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2025 NAMM Show
Buyer's Guide: Part 2



'A Swiss Army Knife
for Guitar Players': The
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Matters
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MUSICAL MERCHANDISE REVIEW

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Acclaimed MI retailer, music educator, and author of the recently released *The New Musician*, Menzie Pittman provides reason for optimism in our industry, drawing parallels between the present-day and the explosion of interest in popular music in 1964.

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Tube amplifiers appeal to guitar purists/traditionalists, in part, for their undeniable "cool factor," but there truly are sonic qualities to these units that cannot be replicated. The more compact combo configuration, once strictly for use in much smaller venues and bedrooms is, with today's advanced PA systems, showing up on arena and stadium more than ever before. We speak with reps from four suppliers of tube-driven combo amplifiers to learn about trends shaping this market segment.

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Is Your Store an 'Experience Destination'?

By
**Christian
Wissmuller**

As the iconic Sam Ash Music mega-chain shuttered its 42 stores in May of last year (Sam Ash's 100th anniversary year), the company noted in court documents that it had remained too dependent on in-store foot-traffic. The bankruptcy and closure of Sam Ash was not only yet another sign of the absolute necessity of integrating internet sales into traditional business models, but it also meant that there was now one fewer major player in brick-and-mortar MI retail.

While the demise of one of the most legendary names in our industry was no doubt sad, one question/hope that immediately arose was: Would the sudden dearth of physical musical stores across the territories Sam Ash had served present, for the savvy up-and-comer or pre-existing MI retailer, an opportunity to stake a claim for that business?

While there likely have been upticks in sales for smaller dealers in roughly the same areas as now-shuttered Sam Ash stores, most of what I've read and heard suggests that former Sam Ash customers have largely turned to the likes of Sweetwater, Guitar Center, and Amazon for their shopping.

Mexican music retailer Gonher, the winning bidder for most of Sam Ash's assets, seems to concede that online is where the future lies. While the company shared the (potentially) encouraging message, "The Next Chapter: Coming Soon" across social media this past fall, Alex Valdés, Gonher Group marketing manager, told online publication *Retail Dive*, "There are currently no plans to reopen physical stores, our entire strategy will be focused on online sales." Along those lines, the former Sam Ash Facebook page is now rebranded as "Sam Ash Direct."

In this issue's Spotlight feature, a conversation with Guitar Center CEO Gabe Dalporto, a good deal of time is devoted to the continued evolution – and ever-increasing prominence – of online retail across all channels, including the MI realm.

When asked how traditional brick-and-mortar storefronts should respond to the changing landscape, Dalporto observes, "You can't pretend that things are not moving digital, and you can't pretend that everything is fine."

That's all well and good (and unquestionably accurate), but what specific *actions* can smaller, independent dealers take to succeed in this new reality? Some options are relatively self-evident: Add online shopping functionality to your business' website; place your instruments and gear up for sale on Reverb.com and/or eBay, as well as in-store; increase your presence and activity on social media platforms.

Odds are good most retailers reading this have already taken all of the above steps – and have very likely made additional moves in attempts to adapt, but there's no question that what was already a quickly changing reality is only progressing faster by the day. What *else* is there to do?

All is not lost for the in-store experience, however. Plenty of folks, including yours truly, still *love* going to MI stores. And that passion is precisely what Dalporto is leaning into, and he advises smaller dealers to follow suit: "I would say that if you can deliver an exciting, fun experience, think of yourself as an experience center, then you have a reason to be. I mean, it is *fun* to go to a music store. It is fun to try out the millions of different instruments. Each is unique and brings joy."

Personally, I can't find much to argue with in those comments and think it's a tactic worth embracing. I visit my own local music stores for a bunch of reasons: I need a repair that's above my skill-set (or, as likely, I need one of my own "repairs" to be fixed...); I feel an obligation to "support the team," so I walk or drive to buy some new strings rather than place an order on Amazon; I want to, in person, check out a quirky amp that I've read about, but never used; and so on. But the primary reason for me leaving the house and making the trek to actual MI storefronts is: *I really enjoy* the experience. You can keep your trips to outlets and carefully curated specialty shops and discount wholesale clubs. When I have free time (Ha! "Free time"...) to do some discretionary shopping or plain old gawking, I'm heading to my local music dealer(s).

Is your MI dealership an "experience destination?" Could you be doing more to make it one?

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Introducing A New, More Accessible MuseClass Model

Hal Leonard and Muse Group announce a transformative update to MuseClass, the assignment and grading platform launched earlier this year. In 2025, MuseClass will adopt a unique pay-as-you-go content model, compatible with select titles in Hal Leonard's renowned library of sheet music and method books.

This change, unveiled at Chicago's Midwest Clinic Conference, guarantees the MuseClass platform and learning tools will remain free forever, while introducing "Made For MuseClass" content for educators to purchase as needed.

This significant shift away from a subscription model underscores MuseClass' commitment to providing flexible, cost-effective solutions for teachers and band leaders. It was inspired by feedback from more than 10,000 US educators and students already using MuseClass since it became widely available in July.

To support the update, MuseClass is also partnering with renowned sheet music retailer J.W. Pepper to offer MuseClass access as an add-on for selected titles, at point of purchase.

The benefits of MuseClass are now even greater:

Free for all educators. The MuseClass suite of time-saving tools for assignments and practice will now remain completely



Gabe Micheli, Hal Leonard's Education Tech Support Manager, demos the platform at the 2024 Midwest Clinic in December

free. Teachers and students can get started immediately with a curated selection of free Hal Leonard music and method books. Plus, teachers can easily upload their own music, exercises, or worksheets to use as student assignments.

Save time and engage students with next-level interactivity. "Made for MuseClass" titles will be fully compatible with AutoGrade, a high-powered AI-practice tool that gives instant feedback on rhythm and pitch. Combined with MuseClass' easy-access app and other tools, MuseClass saves time for teachers, while elevating any assignment with more engaging

ways to learn.

Combining the best of digital and physical sheet music learning. In a groundbreaking first, educators who purchase a physical or digital version of a compatible Hal Leonard title from J.W. Pepper will soon be able to purchase a 'MuseClass Access' add-on. This dual format will enable students to practice pieces at home using the MuseClass app (available on iOS, Android, and Chromebook) while eliminating the worry of misplaced printed music. Based on feedback from educators, additional retailers will be added in 2025.

Build a flexible catalog of music to suit individual program needs. With the new pay-as-you-go model, educators can focus their budgets on the titles that best suit their programs. They can build a personalized MuseClass library over time, choosing from a growing catalog of premium arrangements and method books tailored to any teaching style or goal. Educators will also be able to add MuseClass functionality to new and previously purchased music from authorized retailers.

An evolving platform, built in partnership with teachers. MuseClass is being built with teachers, every step of the way. Its features and content library will continue to grow to address real classroom needs.

Casio Road Show Comes to East Cambridge Piano

On Thursday, December 5, East Cambridge Piano (profiled in our January, 2018 issue) hosted a stop on the Casio Road Show, with special featured performer Ron Poster, official organist for the Boston Bruins. The event drew a sizable number of piano enthusiasts, students, educators, and professional performers to East Cambridge Piano's longtime showroom within The Knights of Malta Hall in the historic Winter Hill neighborhood of Somerville, MA.

Following 20 or so minutes of hors d'oeuvres and beverages amid spirited conversation, Rich Formidoni, product marketing manager for Casio America, walked guests through a brief visual history of Casio and the brand's involvement in the design and creation of musical instruments, in particular keyboards, with a focus on the popular Privia line, leading up to a more detailed look at the wildly popular PX-S7000 models. After discussing the PX-S7000's many innovative features and thoughtful design, Formidoni introduced Ron Poster, one of Boston's most active performers, who took the PX-S7000 through

its paces by performing a number of piano-heavy classic pop and rock hits.

"There's so much about it that is truly remarkable," noted Formidoni when discussing the PX-S7000's unique marriage of aesthetic style with impressive playability and sound. "It's unlike any other digital piano you've ever seen. It's the kind of thing that could inspire you from across the room... The whole design of the instrument, I find, draws me to it and makes me want to play."

