



MUSICAL MERCHANDISE REVIEW

Celebrating 147 Years of Serving the MI Industry

Est. 1879



MAKING THE GRADE:

**INDUSTRY LEADERS
DISCUSS THE STATE OF
MUSIC EDUCATION**



THANK YOU!

MMR
MUSICAL MERCHANDISE REVIEW
**DEALERS CHOICE
AWARD**

*Sound Reinforcement
Line of the Year - 2025*

ALLEN & HEATH

Winner

MMR Product of the Year

Winner

2018, 2019

SQ Series

MMR Product of the Year

Winner

2020, 2021, 2022, 2023

Avantis

MMR Product of the Year

Winner

2024

CQ Series

INSIDE



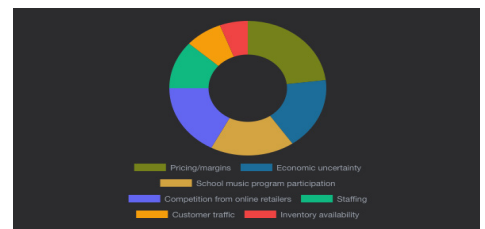
Upfront Q&A:

GC's Gabe Dalporto Discusses Beat Lab



Anniversary:

Portman's Music at 90



Dealer Survey:

Ready for the Back-to-School Rush?

CQ

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CQ-18T



CQ-20B



CQ-12T



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ALLEN & HEATH

C O N T E N T S



MUSICAL MERCHANDISE REVIEW

FEATURES

Vol.185 AUGUST 2026 No. 8

UPFRONT Q&A

GC CEO GABE DALPORTO FINDS THE GROOVE WITH BEAT LAB10

For decades, Guitar Center has been synonymous with guitars, amps, and live performance. But as music creation continues to evolve, so does the retailer's approach to serving today's musicians. Beat Lab reflects that shift, offering immersive production-focused experiences designed to inspire new creators while introducing them to the latest technology. Guitar Center CEO Gabe Dalporto shares how the initiative came together, what it means for the company's future, and why experiential retail remains a key differentiator in the MI market.

ROUNDTABLE

MAKING THE GRADE: INDUSTRY LEADERS DISCUSS THE STATE OF MUSIC EDUCATION11

To explore the challenges and opportunities shaping music education today, we invited leaders from across the industry — including the president and CEO of NAMM, retailers, representatives from advocacy groups, and supplier executives — to share their perspectives on what's working, where the greatest needs exist, and how the MI community can work together to strengthen the future of school music programs.

DEALER SURVEY

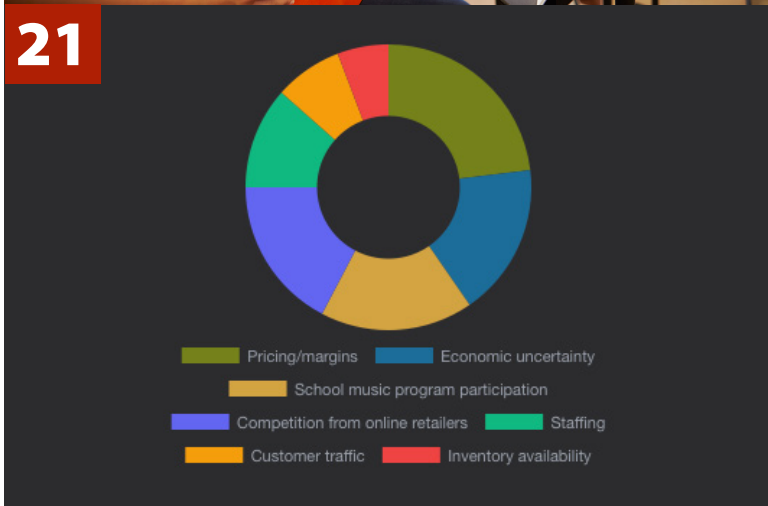
READY FOR THE RUSH?21

To better understand how music retailers are preparing for back-to-school, we surveyed dealers across the country about their expectations, biggest challenges, sales outlook, inventory strategies, and priorities for the months ahead. Their responses offer a snapshot of the opportunities — and uncertainties — shaping this year's pre-fall season.

