

# Happy 30th birthday, Walkman

July 1 2009, by Daniel Rook

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A Sony employee displays the first model of Sony's stereo cassette player "Walkman TPS-L2" (left) and the second model "WM-2" at the company's museum in Tokyo. Thirty years ago Sony launched the Walkman, a gadget which revolutionised the way people around the world listened to music but has since been overtaken by an icon of the digital age -- the iPod.

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The July 1, 1979 rollout of the portable cassette player helped transform the Japanese company into a global electronics powerhouse.

Sony sold 30,000 Walkmans in the first two months after its launch, and 50 million within a decade.

Three decades on, however, Sony is struggling against rivals such as Apple, which has enjoyed immense success with its iPod music player.

Times have changed since Sony engineer Nobutoshi Kihara sketched out designs for the Walkman by hand.

"Back in my days, we had to draw product designs on paper," Kihara told AFP in an interview in 2006 after his retirement.

"I would close my eyes and imagine our products. I would imagine joggers with Walkmans to see how the hinges should move or how the products fit into the lives of the users."

Sony co-founder Masaru Ibuka came up with the idea for the gadget on one of his overseas trips, during which he used to listen to music on existing tape recorders that were too heavy to be considered truly portable.

The initial reaction to the Walkman was poor. Many retailers thought that a cassette player without a recording mechanism had little chance of success.

That changed, and today total sales of the Walkman have reached 385 million around the world, including newer digital models that use [flash memory](#).

Sony says it chose the name "Walkman" partly because of the popularity of Superman at the time and the fact it was based on an existing audio recorder called the "Pressman."

It initially planned to call the machine "Soundabout" in the United States and "Stowaway" in Britain, but changed its mind after hearing that children in Europe were already asking their parents for a "Walkman".

The name stuck, and in 1986 it was included in the Oxford English Dictionary.

For people who have grown up with iPods, Sony's original gadget can leave something to be desired. They include 13-year-old Scott Campbell who was asked by the BBC to swap his Apple gadget for a vintage Walkman for a week.

His friends, he said, "couldn't imagine their parents using this monstrous box."

It also took him three days "to figure out that there was another side to the tape."

"I mistook the metal/normal switch on the Walkman for a genre-specific equaliser, but later I discovered that it was in fact used to switch between two different types of cassette," he added.

Sony has tried to repackage the Walkman in recent years with new versions, including one that looked like a jelly bean, with some success.

It sold seven million Walkmans in the year to March, up from 5.8 million the previous business year, a company spokeswoman said.

But it has failed to pose a serious challenge to Apple, which sold 100 million iPods in less than six years after its launch in 2001, making it the fastest selling [music player](#) in history. Sales have since topped 200 million.

Sony is hoping its new touch-screen X-series Walkman will revive sales of the gadget.

For many observers, the success of the iPod illustrates the way Sony has lost its golden touch in recent years, failing fully to exploit the opportunities of the Internet and the digital age.

As well as losing its lead in portable music players, Sony's PlayStation 3 has been trumped by Nintendo's Wii as the top-selling home video game console.

[Sony](#) announced in May its first annual loss in 14 years and warned it would stay in the red this year.

Chief executive Howard Stringer has vowed to meld the company's strength in electronics with its games and movies. He is also slashing 16,000 jobs and axing about 10 percent of Sony's manufacturing plants.

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