



# We Were Burning: Japanese Entrepreneurs And The Forging Of The Electronic Age

By Bob Johnstone

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## We Were Burning: Japanese Entrepreneurs And The Forging Of The Electronic Age By Bob Johnstone

Are the Japanese faceless clones who march in lockstep to the drums beaten by big business and the bureaucrats of MITI, Japan's miracle-working ministry of international trade and industry? Can Japanese workers, and by extrapolation their entire society, be characterized by deference to authority, devotion to group solidarity, and management by consensus? In *We Were Burning*, investigative journalist Bob Johnstone demolishes this misleading stereotype by introducing us to a new and very different kind of Japanese worker—a dynamic, iconoclastic, risk-taking entrepreneur. Johnstone has tracked down Japan's invisible entrepreneurs and persuaded them to tell their stories. He presents here a wealth of new material, including interviews with key players past and present, which lifts the veil that has hitherto obscured the entrepreneurial nature of Japanese companies like Canon, Casio, Seiko, Sharp, and Yamaha. Japanese entrepreneurs, working in the consumer electronics industry during the 1960s and 70s, took unheralded American inventions such as microchip cameras, liquid crystal displays, semiconductor lasers, and sound chips to create products that have become indispensable, including digital calculators and watches, synthesizers, camcorders, and compact disc players. Johnstone follows a dozen micro-electronic technologies from the U.S. labs where they originated to their eventual appearance in the form of Japanese products, shedding new light on the transnational nature of twentieth-century innovation, and on why technologies take root and flourish in some places and not in others. At this time of Asian financial crisis and the bursting of Japan's bubble economy, many are tempted to dismiss Japan's future as an economic power. *We Were Burning* serves as a timely warning that to write off Japan—and its invisible entrepreneurs—would be a big mistake.

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**We Were Burning: Japanese Entrepreneurs And The Forging Of The Electronic Age** By Bob Johnstone **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Freelance journalist Bob Johnstone shatters the stereotypes of Japanese entrepreneurs as uncreative copycats and reveals the spirit, competitive zeal, and perfectionism that drive high-tech companies like Sony, Sharp, and Canon. "It is hard to imagine such faceless drones as brave risk takers, betting their companies on some new and unproven technology," Johnstone writes about the Japanese in *We Were Burning*.

The book documents how Japan launched the revolution in consumer electronics--often by seizing on technology initially developed in the U.S. and vastly improving it. For instance, it was an American company, RCA, that announced the creation of liquid crystal displays (LCD) in New York in 1968. Another American giant, Hewlett-Packard, pursued the technology and then abandoned it out of frustration by 1980. But Japan's Seiko and Sharp persisted in the development of LCDs: the devices now are now found in everything from watches to calculators and laptops to flat-screen TVs. The book profiles people like Sharp's Sasaki Tadashi, nicknamed "Doctor Rocket" for his boundless energy, and companies like Seiko, which began more than 100 years ago as a maker of clocks and watches. It also offers some insights about the future of such technologies as digital photography. At the same time, *We Were Burning* provides a historical and cultural context for Japan's incredible technological achievements. The book contains some valuable lessons for U.S. business managers. It's also worthwhile reading for people interested in the technology underpinning modern machines, including compact-disc players, laser printers, and multimedia computers. Johnstone, who has written for *New Scientist* and *Wired* and been a journalism fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is convinced that the entrepreneurial spirit of the Japanese people will pull the country back from any economic mess. "In the past, the Japanese have repeatedly demonstrated their resilience-- especially when their backs are against the wall." --*Dan Ring*

#### From Publishers Weekly

The commercialization of semiconductor technologies, largely dominated by Japan, brought us such marvels as hand calculators, quartz watches, liquid crystal displays and TVs, camcorders and synthesizers, improved solar cells and lasers, light-emitting diodes, CD players and printers. Journalist Johnstone, who has written for *Wired*, is clearly well versed in the history of electronic technology and takes us device-by-device "from invention through commercial application." The narrative encompasses the evolution of dynamic firms such as Sony, Canon, Casio, Seiko and Sharp, and key research contributions of scientists from Bell Labs, RCA and other U.S. companies. Johnstone explains how brave, motivated visionaries in mid-level Japanese companies consistently managed to capitalize on discoveries of U.S. research that rivals were unable to bring to market. He flatly contradicts a prevalent view that Japanese industry owes its technological success to monolithic government-sponsored consortia that took perhaps undue advantage of the West. Rather, Johnstone identifies vital individuals and pivotal company policies, weaving material from about a hundred interviews into an account seasoned with biographical sketches and remarks from the oral histories that capture the flavors of research environments and entrepreneurial management. Comprehensive, smartly written and accessible to the lay reader, this book provides a definitive?virtually encyclopedic?account of how the Japanese consumer electronic industry won the world.

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#### From Library Journal

A freelance journalist who spent 15 years in Japan, Johnstone provides an insightful, historic account of Japan's consumer electronics industry. He details case studies of several independent Japanese entrepreneurs,

mostly from the 1970s and 1980s, who were directly responsible for what many call the electronics revolution. Based largely on Johnstone's personal interviews, this well-written book successfully shows that entrepreneurial innovation and personal ambition do get results in Japan, instead of just the groupism and team emphasis typically associated with Japanese management and often cited as key reasons for Japan's economic success. The book traces the development of the transistor and the microchip from watches and calculators through camcorders and synthesizers and finally to CD players, printers, and cars. Indirectly, Johnstone illuminates the differences between U.S. and Japanese company culture. Recommended for all business readers. Joseph W. Leonard, Miami Univ., Oxford, OH  
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