

Tech start-ups

Pharrell Williams happy to join forces with London start-up

US performer and producer takes creative role at tech musical instrument maker Roli

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In a former sofa factory in east London, surrounded by a mishmash of musical instruments, wireframe sculptures and homemade wooden furniture, Pharrell Williams is explaining his idea for a new type of musical instrument, over jasmine tea.

“It should feel simple, pure and need no instruction – like many of the greatest consumer products that exist today,” he says. “It does what it looks it does, which is to be an invitation to someone who hasn’t played it before.”

The musical star, dressed in a mint-green baseball cap pulled low and a baby-pink silk jacket, is in town for three days to kick off his new role as chief creative officer at five-year-old London start-up Roli; his intention, he says, is to help design new instruments and democratise the art of music making, in a partnership that includes an undisclosed financial investment in exchange for equity for the American producer and songwriter.

“Sometimes, you can get lost or distracted by the tools you are trying to use in the creative process [of music making]. Instruments are too complex,” Mr Williams says. “We’re trying to make instruments that be used as teaching devices and software that can aid in one’s learning. It made a lot of sense for us to join forces and essentially build new instruments together.”

Roli has invented three musical instruments including the Seaboard, an electronic twist on the classical keyboard, and Blocks, a modular percussion controller that can plug into your mobile phone. It is working on its next new product in conjunction with Mr Williams.

The hardware start-up has raised close to \$50m in venture funding from the likes of Universal Music Group, Index Ventures and Foundry Capital, along with more than £4m of debt funding from Kreos Capital to cover inventory costs in peak retail seasons, according to chief executive Roland Lamb.

In 2009, Mr Lamb, a former Sanskrit philosopher and jazz pianist studying at the Royal College of Art, had been riffing on a piano in the college café and wishing he could modulate the pitch of the



Pharrell Williams, right, with Roli founder Roland Lamb at the start-up’s Dalston offices



Pharrell Williams performs with Hans Zimmer in April this year at a California festival

melody. What started as a personal motivation, aimed squarely at helping professional musicians, has morphed into a 140-person company with three offices in London, New York and Los Angeles, with products on sale in 1,500 retail shops, including every Apple store globally.

It now splits product sales equally between serious music makers and novices dabbling in music, Mr Lamb says. The instruments are no hobbyist accessory: they have been used by professional musicians ranging from Oscar-winning composer Hans Zimmer, known for The Lion King’s

soundtrack, to Stevie Wonder and DJ Steve Angello. Pharrell Williams performs with Hans Zimmer in April this year at a California festival

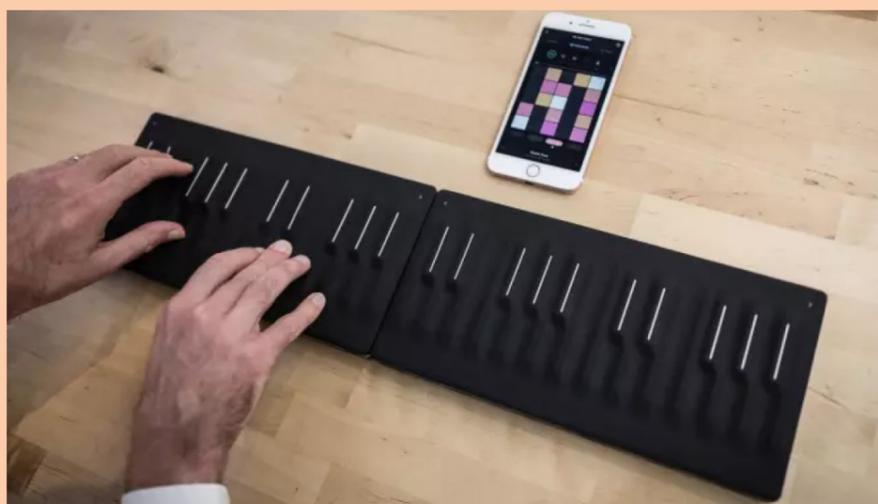
“We are growing 300 per cent year on year and selling tens of thousands of Seaboards every year; Blocks is our bestselling product,” Mr Lamb told the Financial Times. “Our retail partnership with Apple was an important component of driving that forward. We are the primary music creation product in their stores worldwide, where you can buy and try all our instruments.”

The partnership between Mr Williams and Roli came about because of uncanny similarities in what the two were working on. “My manager called me after a preliminary conversation with [Lamb] and said, ‘When he describes some of the stuff he’s working on, it sounds like he’s been eavesdropping in your creative sessions,’” Mr Williams says. “In our meeting, I was taken aback. I was like, wait, your third product is what I’m building right now. We had the same dream, to arm co-creators with tools that can aid them in the creative process.”

Although celebrities are no stranger to commercial product collaborations and Roli’s designers have incorporated the feedback of dozens of professional musicians into the design of its products, Mr Williams insists his role will be far more active.

The Roli keyboard, designed to be beautiful, digitally connected and approachable “I’ve been dreaming about this type of device for two years now so the idea it’s come to fruition and will be commercially retailed is very exciting,” Mr Williams says. “It’s not even necessarily new; it’s right under everyone’s noses. And it’s great for me as an artist too. It’s something we need.”

Beyond selling hardware to consumers, Roli has also launched a record label, Roli Records, which released its first record, No Refuge, by Parisi, featuring RZA from Wu-Tang Clan in April. Mr Lamb says the company will continue to focus on hardware as its primary revenue stream but plans to expand the record label as an avenue for amateur musicians using Roli products to make money.



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