy to forget how radically the Walkman changed things. "Mobility—the idea that you could take music with you—was huge," said Americus Reed, who teaches marketing at Wharton. "It was one of the early moments where music consumption became outward-speaking."

Groundbreaking as it was, however, the Walkman would also become one of branding's cautionary tales. Sony initially kept pace with the changes in technology, introducing its CD-playing Discman D-20 in 1987. But when the era of MP3 arrived, Sony wasn't hip to the groove. The MP3 Walkman arrived in 2004, but its high

price (\$400) and Sony's insistence on using its Atrac MiniDisc format alienated many consumers—who were all too happy to defect to Apple's iPod when it hit the market in 2007. "Sony was not defending its space as it should have been," Reed said. "One of the brilliant things that Apple did—and that Sony had done—was to create a category."

Today, that category still exists, though the Walkman's share of it has dwindled to single digits. Meanwhile, in 2003, after 24 years of legal battles, Sony settled with Andreas Pavel. The inventor received several million euros for his long-ago radical idea, which he called "add[ing] a soundtrack to real life."