Poster said, "I've actually been playing Privia for about 20 years now... [After] my first Privia, I was like, 'Huh! I play Casio!'" He cited the instrument's combination of light weight, high quality, and creative design as what made him a believer. "That portability and that light weight and that sound quality is what converted me. I've got one in the trunk of my car right now and I have



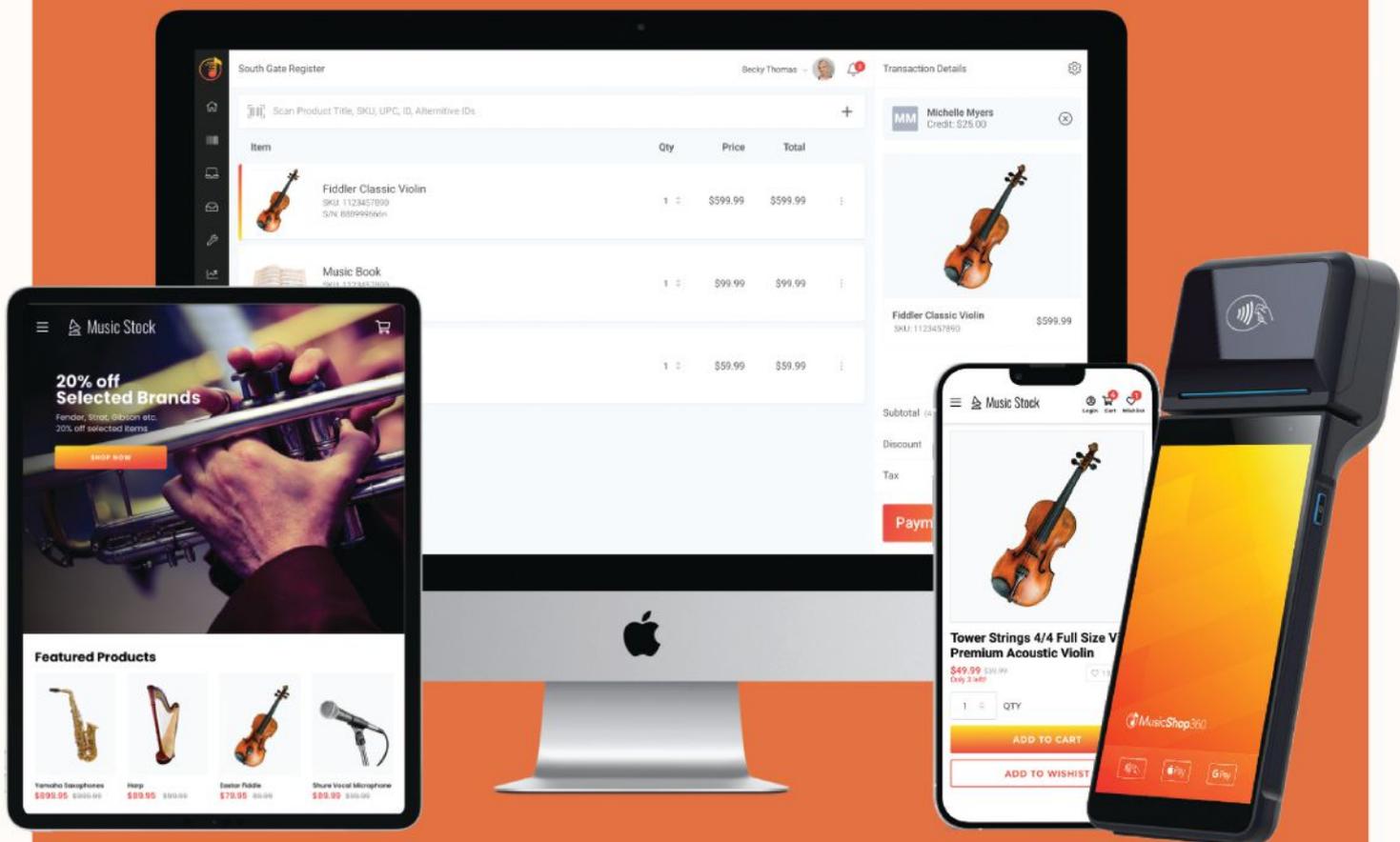
The Casio team with Alyssa Maxwell (Nicoloro) and James Nicoloro

it with me at all times. I've got a couple of them at a few spots where I do gigs... it's just a great product."

James Nicoloro, owner of East Cambridge Music, had nothing but enthusiastic praise for Casio, overall, as a brand: "We carry them because we know it's a good product and we love selling them because it's got great support, the people at Casio are great, and the service is great. I think the future is great for all of us."

At the conclusion of the evening, two lucky attendees were named the winners of the night's giveaway competition's prizes: a Casio G-Shock watch and a stylish PX-S7000HM keyboard.

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Yorkville to Distribute K.H.S. Band & Orchestral Lines



Yorkville Sound has announced its Canadian distribution of K.H.S. Musical Instrument Co., Ltd.'s band and orchestral lines, including Altus Handmade Flutes, Azumi Flutes, Jupiter Band Instruments, Majestic Percussion, Mapex Marching, and XO Professional Brass.

The two companies have a long and successful relationship, most notably with Mapex Drums. "Since Yorkville began to distribute Mapex Drums in Canada over ten years ago, it has grown to become the

number one acoustic drum brand in the country," said Jeff Cowling, Yorkville's VP of sales & marketing. "We see a similar opportunity with these prestigious brands. They're a natural fit for our customers and for our network of dealers and music educators."

The band & orchestral distribution partnership with Yorkville and K.H.S. is effective immediately. Canadian retailers are encouraged to contact their Yorkville Sound sales representative for more information.

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Rick Cochran,

founder and president of Fort Bend Music Center, passed away unexpectedly on December 4, 2024, at 64. Born on February 19, 1960, Cochran dedicated his life to sharing the joy of music and creating a legacy that will continue to impact his community for generations.



Rick is survived by his loving wife of 41 years, Terry; his three children, Ashley (spouse Kurtis), Lindsey (spouse Chris), and Justin (spouse Shelby); and his four cherished grandchildren, Carter, Quinn, Beau, and Kennedy. He is also survived by his mother, Joyce, and sister, Debbie. He was preceded in death by his father, Joshua "Buddy" Cochran, and his brother, Michael.

Rick's remarkable journey began in 1983 when he co-founded Blue Streak Transport, a trusted piano-moving service serving Houston. His entrepreneurial spirit led him to expand into piano tuning and repairs with the acquisition of Complete Piano Service in 1995. In 2004, Rick founded Fort Bend Music Center in Stafford, TX, a small teaching studio that quickly grew to serve over 500 students weekly. Under his leadership, Fort Bend Music Center became an authorized Yamaha piano dealer, with locations in Stafford, Houston, and San Antonio. Most recently, the company has been a trusted provider for band and orchestra instrument rentals and repairs, solidifying its role as a vital resource for musicians of all levels.

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Now, the demanding specifications of this guitarist extraordinaire have resulted in the Mike Lawson Signature Series of handmade guitars. The brand new ML8000-GCB and ML800-D guitars feature Fishman Sonitone pickups, Grover tuners, select solid spruce tops, solid rosewood backs and sides, and a nitrocellulose lacquer finish.

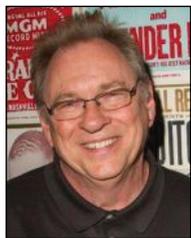
As Mike puts it, “It means a lot to me that working musicians can now play an amazing professional-level instrument at an awesome price that sounds equal if not better than the world’s best guitars.”

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If You Were a Betting Man, Would You Guess 1964 or 1929?



By
**Menzie
Pittman**

As I observe the slug-fest that is today's evolving retail environment, I am encouraged by the willingness of independent music dealers to engage in exchanging creative ideas. The tones of the discussions are wide-ranging, but the main reoccurring theme revolves around one question: Does it feel more like 1964 or 1929?

Opinions may vary, owner to owner, but there is a glimmer of hope beginning to evolve. When the votes are tallied, most

owners feel like the tea leaves suggest 1964. That's a good sign, because there was a seismic shift in 1964: interest in pop culture exploded.

The sixties were an exciting time for pop music. One of my favorite movies is "That Thing You Do!" written and directed by Tom Hanks. The movie accurately captures the power of pop music, and the excitement teens felt about their new idols at this time. The turning point that took place in pop music in 1964 took us from artists like Pat Boone and Elvis Presley – with their clean-cut looks, slicked back hair, and Elvis's signature twist – into The British Invasion, Mod styling, and hairstyles made more for "Blowin' in the Wind," and all it took was one TV show on a Sunday night.

Sunday February 7th, 1964 changed everything about the way we consume music and pop culture forever. It was time for the Brits to invade America. By August 1964, The Beatles' *Life Magazine* cover had put everything in perspective – The Beatles were larger than life, and 1964 was indeed to be a good year for music.

The opposite was true in October of 1929. It was the year the American stock market crashed, kicking off The Great Depression. This was a different kind of cultural event, but one which also changed life in America overnight.

If you think about it, the 1929 event is eerily similar to what many experienced after COVID. The long term effects of the shut-down can be debated, but if you speak with most any school teacher, they will tell you that we are not yet remotely close to where we were before the pandemic in terms of education. We can try to sugarcoat it, but the test scores speak for themselves.

With the exception of high-profile online music retailers, the devastation COVID caused for music education businesses is still being felt today. COVID was devastating for local retailers, and the overall economy was the second shoe to drop. Just as folks were beginning to trust that life could be returning back to normal, you heard the sound of that second shoe: *inflation*.

Only families with the means to endure the pain of inflation with grace elected to continue paying the extra cost of private music education. This has severely hurt independent music stores, and those with education programs the most.

The good news is, as fuel prices drop, you can begin to feel a change rumbling. As inflation balances out, consumers are once again actively seeking in-person education.

So, my gut tells me that it could be 1964 all over again, and that we are on the cusp of better financial times.

Another reason I believe that we are turning a corner: Resistance builds strength. I see it in families that keep multiple children in private music education, even amidst inflation. To them, cost be damned, because high-quality education matters, and it's their priority. And because of that held belief, their children thrive!

So if we are mirroring the economic positives of 1964, what will the new trends be?

Families are now coming out of shock, and they are frustrated that their normal ease of life has been interrupted. So, it's my belief that going forward, we will enter a period very similar to the post-World War II economic boom.

There is a reason I feel that way...

Families have been squeezed hard, and they have made many sacrifices in the last few years. Any sign of relief will feel like a breath of fresh air, causing them to seek new enjoyments. It's my take that gas prices falling, or food prices dropping, will provide a refreshing sense of trust among communities. Most importantly, the trust that it is ok to come outside again, and find peace and enjoyment in our hobbies. I also believe that the more we hear about dropping test scores, the more families will get back into extracurricular education.