ANNIVERSARY

PORTMAN'S MUSIC AT 90 23

As Portman's Music Superstore celebrates its 90th anniversary, the family-owned retailer looks back on nearly a century of serving musicians while continuing to evolve for the future. This feature explores the company's history, the values that have sustained it, and the people who have shaped its legacy.



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By Christian Wissmuller

THE FIRST NOTE

The future of the music products industry isn't determined only by product launches, acquisitions, or market trends. It's shaped every time someone discovers the joy — and yes, sometimes the frustration — of learning to play.

There's something about the back-to-school season that never gets old.

Maybe it's because it represents possibility. Every August and September, students walk into band rooms, orchestra classrooms, choir rehearsals, and music stores with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. Some are returning after a summer away from their instruments. Others are holding one for the very first time, wondering if they'll ever figure out how to make the "right" sound come out of it.

If you've spent any time in this industry, you've seen that look before.

For music retailers, back-to-school is one of the busiest — and most demanding — times of the year. Rental fleets need to be ready. Repairs have to be turned around quickly. Inventory has to be where it's supposed to be when it's supposed to be there. Sales associates become part product expert, part teacher, and part counselor for families trying to navigate an unfamiliar process.

It's a lot.

But it's also one of the few times each year when we're reminded, in very tangible ways, that the music products industry isn't simply about selling instruments. It's about introducing people to music.

That distinction matters.

The state of music education has been the subject of countless conversations over the years, and for good reason. Budget constraints, teacher shortages, scheduling challenges, changing demographics, shifting student interests—none of these are new topics. Every community faces its own unique set of circumstances, and there are no universal solutions.

Yet, somehow, music educators continue to do what they've always done: find ways to make music happen.

That persistence deserves recognition. So does the work of retailers, manufacturers, distributors, repair technicians, and countless others who help support those educators throughout the year. Music education doesn't exist in a vacuum. It relies on an entire ecosystem of people who believe that learning an instrument is worth the investment of time, resources, and effort.

The encouraging news is that the pathways into music continue to expand.

A generation ago, the journey often began in a school band room or piano studio. Today, it might begin there — or it might start with a beat-making app, a YouTube tutorial, a social media creator, or a recording setup in a bedroom. Students are discovering music in more ways than ever before, and while those experiences may look different, they all have the potential to lead to the same place: a lifelong connection with making music.

For our industry, that's an opportunity rather than a threat.

The more entry points there are, the more people we have the chance to welcome into the fold. Some

will eventually join school ensembles. Others will become gigging musicians, producers, hobbyists, songwriters, worship musicians, or passionate consumers of musical instruments and technology. There isn't a single "correct" musical journey anymore — and perhaps there never really was.

What's important is that the journey begins.

This issue of MMR reflects that idea from several angles. Our dealer survey explores expectations for the back-to-school season and the realities retailers are facing as another school year gets underway. We also look at businesses marking significant anniversaries, reminders that longevity in this industry is earned through decades of relationships and service. And we examine new initiatives designed to engage emerging creators, recognizing that tomorrow's customers may not look exactly like yesterday's.

Different stories. Common thread.

It's easy to become consumed by the day-to-day realities of running a business. Freight costs. Margins. Staffing. Supply chains. Technology. They all deserve attention, and they'll continue to shape the conversations happening across the industry.

But every so often it's worth zooming out.

Somewhere, as you're reading this issue, a fifth grader is assembling a clarinet for the first time. A parent is signing a rental agreement. A repair technician is making sure a trumpet is ready for its first rehearsal. A retailer is reassuring a nervous family that, yes, squeaks are normal. A director is welcoming a room full of beginners who will eventually become an ensemble.

Those moments probably won't appear on quarterly reports or sales charts.

They're still the foundation of everything we do.

The future of the music products industry isn't determined only by product launches, acquisitions, or market trends. It's shaped every time someone discovers the joy — and yes, sometimes the frustration — of learning to play. It's shaped by the educators who inspire students to stick with it, the retailers who make that first experience a positive one, and the manufacturers who continue to support the people making music possible.

Back-to-school season reminds us of that every year.

The details change. The challenges evolve. Technology marches on.

But the first note? That part never gets old.

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PRS GUITARS ANNOUNCES FIRST-EVER CEO

PRS Guitars has announced that Jack Higginbotham has been named chief executive officer (CEO), making him the first person to hold that title in the company's history. In this new role, Higginbotham will continue to oversee the worldwide day-to-day business operations of the company, regularly traveling around the globe to strengthen manufacturing processes, dealer relationships, vendor connections, and every aspect of PRS Guitars. "Jack Higginbotham has been a leader with PRS since the beginning. He is deeply deserving of this role."