In closing, it's time for the arts to lead the discussion, and because creativity has been stifled, smart families will seek high quality private music education to make up for lost opportunities. I have already witnessed the green shoots, and I believe there are many more to come. You guessed right – it's 1964 all over again! 🎸🎹

Menzie Pittman is the owner and director of education at Contemporary Music Center in Virginia (CMC). Following a performance and teaching career spanning more than 32 years, he founded CMC in 1989 and continues to perform, teach, and oversee daily operations. He has 50 years of musical experience as a drummer and drum instructor. Menzie is a frequent speaker at NAMM's Idea Center, the writer of MMR's "Small Business Matters" column, and author of the recently released book, The New Musician.

“The good news is, as fuel prices drop, you can begin to feel a change rumbling. As inflation balances out, consumers are once again actively seeking in-person education.”

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'You Need to Authentically Connect with Musicians and Support Them'

Gabe Dalporto Reflects on His First Year as Guitar Center CEO

by Christian Wissmuller

In the fall of 2023, Gabe Dalporto assumed the position of CEO at the nation's largest musical instrument retailer. In the ensuing months, he has brought his unique pairing of digital retail expertise and passion for music to bear on a number of comprehensive shifts at Guitar Center. It's all been enacted with an eye towards making the in-store process more of a sought-after "experience" and the online one more targeted and streamlined for the consumer.

In identifying the business' "core customer" and tailoring all of Guitar Center's offerings towards that base, Dalporto and his team have already achieved results that can be observed in both analytical metrics and personal testimonials.

MMR recently touched base with Gabe to learn more about his personal and professional background, his thoughts on the challenges facing all of MI retail in the present landscape, and his plans for the future of GC.

First of all, this past October marked your one-year anniversary at the helm at Guitar Center. Congratulations!

Thank you! *[laughs]*

For any our readers who maybe don't know much about you personally, can you talk about what background you have professionally – in particular anything specific to the MI industry?

Well, this is the first time in my career where I've been able to join my personal passion, which is music and playing, gigging, and writing music, with my professional life. I've had a very rewarding professional career outside the music industry,

and I've also had a very fun and rewarding musical life, but they've been separate up until my time at GC.

I was born in the deep mountains of West Virginia in this old 1860 farmhouse, and my father had set up a recording studio in our living room and people would come from all over the state and spend weeks there playing and recording music. I was always just surrounded by music and at some point, I decided I didn't want to live in my room anymore – I wanted to be in the middle of the recording studio! So, I just started sleeping out there in the middle of all the chaos. In a way, music is just really kind of in my DNA. My father taught me how to play guitar, and I did that individually for a long time, until I wound up creating a band, and I've been playing in the same band now for well over a decade. Then, at some point started writing music. This was my personal journey with music.

Professionally, I'm a little bit of a purple unicorn (I don't know what the metaphor is), but I'm a nuclear engineer by training. At some point I was working for nuclear power plants and building computer models and simulating accidents and making sure they didn't [lead to] anything bad like a meltdown.

Eventually, I moved into marketing and worked my way up the marketing ranks to become a chief marketing officer, primarily at financial services firms like E-Trade and Lending Tree. At Lending Tree, I took over as president and then I took over as chief financial officer. So, I'm probably the only nuclear engineer who has been a chief marketing officer and a CFO of a public company. But these were all digital-centric companies. Consumer focused, but digital centric and really driving disruptive technologies and innovations. Around 2017, 2018 – I

think 2018 – I met with Ares Capital who was the private equity owner of Guitar Center. We started talking about digital innovation, retail, and Guitar Center and how they had built this incredible legacy brick and mortar business, but Sweetwater had kind of emerged as a very large competitor, and Guitar Center was kind of getting their lunch eaten in the digital space.

We spent about a year just talking about how you innovate at a retailer and how you capture digital [sales] and how you think about the future and not just the past. When they asked me to join the board, I spent five years working with management and helping them envision what could be in terms of taking the best of digital, but also injecting new technologies and figuring out how to compete effectively online. And then they asked me to join as CEO.

This was the first time where I had a chance to merge the two: my personal passion and my professional skills. Before I said yes, I said, “Well, let me put together a vision and a strategy for you, and you tell me if that sounds right.” So, we spent some time going through and talking about that, and then they said, “Yeah, that’s it exactly, and go do it.” There was a good alignment and that’s how I got here.

Makes good sense. Your background in online retail leads nicely into the next subject I wanted to cover with you: Ever since I’ve been with MMR – closing in on 23 years – the two biggest perceived threats in the minds of most independent brick-and-mortar dealers have been big box chains and internet sales. The latter category has really outpaced any other sales avenue, and that shift was accelerated during the pandemic. Even certain types of purchases which used to “require” the in-person experience – big-ticket items – are now regularly online transactions. I mean, people buy automobiles sight-unseen online nowadays. What are your thoughts on this trend and what would be your messaging to those smaller storefronts trying to compete in today’s landscape? Do you feel that traditional brick and mortar retail outlets will continue to have a value and a space in a viable way, or do you feel like this really is the way that things are going?

First, you have to not pretend that things are not going to change. I can click a button on Amazon and have

something show up tomorrow (sometimes today). That is pretty game changing and if we think that’s not going to change our business than we’re being silly. For our part, Guitar Center didn’t take digital seriously enough, and to a significant extent, that’s contributed to other digital retailers being as big and successful as they are.

That said, the first thing we’re going to do is we are going to be incredible digital competitors. We are investing significantly in our digital business in terms of our talent, and our technology, and how we go to market. We have to fight that battle otherwise, there is someone else who’s going to win, and we won’t accept that, not on my watch. You can’t pretend that things are not moving digital, and you can’t pretend that everything is fine.

That said, when you ask people why they go into brick-and-mortar instead of online, they’ll say a few things. Obviously, a lot of times they just want to touch and feel and hear a product. But I think as importantly as that, which is kind of obvious, they’ll use words like, “My local store is like my Disneyland. My kids might want to go ride Space Moun-

tain. I just want to go and play music.” And then they’ll say things like, “Yeah, I read all the reviews, but I just don’t know. I need to talk to someone who really knows their gear and product.” Those are the three things that a store can uniquely do. And I would say that if you can deliver an exciting, fun experience, think of yourself as an experience center, then you have a reason to be. I mean, it is fun to go to a music store. It is fun to try out the millions of different instruments. Each is unique and brings joy.

For example, we had these two Les Paul custom signature guitars (they were the same SKU). I played them both. They weighed different and had different grains, so they both felt and looked a little different. So, if you lean into the fact that you don’t know exactly what you’re ordering online, but if you are experiencing it, then you can find the instrument of your dreams. If [an MI retailer] really kind of leans into that musician community, I think you have a reason to be, but if you don’t have the right assortment, if you don’t have a deeply experiential environment, if you don’t have great sales knowledge and



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treat your customers with respect, then you're in a hard place because digital is easy. And if a customer has a bad experience, then they're just going to go online and buy it online. It is like that. It forces us all to pick up our game.

I think that's a great answer. I had mentioned in passing the pandemic. I was curious if you could give your impressions, overall, about where we're at today. Are supply chain issues no longer a challenge? Do you feel that things have gotten back to normal, or do you feel that a better way to look at it is that things are at a "new normal"?

I think things are kind of at a new normal probably. The massive negative year-on-year comps have mostly gone away, but the industry is generally down a couple points this year. We're actually up a couple points this year. We've made a lot of investments in our stores, our store experience, our Associates, our product and assortment, and that seems to really be paying off. So, the things I talked about, really leaning into the experience, and improving the customer experience: It's working!

I think it certainly would be nice if the overall industry had tailwinds and then all ships rise, but in a kind of flat to slightly down environment, you have to pick your game up and you must be really excellent.

That's fair. In looking back at your first year, I'm sure it went by really quickly, but in your first year at the helm what are some of the initiatives and changes you're most satisfied with?

Well, I can't tell if it went by in a week or 10 years. Sometimes I'm like, "Man, I just blinked and that was a year." And sometimes I'm like, "Oh my goodness... it was exhausting."

I think the most important thing we did was get clear about our core customer. Over COVID, you could be forgiven to think your core customer is an entry-level customer because everybody jumped into music, but then just as quickly they jumped out and started going back to their regular activities.

So, for us, it was going back to basics. We did a bunch of research on the market and the segmentation and basically concluded that what we call "the serious musician" is our core customer. Funny story, I had lunch with Marty Albertson, the former CEO from the 2000s last week, and he's like, "Yeah, our core customer's a serious musician." I'm like, "Well, you could have saved me some time there, but thank you!" [laughs] But I caught a lot of shit for that. Tom Morello [Guitarist for *Rage Against the Machine* – Ed.] tweeted, "I never

thought I was a serious musician." [In reaction to a published Dalporto quote stressing the need for more premium product in GC stores – Ed.] Anyway, it was kind of awesome because we got a lot of attention for what we're doing.

That is great – albeit in a roundabout type of way.

I think it was a bit misinterpreted. To me, the serious musician is like a mentality, it's people playing music and making music a big piece of their life. It doesn't mean you're a professional musician, doesn't mean you're buying a \$3,000 custom shop guitar. It just means you're spending significant mental bandwidth and passion against playing and making music. And that's really who we really want to connect with and really serve.

The outcome of that was we decided we needed a better assortment of product in the stores because we had way over-indexed in entry-level, and we needed drool-worthy product in all of our categories. It meant we had to think about the stores as experience centers where a musician would walk in and spend their hours. I don't care if you buy something, I want you to come in and have a good time because you *will* eventually buy something.