"I look forward to continuing our close relationship building and selling guitars and amps for the world," said Paul Reed Smith, PRS Guitars managing general partner. Higginbotham has worked at PRS Guitars since its first year in existence: 1985. In his forty-one years, he has deliberately worked in every department that exists at PRS. Between his first job in the woodshop and his most recent role as chief operating officer (COO), Higginbotham has also spent time in operations management, purchasing, sales, customer service, marketing, artist relations, and was president for 15 years.

This well-rounded view of the company throughout its history has uniquely positioned Higginbotham to tap into his experiences in executing his new role. "PRS is an exciting place to be, now more than ever, and I'm thankful to be surrounded by talented, focused teams in the US, UK, Europe and Japan," said Jack Higginbotham, PRS Guitars CEO.

"As Paul is heard to say, 'This is our time.' As I navigate my fourth decade as a PRS employee, I'm looking forward to using my experiences as well as our collective experiences to position us well for the next 40 years. I am grateful for the opportunity and look forward to what is to come!" A full-time gigging musician prior to PRS, Higginbotham continues to perform on keys, guitar, and an ever-growing number of additional instruments during any free time with his blues-rock band: The Stoneflies.



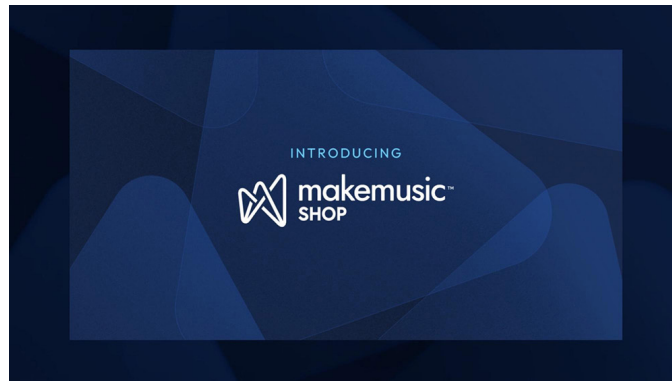
Jack Higginbotham

MAKEMUSIC LAUNCHES DIGITAL SHEET MUSIC STOREFRONT FOR MUSIC EDUCATORS

MakeMusic, the company behind MakeMusic Cloud and MakeMusic Shop, announced the launch of MakeMusic Shop, a new digital sheet music storefront built specifically for music educators. MakeMusic Shop allows educators to browse, purchase, and instantly access digital sheet music in one place with more choices, better file management, and no licensing guesswork.

MakeMusic Shop arrives at a moment when the demand for high-quality, legal digital sheet music has never been higher. Educators increasingly rely on digital tools to prepare and distribute music for their students, yet the process of finding, purchasing, and organizing sheet music has remained fragmented across multiple platforms and workflows. MakeMusic Shop is designed to solve that problem from the ground up.

Titles in MakeMusic Shop are curated specifically for educational use and tagged by grade level, ensemble type, genre, and instrumentation, making it fast and intuitive for educators to find exactly what they need. Digital purchases can be downloaded instantly, ready to open, annotate, and assign, while physical sheet music ships directly to their door.



Building a True Ecosystem for Music Education

"Digital sheet music should be as easy as streaming a playlist: find it, own it, and use it, all in the same place you do everything else. With MakeMusic Shop, we're not just adding a storefront. We're completing an ecosystem that takes an educator from discovery to the music stand in a matter of clicks," said Heath

Mathews, general manager of MakeMusic. "That's been our goal, and I'm incredibly proud that we're finally here."

The launch represents a significant expansion of MakeMusic's platform vision: rather than serving educators with a collection of standalone tools, the company aims to provide a fully connected experience where

composition, performance, teaching, and repertoire discovery all coexist. MakeMusic Shop is the latest expression of that strategy, and the company says the catalog will grow continuously as new publisher partnerships are established.

A Composer's Perspective

Composer and educator Brian Balmages, whose works are performed by ensembles at every level, welcomed the announcement as a meaningful step forward for how music reaches classrooms.

"The evolution of MakeMusic has been remarkable. From significant advancements in interactive practice to the development of The Foundations Series and the wildly successful launch of MakeMusic Publications, I am incredibly proud to be associated with such a world-class organization," he said.

"This next major milestone is streamlining accessibility by getting sheet music into the hands of students within minutes. Even better, this includes the brand-new HybridNOW format, which seamlessly delivers immediate digital access, a premium printed score for the podium, and full permission to copy parts. I am thrilled to be part of what is truly a defining turning point for digital sheet music."

SHOWTOOLS INTERNATIONAL NAMED CHAMSYS AUSTRALIAN DISTRIBUTOR

ChamSys is no stranger to Australia, having powered some of the nation's most notable tours by groups like Empire of the Sun and high-profile festivals, such as Foreshore in Canberra. Now, the wildly popular series of lighting solutions has found a new home in the country as it announces that effective June 5th Showtools International has become its official distributor for the Australian market.

Not only does the new move put ChamSys in a better position to serve its growing Australian customer base, it also creates a convenient connection with Chauvet, as the latter has been distributed by Showtools International for 13 years. As the authorized Australian distributor for both CHAUVET Professional and ChamSys, Showtools will now be able to provide customers with a streamlined and integrated pathway to access professional lighting fixtures and advanced lighting control solutions through a single distribution partner.

"We are thrilled to be able to build on our longstanding partnership with Showtools by integrating CHAMSYS as part of their product offering together with CHAUVET Professional," said Stephane Gressier Chauvet's international sales director. "The CHAMSYS addition to Showtools' portfolio will continue to leverage our family of brands by strengthening our

integrated solutions via one partner for the professional lighting market." For its part, Showtools International will be supporting ChamSys products with the same level of total commitment that has earned it such a stellar reputation throughout Australia.

With offices located in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth, Showtools is well positioned to provide local support across Australia. This uncompromising support will include product education and training opportunities, and personal product demonstrations and viewings by appointment through the Showtools team, subject to product and demonstration equipment availability. "ChamSys is a strong addition to the Showtools portfolio and a natural extension of our existing relationship with Chauvet," said Robert Runko, director of Showtools International.

"For Australian customers, this means clearer local access to ChamSys products, support, and product conversations through the Showtools team. We're looking forward to supporting lighting designers, rental houses, venues and integrators as we continue building the impressive ChamSys brand locally."

NEUTRIK GROUP AMERICAS EXPANDS DISTRIBUTION THROUGH DIGIKEY PARTNERSHIP

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Neutrik Group Americas, a subsidiary of Neutrik AG and the leading supplier of robust and reliable professional AVL connectivity solutions, proudly introduces a new channel partnership with DigiKey, one of the world's leading electronic components distributors. This collaboration will expand DigiKey's customer access to the complete portfolio of NEUTRIK® and REAN® connectivity solutions across the Americas as well as the global markets. Through this new reseller relationship, DigiKey will offer both NEUTRIK and REAN brand products, making these solutions more accessible to engineers, integrators, manufacturers, OEMs, and technical buyers who rely on DigiKey's extensive distribution platform and streamlined purchasing experience. This mutually beneficial partnership represents a significant milestone for Neutrik Group Americas, as its products continue going live across DigiKey's platform, creating new opportunities to reach customers and markets while strengthening support for existing channel relationships. Click Here for the Press Release and Image Neutrik Group Americas proudly introduces a new channel partnership with DigiKey.

KOCH SOUND'S ALLEN & HEATH ECOSYSTEM FUELS DIVERSE PRODUCTIONS



Koch Sound, based in Kenai, Alaska, is building its business around the Allen & Heath ecosystem. Owner Alex Koch chose the brand for its versatility, supporting productions ranging from intimate community events to large outdoor festivals. Koch's relationship with Allen & Heath began with a GLD-80 and has expanded to include an Avantis and a CQ-18T. The CQ-18T, known for its compact footprint, is frequently used for smaller productions, as Koch noted, "it's just simple, it's small."

The company's inventory includes an Avantis alongside a CQ-18T, allowing it to tailor each production to its specific requirements while remaining within the Allen & Heath ecosystem. For smaller productions, Koch often turns to the CQ-18T, as its compact footprint and streamlined workflow allow him to move quickly without sacrificing capability. The fact that "it's just simple, it's small," is what keeps Koch reaching for it.