It meant that we rebuilt our sales training team, starting with the foundational stuff of, "Oh, okay, here's what your core customer expects, and how do we delight that customer?" I think the thing I'm proud of is just getting clarity on who our customer is and how we serve that customer well. There are a million tasks underneath that, right? Things as simple as just getting our stores clean and organized, unlocking the guitar walls so people can grab a guitar and not have to ask someone, building out experiential displays. We now have these giant pedal boards that have 50 or 75 pedals and one board, and you can plug in and just to your heart's delight, go to town. But fundamentally it was aligning on our core customer.

Some of what you just said dovetailed nicely into the next topic that I wanted to discuss and that is Guitar Center's role in community engagement and your role in terms of reshaping that or targeting that.

Someone I spoke to the other day said to me, "In the '90s, Guitar Center was the coolest place to hang out on the planet for kids." And then she goes, "That's where I made some of the worst decisions of my life," [laughs] which I thought was hilarious, but it's just young people hanging out because this is a core pillar of the musical community, and that's I

"I think it certainly would be nice if the overall industry had tailwinds and then all ships rise, but in a kind of flat to slightly down environment, you have to pick your game up and you have to be really excellent."



think, a real insight there. You need to authentically connect with musicians and support them. And, if you support them, they support you back, so we discuss it a lot here. We don't have all the answers yet. The thing we want to do is to really connect with the performing community, the musician community, and be a place where we can be kind of part of that community and kind of be a hub where they feel comfortable hanging out. What that means in terms of how we operate differently, we're still kind of working through, and part of it just comes down to what's important to them and how can we support them in their journey.

As a former habitual teenage loiterer in many MI stores – GC included – I couldn't agree with you more! To wrap this up, are there any announcements or news that you'd like to share with MMR readers?

No, not really. I would say this is relatively tactical, but when we set about transforming our inventory in our stores, the first thing we really zeroed in on was our electric and acoustic guitar assortment as of November 1st, and we met our goal. This is stage one, but it's a significant move forward in terms of the percentage of premium and mid-tier and used product compared to entry-level product. So if people go into Guitar Center today, I think what they're going to find is a much more enjoyable, much more accessible assortment, but we have a lot of work to do in other categories like keys and live sound so there's still a lot of work to do. Some of the core foundational elements are there now. Some of them are in progress. There's a lot of motion still happening. I'd say we're probably like 40% of the way to where we want to be as a company, but we're feeling really good about it.

And, if you look at our customer status, like our net promoter score is up and all the sub metrics around that are also up, so people are noticing, which is great, and it's rewarding.

I don't want to say we are perfect because we're far from the vision that we set out, but we made a lot of progress in the middle. This is a journey, and I think there's a tendency for every company to say, hey, we're perfect and we're not. We just have a lot of work still ahead of us, and I think we need to be humble and realistic about that while also feeling good about the significant improvements we've made along the way. 



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The Enduring Appeal of Tube-Driven Combo Guitar Amps

by Christian Wissmuller

Technology marches on, but tube (“valve,” for our pals across the pond) amps have never really ceded the spotlight. Is it that many guitarists are “traditionalists” – old-fashioned romantics unable to evolve? Sure, maybe. Or do tube amps truly have a sound, feel, and vibe that’s just unbeatable by innovation? Yeah, that, too! There can be more than one correct answer to a question!

And what about combo amplifiers? Those humble, diminutive (relatively. Have you tried to carry a vintage 2x12 combo any distance lately?) units used to be relegated to the realm of beginner’s bedrooms and tiny coffeehouses. With today’s advanced PA systems and sophisticated sound reinforcement, however, why on earth would anyone lug around a full- or even half-stack (aside from the fact that, yes, they do look undeniably cool)?

We talked with reps from four of the biggest names in tube combo amps to find out about the evergreen appeal of these powerhouses that truly “punch above their weight.”

For your brand, what’s currently the top-selling tube combo guitar amp model?

John Bingham: Currently, the Hot Cat is the best-selling Bad Cat combo amp.

Anoush Saboktakin: AC15C1 followed closely by AC10C1 (literally by just one less unit for the whole year!).

Paul Stevens: In 2024 the single biggest selling tube combo was the HT-5R MKIII, which is a 1x12, 2-channel, 5-watt combo. This was closely followed by the HT-1R MKIII and HT-20R MKIII from the same range (1 watt and 20 watts, respectively).

Jason Stillwell: For over 30 years it’s been the modern-classic Blues Jr, which is a 15W 1x12 combo, which provides extremely pedalboard-friendly Fender cleans and smooth overdrive tones. These convenient and lightweight amps are known for their great tones and are perfect platforms for driving with pedalboards. An all-around great first tube amp for beginners and pros alike.

With all the modelling, solid state, and other, more “modern” amplifier options out there, how do you explain the enduring appeal of tube amps?

JS: Digital modelling has come such a long way, particularly in the last 10-15 years. They are convenient, flexible and provide



“For some players, there’s just no replacing the warmth and touch-sensitivity that tube amps offer.” – Jason Stillwell, Director | Product, Fender Amps



many modern features, but there’s a reason that tube amps are the original reference and benchmark that digital amps are still trying to mimic. They may not always be as tonally flexible or have the latest modern features, but they have “that sound.” For some players, there’s just no replacing the warmth and touch-sensitivity that tube amps offer.

AS: The enduring appeal of tube amps really comes down to the way they feel, sound, and connect us to the music we love. For all the advances in modelling and solid-state technology, there’s just something special about plugging into a tube amp that’s hard to explain but easy to feel.

It’s All About the Tone: Tube amps have this natural warmth and richness that makes the sound feel alive. When you play through one, it’s not just about hearing the notes – it’s about feeling them. The way they respond to your touch, how they compress and saturate when you push them – it’s like the amp becomes an extension of you. That kind of dynamic response is hard to match with anything else. And then there’s the over-drive. When you crank a tube amp, the distortion doesn’t just

get louder – it gets smoother, thicker, and more musical. It’s that perfect mix of grit and clarity that’s been the backbone of so many classic guitar tones.

The Emotional Connection:

There’s also this intangible magic to tube amps. Think about all the records we grew up loving – Hendrix, Clapton, Page, SRV. Those iconic tones were born from tube amps. Playing through one feels like tapping into that history. It’s not just gear – it’s a piece of the story of rock, blues, and beyond.

They’re Built to Last: Another thing I love about tube amps is how they’re made to stand the test of time. Sure, tubes need replacing now and then, but they’re easy to service, and a good tube amp can last decades. Compare that to some of the digital gear out there – it’s like choosing a vintage watch over a smart-watch. One has character, the other feels disposable.

The Challenge of Perfection: Don’t get me wrong, modelling amps and solid-state options are amazing tools. They’re practi-



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“Combo amps are practical, approachable, and often packed with personality.”
— Anoush Saboktakin, Amplifier Category Manager,
KORG USA, Inc. (VOX)



cal, versatile, and some of them sound incredible. But no matter how advanced they get, there’s always this elusive “feel” that they struggle to nail. It’s not just the tone – it’s how a tube amp reacts to your playing. That’s what keeps players coming back.

At the end of the day, it’s not about one being better than the other – it’s about what inspires you to play. For a lot of us, tube amps just hit that sweet spot between tone, feel, and nostalgia. There’s a reason they’ve stuck around this long, and I don’t think they’re going anywhere anytime soon.

PS: I think it’s basically about sonic authenticity and the visceral feelings they generate. I have long had the following theory... We can make “technical” better and more consistent violins now, compared to a couple of hundred years ago, for example with carbon fibre and CNC processes. But, a 300-year-old Stradivarius is still the desired instrument to play the music from those times. Applying this to electric guitar, the tones that defined this relatively new instrument were largely produced by the amplifier technology that was available in its formative years; the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s. Although we can make “technically” better amplifiers with modern technology, the tube tone generating sections that are still loved are using the technology from those earlier days.

JB: While tube amps can be approximated and replicated relatively well, nothing captures the room-filling, visceral appeal of *real* tube amp tone. You can get great sound and feel from a modeler through your studio monitors, but it doesn’t translate in a room with a band playing loud. The envelope of warm punchy tone just doesn’t fill the room the same.

What about combo models, specifically, is connecting with end-users?

PS: Regarding the continued popularity of specifically combos, I believe that is due to simplification, consistency and portability – basically a “plug and play,” all-in-one solution that requires minimal external cables and is the same each time.

JB: The combo is convenient and easy. It’s the

ability to carry your entire rig into the room with one hand.

Combo amps have been a mainstay since the first amplifiers brought forward by Leo Fender. It’s a classic staple of guitar playing. While the mammoth wall of heads and cabs is ridiculously cool, the combo stays practical and convenient. Combos also have a sound all their own!

AS: Combo amps are practical, approachable, and often packed with personality. Whether it’s tube-driven or a modern digital design, there’s something about a combo that just feels right for so many situations.

Convenience: The first thing that comes to mind is how convenient they are. Everything you need – the amp and the speaker – is in one box. It’s plug-and-play at its best. You don’t have to think about matching heads and cabs or carrying a ton of gear to rehearsal or a gig. It lets you focus on what really matters: playing.

It’s Personal: With a combo amp, you’re not just playing through it – you’re playing with it. It is an extension of your instrument. The whole thing, the amp and the speaker and the box itself. There’s this direct connection between you and your tone. It’s almost like having your own little sound companion, one that’s designed to be right there with you in the moment, filling the room without overwhelming it.

Legendary Tones, Compact Packages: Some of the most iconic amps ever made are combos – think Fender Deluxe Reverb, Vox AC30, or the Marshall Bluesbreaker. These amps prove you don’t need a massive rig to get world-class sound. They’re portable enough to take anywhere but still have the depth and richness to hold their own on stage or in the studio. It’s that perfect balance of practicality and tone.

Versatility for Real Life: Modern combos take things even further. Whether it’s a killer tube amp or a digital modelling amp, they’re often loaded with features: built-in effects, multiple channels, and even direct-outs for recording or going straight to a PA. They’re designed to handle everything from quiet practice at home to full-band gigs, and that kind of versatility makes them feel like a Swiss Army knife for guitar players.



“The combo is convenient and easy. It’s the ability to carry your entire rig into the room with one hand.” — Jon Bingham, Director of Sales | North America, Bad Cat Amps



A Player's Companion: Maybe the biggest thing is how personal they feel. For a lot of players, a combo amp is the first "real" amp they own, and that connection stays with them. Whether it's a little practice amp or a 40-watt workhorse, it's not just gear – it's part of your journey. Your riffs, your songs, your tone – it all comes through this one amp, and that makes it feel special.

Combo amps bring together tone, simplicity, and connection in a way that's hard to beat. They're not just tools – they're partners in crime for every jam, rehearsal, and gig. Whether you're chasing vintage vibes or modern versatility, combos have a way of making the whole process of playing guitar feel more natural and, honestly, more fun.

JS: Combo amps make great grab-n-go solutions for gigs, rehearsals or sessions. What's easier than a guitar gig bag over one shoulder, a pedalboard in one hand and a small combo in the other? With a few simple controls you can dial in a great base sound, making for a pedal-friendly palette for tone creation. A small tube combo and a pedalboard can provide enough tonal options to satisfy most players in just about any genre. And last, they allow players to quickly setup/teardown their rig and get off the stage.

Have you observed any particular display, marketing, and promotions strategies adopted by MI retailers who are especially successful in selling these types of amps?

AS: Successful MI retailers selling combo amps keep it simple, engaging, and relatable. Here's what they do well:

1. **Make Them Easy to Try:** Retailers set up dedicated demo areas with guitars ready to plug in. It's all about letting players experience the sound and feel for themselves, which is often

the deal-maker for amps.

2. **Show Them in Action:** Good demo videos and A/B comparisons – on websites, emails, and social media. These videos highlight tone, versatility, and why nothing beats the real deal.

3. **Tell a Story:** They lean into the legacy of iconic models like the Vox AC30 or Fender Deluxe Reverb, showing how these amps shaped music history. When customers see how their heroes used these amps, it makes the connection personal.

4. **Add Value:** Smart retailers offer bundle deals with accessories like cables or footswitches, seasonal discounts, and financing options. These extras make it easier for customers to say "yes."

5. **Educate Without Overwhelming:** Buying guides, workshops, or even a helpful sales rep explaining why a combo amp is perfect for small gigs or home playing helps customers make informed decisions without feeling pressured.

6. **Build Community:** Social media contests ("Show us your rig!") or partnerships with local artists keep the buzz alive. Real players using real gear – it's authentic and relatable.

7. **Highlight the Experience:** Successful retailers sell the *feel*. They remind customers that, at the end of the day, nothing matches the experience of plugging straight into a combo amp and letting it inspire your playing. It's all about connecting emotionally, keeping it practical, and making the amps feel accessible to anyone looking to create great music.

JB: Pairing like-minded guitars on a stand right alongside the amplifier gives people an immediate impression of the amplifier's personality (examples like a 335 and a vintage tweed amp, or a shredder guitar and a Bad Cat Lynx). In high-end rooms (like the ones we find Bad Cats in) you'll usually sell more guitars due

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“Regarding the continued popularity of specifically combos, I believe that is due to simplification, consistency and portability.” – Paul Stevens, Chief Engineer, Blackstar Amplification



to better amp selection too! Secondly, rotate your inventory. If an amp of a guitar hangs on the same hook or sits in the same spot month after month, move it. Shake up the look of the retail floor often. Customers will see things differently if you present them differently.

PS: I think much of this is what makes any retailer successful, but specifically to guitar amps...

Good presentation and knowledgeable staff.

Ease of demonstrating/customer testing. Set up correctly with any required footswitch.

A specific sound room can help as well, especially for some more bashful customers.

Using the materials that Blackstar provides for all products that includes all the relevant information needed in quick formats: e.g., Point of Sale overlay, product information sheet, White Paper, et cetera.

JS: Dealer-created YouTube and social media videos have become an essential tool that creates excitement, drives consumers to their retail websites and ultimately, generates sales.

Do you have any recent or upcoming tube combo amps you'd like to shine the spotlight on?

PS: Released late last year were the following tube combos: TV-10 A and TV-10 B. These are 1x12, 10-watt Class A combos. The 'A' model uses a 6L6 power tube and is voiced based on vintage American amplifiers. The 'B' model uses an EL34 power tube and is voiced based on traditional British amplifiers. So, there's currently two flavors. Both feature a relatively simple set of controls and output connections. However, they do have an internal load which, unusually for tube amps, means they can be used with headphones, while still using the whole signal path of the amp.

The most recent release was the feature laden St. James 100 combo. Although fundamentally a tube amp (all the tone is generated by tubes in both the preamps and power amps), it is also at the cutting edge of guitar amp technology. It has four channels, all footswitchable and with alternative voicings; fully variable power reduction and power tube control, enabling anywhere from 100 watts down to 1 watt to be dialed in using either or both pairs of EL34 or 6L6 power tubes; internal reactive load driving IR-based DSP technology to various output options; MIDI control of preamp functions including variable boost/solo level. It is also the lightest 2x12 100W tube combo available, due to clever construction and speaker design, as well as a state-of-the-art bespoke SMPS power supply.

JB: Bad Cat has just released the Cub V in a 15w combo and a 40w combo. Both of these combos are based on Mark Sampson's original Cub design, but we're five generations in. The 5th generation brings in a fully buffered FX loop, improved dual master volume circuit, and improved switching for a completely tour capable rig. This is a completely point-to-point hand wired amplifier and will be the perfect companion to any player from country and rock to blues and soul.

AS: The Vox AC Handwired Series is set to be a game-changer this year. Vox has not only captured the iconic tone of the golden era of the AC series but has also elevated it with modern features tailored for today's players. With additions like an effects loop and onboard spring reverb across all models, these amps deliver both vintage character and modern versatility. And let's not forget – they look stunning, too. If you're chasing the authentic chime, dynamic attack, and responsive feel that define a Vox AC amp, the Handwired Series is your ultimate answer.

JS: Our recently released Fender® Jack White Pano Verb™ Amplifier is a great example of finding ways to innovate in the tube amp space. Designed in collaboration with Jack White and his Third Man Hardware brand, it's an all-tube combo amp with an integrated +26dB clean boost, spring reverb with EQ, Stereo Harmonic Tremolo and a pair of tube power amps driving both 10" and 15" speakers.

Expectations for this segment of MI in the coming months?

AS: The amp market is undoubtedly facing challenges with the rise of amp replacement products like plug-ins, profilers, and amp pedals. Yet, combo amps have always stood their ground. For so many of us, a combo amp was the first "real" amp we ever owned – it wasn't just a piece of gear; it became part of our journey as musicians. And that story is still unfolding for countless young players today.

Sure, plugging your guitar into a computer has its conveniences, but there's something fundamentally different about connecting directly to a real amp. The immediacy, the interaction, the way you can feel it respond under your fingers – it's an experience that no digital emulation can truly replicate. That connection is why combo amps continue to inspire musicians, generation after generation.

JS: While we can't speculate what others have planned, rest assured that Fender will continue to innovate in both the digital and tube amp categories in 2025 and beyond.

JB: All signs are pointing to a more 2025, after a hard-fought 2024. As more guitarists are digging into digital technology more are finding models that intrigue them enough to go on the hunt for the real thing. I expect some recovery in this segment in 2025.

PS: Although at one time these were ubiquitous, admittedly it has become more challenging due to other options, especially in the mid-range. The market for valve combos mainly sits with low-wattage options for good tone at home. We believe this type of mid-range purchase will correlate with any economic recovery, as people that would make that type of purchase are being more cautious with their money currently. However, at Blackstar we strive to design even our more traditional products to not only have the modern features that younger players want, but also produce them at competitive prices. 

The NAMM Show

CASES & STANDS

On-Stage's THM7000 Trombone Hanger & VS7500 Violin Stand

On-Stage, a leading supplier of music instruments and accessories, and brand of The Music People, has rolled out the VS7500 Violin/Viola Stand, a portable storage solution for a violin or viola that keeps the instrument out of its case and ready to play, yet still well protected.

This versatile stand safely holds and provides ease of access to a small string instrument and its bow. The instrument's headstock is cradled by a yoke while the instrument's body securely rests against two legs of the stand. Soft rubber padding ensures a nonslip hold and also protects the instrument's finish against scratches. A built-in, height-adjustable hanger keeps a bow comfortably within reach.

To fit a variety of instrument lengths, the yoke adjusts in height enabling users to position the body for optimal contact with the padded legs.

The wide tripod base delivers outstanding strength and stability for reliable instrument support while rubber feet prevent skids on smooth floors to keep the stand safely in place. For compact storage and ease of transportation, the base and yoke fold down.