During a recent EDM performance featuring DJ Buku, the CQ-18T delivered the necessary bass via a three-channel setup. Koch also provided an Avantis to Anchorage-based sound company during the Homer HarborFest festival, even offering training on the platform, which proved successful. The event showcased Allen & Heath dLive at the touring level, with two consoles at front of house.

Koch credits both the products and the people behind them for earning his long-term loyalty. He has built his confidence through attending NAMM and AES shows, and completing Allen & Heath's certification training. Whether supporting local graduations, outdoor festivals, EDM performances, or regional touring productions, Koch continues to rely on Allen & Heath to deliver a familiar workflow that scales with every event. His loyalty to the brand proves that a single ecosystem can meet the demands of an entire live sound business.

SOLID STATE LOGIC NAMES ALGAM EKO ITALIAN DISTRIBUTOR

Solid State Logic announced the appointment of Algam EKO as its distributor for large format consoles in Italy. Algam EKO will handle product distribution, technical support and strategic market development for SSL live, broadcast and studio consoles with immediate effect. The territory includes Italy, Vatican City and San Marino.

Algam EKO is headquartered in Montelupone on the east coast of Italy. The company combines the heritage, experience and workforce of French company Algam and Italian distributor EKO, founded in 1959. Algam EKO strives to provide users with service and support while building the reputation of supplier brands among customers. Its distribution expertise ranges across different verticals within professional audio, including live, broadcast, studio, education, installation, and communication.

Algam EKO brings decades of experience as a distributor providing knowledge, logistics and support across the region.

"I have been working with Giovanni Blasi and Giacomo Laria for many years, and we know the Algam Group very well since they have been our long-time partners in France," said Philippe Guerinet, director of international sales at Solid State Logic. "By building our solid and long-term relationship and their distribution infrastructure in Italy, this great team of professionals will serve our Italian customers at the highest standard, while maintaining a strong and direct relationship with SSL headquarters in Oxford."

Guerinet noted the partnership leverages Algam EKO distribution infrastructure to serve Italian customers while maintaining a direct relationship with SSL headquarters.

"I am delighted to continue this long-standing partnership with SSL, not only to enhance SSL brand reputation, but also to foster meaningful relationships with the exceptional individuals I have had the pleasure of working with over the years," said Stelvio Lorenzetti, CEO of Algam EKO.

Solid State Logic manufactures analogue and digital audio consoles and creative tools for music, broadcast, live and post production professionals. The appointment expands SSL distribution network for large format consoles in the region.



Stelvio Lorenzetti and Philippe Guerinet

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PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Proel SpA announced the appointment of **Alessio Foti** as Co-CEO alongside Giacomo Sorbi. The appointment officially marks the beginning of a new era for the Group, defined by a profound process of technological, digital and organizational transformation. Foti will lead the Group's Global Sales, both directly and alongside the sales team, with the goal of bringing PROEL's offering to international markets with a level of reach never achieved before.

Proel is a historic Italian group active for 35 years in the MI and PRO sectors. The company operates through accessories, PA systems, Pro Audio, Lighting and musical instruments under the PROEL, AXIOM, SAGITTER, DEXIBELL and TAMBURRO brands.

Joining PROEL at this historic moment is an extraordinary challenge, Foti said. There is a completely new energy. As Co-CEO, my goal is to lead Global Sales, both directly and together with our team, to bring the company into the MI and PRO world. The global market demands fast, intelligent responses; we are ready to provide them.

Customers will not only find new products, but a fully digitalized global partner, Foti added. The integration of our model, between our past and our outlook toward the future, allows us to fully understand the market's needs. Made in Italy is a fundamental part of our identity.

Sorbi said the company's history represents an enormous asset: "Our task is not to change who we are, but to ensure that this history continues to be relevant in the years to come. You cannot build the future if you don't know where you come from. But today, that same passion compels us to evolve. To drive such a powerful machine, you need the right people."

"Over the past two years, PROEL has worked on a complete overhaul of its product range, involving both the Sound Systems and Stage Equipment division and the AXIOM brand, dedicated to Pro Audio, and Sagitter, focused on professional lighting. This is not a simple restyling, but a true metamorphosis encompassing new architectures, new software, new electronics and new processes, with AI integrated into the systems and full digitalization of internal processes."

"Today, technology is no longer a commodity: it is the heart of the product and the DNA of the company," Foti said. "We place great importance on artificial intelligence, but we remain firmly connected to people. We build our strategies for people and with people, rather than relying on algorithms."