Concurrently, the company has released the THM7000 Trombone Hanger, a reliable wall-mount storage solution for trombone that keeps the instrument out of its case, assembled, and ready to play, yet still well protected.

This versatile stand safely holds and provides ease of access to a trombone regardless of its size or type, accommodating anything from a piccolo trombone to a bass trombone. The instrument is supported by a bell rest inside its bell so that it doesn't lie on its keys or other delicate parts. Soft rubber padding on the bell rest ensures a nonslip hold while also protecting the instrument's finish against scratches.

To fit a variety of bell diameters, the spring-loaded bell rest automatically adjusts when an instrument is placed on it, positioning the wide base of the bell rest near the opening of the bell. The height of the bell rest is also adjustable to accommodate trombones of various lengths.

To conserve floor space in studios, classrooms, or homes, this stand is installed on a wall. Its steel bracket and structural tubing deliver strength and stability, supporting up to 40 pounds to keep instruments safe.

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2025 NAMM Show Buyers' Guide Part 2

MMR presents some of the most significant new instruments, print music titles, music-making gear, and other related items on-hand at this winter's industry gathering in Anaheim.



ACCESSORIES

JodyJazz Expands Popular New DV HR Series with Baritone Model

JodyJazz® has announced the expansion of its popular new DV HR series saxophone mouthpieces with the introduction of the new DV HR Baritone model. The DV HR series models are the first hard rubber mouthpieces to feature JodyJazz's patented DV design. The new DV HR Baritone is available in 6, 7, 7*, 8, 9 & 10 tip openings.

The unique features of the DV design, including the patented secondary window, were created through the application of the Golden Mean Proportions found in nature. Like the other models in the DV HR series, the proportions of the DV HR Baritone are therefore also derived from the Golden Mean proportions. The DV HR Baritone mouthpiece features the patented DV secondary window design to add mid and low harmonics, resulting in an authoritative, cutting tone yet with a bigger, huskier bottom than normal Baritone sax mouthpieces provide. The long straight, somewhat high baffle gives the mouthpiece superb cutting power and strong projection and when called upon can also offer excellent altissimo.

The new DV HR Baritone model also features JodyJazz's newest bite plate technology which enables a bite plate to be embedded into the beak of a hard rubber mouthpiece. The plate features the iconic 'Phi' symbol logo in gold, a characteristic of the classic DV series, creating a very attractive visual appeal.

The DV HR Baritone also features a stylized gold-plated brass ring on the shank of the mouthpiece. The distinctive profile of the ring was also created using the Golden Mean proportions. The brass ring adds more mass on the shank of the mouthpiece which results in increased stability, more body in the sound and increased harmonics.

Made at the JodyJazz Factory in Savannah, Georgia, the tip rail, side rails, baffle and table are all expertly finished by hand and each mouthpiece is individually play tested to maintain the highest consistency and quality.

The new DV HR Baritone has an MSRP of \$550.00.

www.JodyJazz.com • Booth #9724



DOD Limited Edition 50th Anniversary OD250 Overdrive/Preamp Pedal

DOD Electronics celebrates 50 years of sonic euphoria with the DOD OD250 – 50th Anniversary Edition pedal. This limited-edition pedal is limited to a 1,974-piece run to commemorate the year of DOD's start, 1974. The original OD250 put DOD on the map as "America's Pedal" and continues to



buyers' guide

be an industry favorite today. Each pedal will have a serial-numbered Certificate of Authenticity, a commemorative laser-etched pedal topper, several commemorative guitar picks, and multiple commemorative stickers.

Hand-built in the USA, the DOD OD250 – 50th Anniversary Edition pedal boasts Gain and Level controls using the original potentiometer values and tapers giving the control knob the feel and range that DOD enthusiasts love. A three-position toggle switch features the OD250's classic "SILICON" mode replicating that original sound. The "Ge/ASYM" mode uses a vintage Germanium diode for asymmetrical even-harmonic distortion. "LIFT" mode cuts the diode clipping from the signal path allowing for a clean boost or even a dirty boost when the vintage LM741 op-amp is clipped at higher gain settings. The DOD 250 also features True Bypass to maintain the integrity of your guitar tone.

This limited edition OD250 is outfitted in a stunning metal flake gray finish with classic yellow screen-print in a callback to the original OD250 of the 1970s. An etched aluminum badge on each unit commemorates this occasion. The DOD OD 250 – 50th Anniversary is ready to take its place among the historic DOD pedal lineup.

When John Johnson and "Mr. DOD" himself, David O. DiFrancesco, set out to make DOD Electronics in Salt Lake City 50 years ago, they had no idea how enduring their legacy would be. Now 50 years later, DOD Electronics continues to be at the forefront of pedal technology. The DOD OD 250 – 50th Anniversary Pedal is an exceptional testament to DOD Electronics' long-standing success.

Retail Price: \$250

www.digitech.com • Booth #5102

PRINT & DIGITAL

Hal Leonard Has All the Hits for NAMM 2025

Hal Leonard is excited to showcase an array of new and recent piano songbooks at NAMM Booth #9114. Designed for players of all levels, this year's collection features music from the industry's top artists, blockbuster movies, and genre-defying innovators. These songbooks are perfect for piano teachers, students, and enthusiasts looking for fresh repertoire, and they offer retailers best-sellers to attract every type of customer.



Wicked – Music from the Motion Picture

Celebrate the movie adaptation of the iconic Broadway blockbuster! This matching folio includes eight stunning piano/vocal arrangements of Stephen Schwartz's beloved songs, approved by the composer.

Top Hits of 2024

Featuring chart-topping songs by Grammy-nominated artists like Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish, Sabrina Carpenter, Post Malone, and Chappell Roan, this compilation of piano/vocal/guitar arrangements is a must-have for pop music fans.

Chappell Roan – The Rise & Fall of a Midwest Princess

This matching folio to Roan's Grammy Award-nominated album includes piano/vocal/guitar arrangements of fan-favorite singles like "Pink Pony Club," "Hot to Go!," and "Good Luck, Babe!" It is a perfect addition for contemporary music lovers.

Jon Batiste – Beethoven Blues

Jon Batiste's latest album features genre-blending modern interpretations of Beethoven classics. Ideal for advancing students, this piano solo folio showcases creativity and joy with fresh takes on timeless classics.

Best of Taylor Swift for 5-Finger Piano

This folio lets even beginning pianists play 15 of Swift's biggest hits, from "Fortnight" and "Shake It Off" to "Cardigan" and "You Belong with Me." The arrangements feature easy single-note melodies, lyrics, and piano accompaniments for teachers or parents.

www.halleonard.com • Booth# 9114

PERCUSSION

Mapex Expands Black Panther Design Lab Series with 'Equinox' and Updated Fan Favorites

Mapex Drums is proud to unveil the latest creation in the Black Panther Design Lab Series, the highly anticipated Equinox model. This new release represents the culmination of years of research and innovation, combining cutting-edge technology with the finest materials to deliver the most open and bright tone in the entire BPD series.



The Equinox is crafted with a Padauk/Maple Hybrid Shell and Single Flanged Hoops, creating a unique and vibrant sound, perfect for drummers who seek both a warm tone and bright attack. This model joins the ranks of the Cherry Bomb and Versatus, two fan-favorite kits that have been refreshed with Mapex features, including the revolutionary HALO Mounting System and a new exclusive Black Panther Design Lab gold badge.

Other key features of the Black Panther Design Lab Series include the HALO mount sustain adjustment knob, SAS attenuating floor tom leg, air flow venting, chamber specific design, isolation gaskets, master tune lugs, and SONIClear bearing edges.

"The Equinox is an arrival point for exactly what the Black Panther Design Lab concept represents: A collective effort between artists and craftsman pursuing a sound," says Mapex Brand Manager Jeff Mulvihill. "These drums sing AND slam!"

www.mapex.com • Booth #213A

CASES & STANDS

JBL Bags Debuts Low-Profile Subwoofer Mounted Speaker Pole

JBL Bags, a division of Gator Co., has announced the release of a new low-profile subwoofer pole, designed to mount loudspeakers onto subwoofers for a more compact setup in smaller spaces. This shorter speaker pole offers a height adjustment range ideal for more intimate events, complementing JBL Bags' existing lineup of standard-sized subwoofer poles.

The JBLSUBPOLE2032 supports up to 132 pounds and adjusts in height from 20 to 32 inches. It features four preset locking pin positions, while also allowing users to secure the pole at any position within the height adjustment range.

At the subwoofer end, a removable piece fits into 35-millimeter cup mounts, or when unscrewed, reveals M20 threads for threaded subwoofer mounts. The speaker end includes a removable sheath that expands to fit 38-millimeter speaker mounts or can be removed to fit 35-millimeter mounts.

JBL Bags provides a range of speaker stand solutions, including tripod stands and subwoofer poles, all designed for stability and compatibility with a variety of PA systems. In addition to stands, JBL Bags offers a selection of durable padded bags, cases,



transporters, and covers to protect speakers during transit and extend the life of equipment.

www.jblbags.com • Booth #11914

Hercules Stands Launches Adjustable Subwoofer Pole with Hybrid Adapter

Hercules Stands, an industry leader in robust and innovative audio equipment solutions, proudly announces the release of the SS350B Adjustable Subwoofer Pole with Hybrid M20 Adapter. Designed to meet the rigorous demands of touring musicians, DJs, backline, and rental companies, the Hercules SS350B sets a new standard in audio support, providing adaptable configurations with unmatched stability.



The Hercules SS350B Adjustable Subwoofer Pole boasts versatile compatibility, fitting a wide range of subwoofers and speakers with a 35mm (1-3/8") pole socket. It offers adjustable height settings from 35" to 56" to adapt to various live performance environments, with reliable safety mechanisms like a locking pin and power lock lever to prevent slippage. Featuring a unique 2-in-1 hybrid adapter with a retractable M20 thread and 35mm (1-3/8") adapter, it supports most subwoofer models. Constructed with heavy-duty steel, the SS350B ensures superior durability for reliable performance.

herculesstands.us • Booth #213A

PRO AUDIO

VocoPro Launches New Wireless Package for Streaming Content Creators

VocoPro's new Streamer-Live-Wireless just added the ability to perfectly stream vocals or spoken audio to any social media platform. The Streamer-Live-Wireless is equipped with everything needed to stream or record audio—professional wired and wireless microphones, 20+ sound effects, singing & chat settings—and even an adjustable auto tune effect.



Just connect to the USB input of a smart device or laptop to easily record and stream. Artists and content creators

can show off their talent to the world with professional results and super easy set up.

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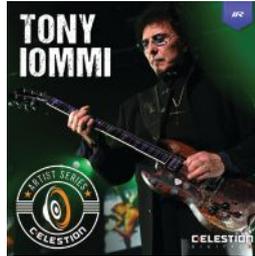
- Streamer-Live All-in-one USB Interface with sound effects and vocal effects
- Commander Digital Wireless Microphone and Wireless Receiver
- Mic Stand and Light ring

Pricing: MAP: \$129 MSRP: \$178

www.vocopro.com • Booth #11910

Celestion Introduces The Tony Iommi IR Collection

Celestion, the premier designer and manufacturer of guitar and bass loudspeakers, well-known as the "Voice of Rock and Roll" behind many of music's most memorable guitar performances, is proud to introduce the first in their collection of Artist Series Impulse Responses, the Tony Iommi Impulse Responses. This digital collection of IRs faithfully captures the tones of two iconic



cabinets that have been used extensively by Tony Iommi, on record and on stage through different eras of Black Sabbath's history, for use on any digital music production platform. Whether in a DAW for recording or a modelling amplifier for performance, the Tony Iommi IR series places his iconic tones within reach of any musician, recordist, or producer, and are available for audition and download at celestionplus.com.

Widely considered the father of heavy metal, Tony Iommi has seared the sound of his legendary Laney amps and cabs into the history of rock 'n' roll. From the late '60's grind of a cranked LA100 BL 100W head (boosted with a modified Arbitrator Dallas Rangemaster because it just wasn't heavy enough) through a LA412 HLC cab, to the '90's smack of a signature model GH 100 TI head through a TI412S cabinet, he has written, recorded and toured some of most iconic music in the history of classic metal. That iconic Iommi guitar tone is a sound that countless guitarists have aimed for, and it's now possible to get a bit closer by playing through authentic digital versions of two of the Laney cabinets used by Tony.

THE INSTRUMENTS

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www.prodigе-instruments.com



buyers' guide

The new Tony Iommi IR Series includes:

Tony Iommi Laney LA412 HLC: Closed back 4×12", Green label Goodmans® speakers. A late 60s cab recorded by Tony from 1969 through the early 1980s – it is THE sound of those early Black Sabbath records.

Tony Iommi Laney TI412S: Closed back, 4×12 Celestion G12H speakers. This cab was owned by Tony and used extensively in the studio and on tour through the '90s – the sound of latter era Black Sabbath.

Both cabinets are available either singly or as a collection.

Celestion employs a meticulous recording process to digitize the sonic characteristics of their acclaimed Impulse Responses, beginning with studio-quality, go-to professional guitar cabinet microphones. Each IR thus offers a variety of mic type and placement options and can be loaded into any IR host within a DAW or into stand-alone amp modeling hardware. The result is an authentic speaker emulation that sounds every bit as outstanding as its hardware counterpart.

Paired with a DAW and IR loader plug-in, modeling amp hardware, or amp-top load box, Celestion Impulse Responses provide authentic tone alongside lively and dynamic response, all without introducing latency. These benefits create a playing experience that is as credibly vintage as any speaker can achieve, but with real-world performance that is predictable and reliable in today's most demanding recording and performance applications.

Combining Celestion's unparalleled all-areas access, together with considerable speaker response know-how, Celestion will introduce future Series of Artist IR collections captured using guitar speaker cabinets made famous by legendary and influential artists.

www.celestionplus.com • Booth #6602

ACCESSORIES

Electro-Harmonix Introduces the 360+ Looper

The Electro-Harmonix Nano Looper 360 has been one of the company's best-selling pedals for just over a decade. Affordable and simple, it has been the looper choice for countless musicians. Enter the new 360+ Looper with an updated feature set and a smaller footprint. Building on the Nano Looper 360's original format of a single footswitch looper with 6 minutes of recording time and 11 memory slots, EHX has added power functionality like overdub control, fadeout abilities, and more.



Housed in EHX's Pico-sized chassis, the 360+ features individual DRY LVL and LOOP LVL volume controls for achieving the perfect mix, while the LOOP selector knob selects from 11 loop memory slots. 6 Minutes of recording time can be split up freely between the loops with unlimited overdubs. The OVERDUB knob sets the overdub feedback level meaning, while in overdub mode, the level of the previous overdubs are lowered with each cycle of the loop. If you have the knob set to 50%, that means the level of previous overdubs will be lowered by 50% each time the loop comes back around creating an ever-changing loop. The single footswitch engages record, playback, overdub, undo, redo, stop, and erase functions. The footswitch can also be programmed for which mode it enters after recording the initial loop. An adjustable fadeout mode allows for smooth fadeout endings when the loop is stopped.

This powerful but simple looper pedal records and plays high-quality, uncompressed audio at 24-bit, 44.1kHz and ships with standard EHX 9 Volt power supply. The 360+ Looper is available now and has a U.S. Street Price of \$137.70.

www.ehx.com • Booth #4744

Optical Illusions and Timeless Revivals: Levy's Unveils Five New Collections, Expands Vintage Hootenanny Series

Levy's Music, a division of Gator Co., has introduced five distinctive guitar strap collections: Apex Leather, In Bloom, Original Hootenanny, Optical Illusion, and Masterpiece. The



brand has also expanded its Vintage Hootenanny Series with updated versions that incorporate pick holder slots into the suede leather strap ends of both designs.

The premium Apex Leather Series combines durability with vintage charm, crafted from Crazy Horse leather that ages over time. Featuring embossed leather cut-outs and antique brass hardware, these straps offer a bold and timeless aesthetic. Each Apex Leather strap offers well-padded support for increased comfort during performances. Players can choose between three color options: black, brown, and tan.

The nature-inspired In Bloom Series features hand-riveted leather flower appliques and vibrant color motifs, including daisy chain green, sky-blue wildflower, mahogany brown, and primrose pink. Crafted from durable garment leather with a soft suede backing, these straps combine artistic details with practical design.

The Vintage Hootenanny Series brings the golden era of music to life with its classic hootenanny-inspired designs. Two of the most popular straps in the series now feature integrated pick holder slots on one of the suede leather strap ends, providing a convenient solution for players to keep spare picks within reach. Distressed leather ends and antique brass adjusters enhance the nostalgic aesthetic.

The Original Hootenanny Series features exclusive jacquard patterns designed in-house by Levy's. The series includes three retro-inspired print patterns, each available in two versions: with or without integrated pick holder slots. In total, the collection offers six straps that combine vintage style with the comfort of jacquard fabric.

The eye-catching Optical Illusion Series features four visually dynamic polyester strap designs: black-and-white patterns with either black or white leather ends, a vibrant orange print with matching leather ends, and a teal print accented with neon pink leather ends. Each strap brings bold visuals that ensure players command attention.

The straps in the Masterpiece Series are constructed from high-quality polyester and showcase iconic works of art, including *Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, *Mona Lisa*, and *Starry Night*. Designed to resonate with those who appreciate timeless masterpieces, these straps allow musicians to express their individuality while connecting their passion for music with a love for classic art.

www.levysleathers.com • Booth #11914

PIANO & KEYBOARD

Casio Expands Celviano Digital Pianos Line in the U.S. with Two Entry-Level Models

Casio recently announced the U.S. availability of two new entry-level models in its esteemed Celviano digital piano series.

These new instruments – the AP-300 and the AP-S200 – are the perfect introductions to the piano world, and each intended to provide a grand piano's authentic touch and sound, complemented by elegant cabinet designs, in highly affordable packages.

First introduced in 1991, Celviano digital pianos have earned a reputation for being among the world's finest instruments. They are distinguished by their exceptional sound quality, reliability, responsive touch and advanced smart learning technology. Designed by a trusted brand with a rich heritage in musical instruments, they deliver a fresh and authentic piano-playing experience. Unsurprisingly, families, music teachers, and schools highly value these dependable, versatile console instruments.

The AP-300's classic design, with gold accents on the logo and key cover, exudes sophistication with a traditional aesthetic. The AP-S200's slim profile, measuring only 11.8 inches in depth, allows it to fit seamlessly into smaller living spaces without compromising performance. A slow-closing key cover is both quiet and safe, while the instruments' three pedals are designed for enhanced usability and stability.

Both models feature a 2-channel, 2-speaker sound system incorporating advanced acoustic and sound source technologies from Casio's higher-end Celviano pianos, ensuring a rich, immersive playing experience. Musicians will delight in playing the 19 built-in tones, which include elegant grand piano tones that provide a wide range of dynamic expressions. The innovative acoustic design allows sound to diffuse naturally from the instrument's cabinet, creating an expansive audio experience reminiscent of grand piano resonance.

A "Volume Sync Equalizer" allows for balanced sound even when playing the piano at a reduced volume – ideal for evening practice. A specially tuned "Headphone Mode" provides a natural and expansive sound when using headphones to play or practice in total privacy.

Each instrument is equipped with the Smart Scaled Hammer Action Keyboard, which combines physical hammer mechanisms with digital control technology to capture the subtle nuances of performance, closely emulating the feel of a grand piano. The white keys feature an ivory-like finish, while the black keys have a texture similar to ebony, offering a luxurious and comfortable feel even during extended periods of play.

Both models include the WU-BT10 Wireless MIDI & Audio Adapter, enabling seamless wireless connectivity to devices like smartphones or computers and integration with MIDI-capable apps like Casio Music Space. This versatile app, available for iOS and Android, allows you to adjust piano settings, view and annotate sheet music, engage in interactive game-like lessons, work with audio files, and more. With Bluetooth audio, Celviano AP digital pianos transform into powerful speaker systems, delivering rich, clear sound that fills the room and inspires you to play along.

"These new entry-level Celviano models reflect Casio's ongoing commitment to creating new musical experiences, cultures, and lifestyles for everyone," says Stephen Schmidt, Vice President of Casio's Electronic Musical Instruments Division. "The Celviano



series embodies this philosophy by combining the timeless elegance of traditional grand pianos with modern technology to provide a fresh and innovative piano experience."

Pricing and Availability

The Casio Celviano AP-300 and AP-S200 are shipping now.

AP-300 (Black, Rosewood, White) \$2,299.99 MSRP

AP-S200 (Black, Rosewood, White) \$1,499.99 MSRP

www.CasioMusicGear.com • Booth #9103

FRETTED

Reverend Guitars Releases New Spicy Guitar and 5-String Triad Bass

Ryan Malisci has been leaning on his trustworthy Jetstream 390s for years with Hot Mulligan. His highly anticipated signature model brings upgraded styling to the Jetstream 390 platform. Armed with gold hardware, a backsprayed pickguard, dazzling finishes, and a brazen reverse headstock – this guitar makes a statement before you even hit that first power chord!

Malisci is the lead guitar player of the Lansing, MI emo band Hot Mulligan. With three full-length albums, a fistful of EPs, and near-constant touring with other big-name emo bands, Hot Mulligan has become the #1 Hot New Band they proclaimed on their socials.

Reverend Guitars is excited to introduce the 5-string version of the renowned Triad bass. Featuring three Jazz Bomb pickups and a 5-way selector, it provides easy access to five distinct tones. The block inlays add a touch of elegance to its design, ensuring the instrument looks as great as it sounds. For those seeking a highly versatile 5-string bass, the Triad 5 is the perfect choice.

reverendguitars.com • Booth #5741



Cort Debuts Sunset Nylectric DLX

Cort Guitars® announces the introduction of the Sunset Nylectric DLX, a sophisticated addition to the acclaimed Nylectric series. This innovative instrument masterfully blends the warm, distinctive resonance of a nylon-string acoustic guitar with the versatility and playability of an electric, making it a valuable tool for musicians of all genres – truly the best of both worlds!

The Sunset Nylectric DLX boasts a meticulously crafted solid spruce top with flamed maple veneer, on a chambered mahogany body, providing a rich tonal foundation. The flamed maple veneer in Tobacco Sunburst finish, wood binding, and gold hardware add to the guitar's visual appeal, while its ebony fretboard and bridge paired with a tapered and slotted headstock promise durability and easy playability. The guitar's unique shape draws inspiration from both traditional acoustic aesthetics and modern electric styling resulting in a distinctively appealing appearance, as well as comfort and balance. A newly applied thinner body depth of 45mm (1 7/8"), as well as a gently beveled neck-body joint heel and 48mm (1 67/64") nut width and string spacing provide further comfort, whatever the playing situation. Graph Tech TUSQ nut and saddle are used to enhance harmonics, volume, and sustain.

Loaded with an advanced Fishman® VTB Preamp, the Sunset Nylectric allows for seamless amplification without abandoning authentic nylon-string acoustic timbre. The built-in EQ system make it simple to dial in the ideal nylon string sound in any environment.



buyers' guide

Lastly, the guitar is factory set up with Savarez Cristal Corum 500CJ high tension nylon strings. Widely considered the best nylon string brand in the world, Savarez uses Corum polished-silver wound bass strings and Cristal trebles. The high tension makes playing this guitar a breeze. And to keep this new guitar safe and secure, each guitar comes with a premium gig bag included.

Street Price: \$899.99 USD

www.cortguitars.com • Booth #5102

Ibanez Announces Two New Additions to the Axe Design Lab Series

Ibanez has expanded its Axe Design Lab lineup for 2025 with two exciting new models.

The first, a new SML721, features a brand-new Midnight Atlantic Ocean Matte finish. Another standout feature of this guitar is its light multi-scale construction. This innovative design combines a 25.5" scale length on the low E string with a 25" scale on the high E, resulting in balanced tension and consistent feel across the entire fretboard.

The second is the all-new RGR52ET, a guitar meticulously crafted for the modern player. Equipped with Fishman Fluence pickups and an Evertune bridge, this instrument delivers a versatile tonal palette and excellent tuning stability, attributable to its Evertune bridge. The RGR52ET boasts a sleek high-gloss black finish, complemented by all-black hardware and striking gold pickup covers. Other key features include a Macassar Ebony fretboard with luminous side dot inlays, a coil-tap switch, and a Fishman Fluence voicing push/pull switch on the volume knob.

Features

RGR52ET

- Wizard III 3pc Maple neck
- Maple top/Nyatoh body
- Macassar Ebony fretboard w/White Step off-set dot inlay
- Jumbo Stainless Steel frets
- Fishman® Fluence™ Modern Humbucker Alnico (H) neck pickup
- Fishman® Fluence™ Modern Humbucker Ceramic (H) bridge pickup
- Coil-tap switch
- Fishman® Fluence™ Voicing switch on volume control (push/pull)
- Evertune® bridge
- Black hardware
- Luminescent side dot inlay
- Recommended case: M300C/MAP: \$209.99
- Finish: Black

LIST PRICE: \$1,928.88

ESTIMATED STREET PRICE: \$1,399.99

SML721MAM

- Wizard 5pc Maple/Walnut neck
- 648mm/25.5" scale at 6th string, 635mm/25.0" scale at 1st string
- Nyatoh body
- Rosewood fretboard w/White Step off-set dot inlay
- Jumbo Stainless Steel frets
- Q58 (H) neck pickup
- Q58 (H) bridge pickup
- dyna-MIX10 switching system w/Alter Switch



- Mono-rail bridge
- Gold hardware
- Gotoh® MG-T locking machine heads
- Luminescent side dot inlay
- Recommended case: M300C/MAP: \$209.99
- Finish: Midnight Arctic Ocean Matte

LIST PRICE: \$1,333.32

ESTIMATED STREET PRICE: \$999.99

www.ibanez.com • Booth #4820

CASES & BAGS

Gator Celebrates 25 Years with Limited Edition Gig Bags

To commemorate Gator's 25th anniversary, the brand has introduced its ICON Series 25th Anniversary Limited Edition gig bags – a fitting tribute wrapped in the iconic 'Gator Red' that has become synonymous with the brand's legacy.

Gator's new collection of 25th anniversary bags comprises four models: two snare drum bags, sized at 14 x 6.5 and 14 x 5 inches, and two guitar gig bags, available in electric and bass guitar sizes.

The ICON Series Snare Drum Bags are built for drummers requiring durability and convenience. Outfitted with multi-layered protection, the bags include a rugged nylon exterior to protect against tears, punctures, and harsh weather conditions. Inside, a thick layer of padding and soft, red velvet lining safeguard the drum from impact. The bag's structured design retains its shape during use, preventing collapse and allowing drums to slide in and out smoothly without catching, while the sloping zipper system ensures quick access. Additional features include a reinforced rubber-coated base and heavy-duty YKK zippers, along with a built-in pouch for a backup head.

The ICON Series Guitar Gig Bags are built with a semi-rigid construction, these bags merge the durability of a case with the lightweight flexibility of a gig bag. The sleek exterior features multiple accessory pockets, reinforced handles, and adjustable backpack straps for effortless transport. Inside, a plush red lining protects the instrument, while removable foam body blocks and an adjustable neck cradle secure it during movement.

www.gatorco.com • Booth #11914



PERCUSSION

TAMA Announces Limited Edition Starclassic Walnut/Birch Kit in Vermillion Bosse Fonce Fade Finish

New for 2025, TAMA has announced a new, limited-edition Starclassic Walnut/Birch drum kit in a stunning Vermillion Bosse Fonce Fade finish. The kit is offered in a 5-piece, 2-up/2-down configuration

with an optional matching snare drum. The 6mm-thick rack and floor tom shells feature 4 plies of Birch, 2 inner plies of Walnut, and 1 exterior ply of Bosse Fonce. The 8mm-thick bass drum shell boasts 5 plies of Birch, 2 inner plies of Walnut, and 1 exterior ply of Bosse Fonce. Complementing the premium shells are Black Nickel shell hardware, Die-Cast hoops, Starclassic lugs, and a natural lacquer interior finish. This limited-edition kit, with only 70 units available worldwide, will be released in January 2025.

www.tama.com • Booth #4820



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