"Our goal is to interpret market trends, while bringing concrete innovation to our customers,



Alessio Foti and Giacomo Sorbi

adds Sorbi. Technology is essential, but it is people who truly make the difference. In the coming months, PROEL will build a completely new way of working, based on greater collaboration, sharing, speed, quality, expertise and investment.

"We remain proudly ourselves, with our head and heart projected toward the future," Sorbi said. "This is the birth of a new era."

M&W Pro Audio has appointed **Jay Schlabs** chief revenue officer as the company prepares to introduce its first generation of products.

Schlabs brings more than two decades of experience in professional audio, global sales strategy, channel development and consumer products. He began his professional audio career at Mackie Designs, where he served as national sales manager.

Schlabs later joined inMusic Brands as executive director of sales and spent 13 years leading global sales and marketing efforts across several professional audio brands. Most recently, he was senior director of e-commerce at PetSafe Brands, where he led the company's e-commerce strategy and digital growth initiatives for nine years.

"M&W Pro Audio is being built by some of the most respected names in the industry, and the opportunity to help shape a new company from the ground up is incredibly compelling," Schlabs said. "Greg, Peter and the entire team share a vision for developing innovative solutions that address real-world challenges for audio professionals."

Schlabs said he will focus on customer, channel partner and distributor relationships as M&W Pro Audio enters the market.

"I've known Jay for years and have always been impressed by both his leadership abilities and his business acumen," M&W Pro Audio co-founder Greg Mackie said. "He brings a unique combination of strategic vision, operational discipline and industry experience that will be invaluable as we continue building M&W Pro Audio."

Mackie and Peter Watts founded M&W Pro Audio in 2022. The company is developing professional audio products that combine sound quality with touch-screen interfaces and software-based feature updates.



Fender Musical Instruments Corporation has appointed **Christina Stejskal** chief communications officer. Stejskal will report to CEO Edward "Bud" Cole and serve on the company's executive leadership team.

In the role, Stejskal will lead Fender's global communications organization, overseeing brand, consumer and product communications, internal communications, executive and board communications, creator and influencer strategy, and corporate reputation.

Stejskal returns to Fender from Dolby Laboratories, where she served as senior director of global public relations. At Dolby, she led global public relations strategy, executive visibility, crisis communications and agency operations.

She previously spent nearly a decade at Fender, where she built and scaled the company's global communications function during a period of business growth and digital transformation. Her work included communications for product launches and strategic initiatives including the American Professional Series, the American Acoustasonic Telecaster, the expansion of Fender's digital ecosystem and the launch of Fender's first flagship store in Tokyo.

"Christina understands what makes Fender unique — our history, our players and the culture that has grown around this brand for generations," Cole said. "She has played an important role in shaping Fender's global story, combining strategic thinking and creativity to build meaningful connections with audiences around the world. We're excited to welcome Christina back to the executive leadership team as we continue to grow the Fender brand and inspire musicians at every stage of their journey."

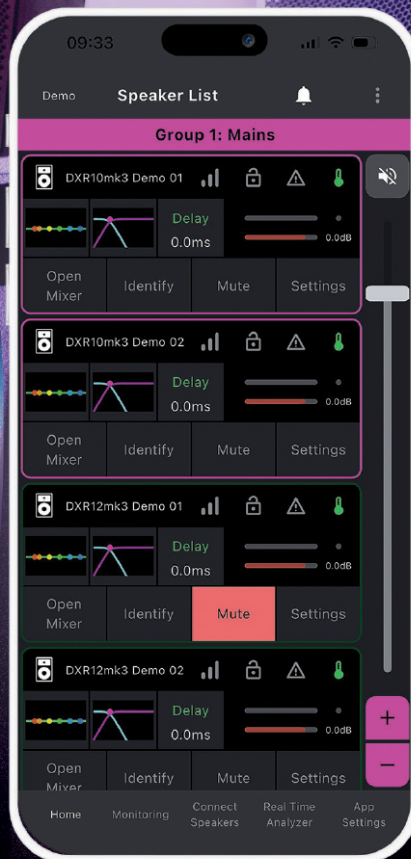
"I'm honored to return to Fender and join the executive leadership team," Stejskal said. "Few brands have shaped music and culture the way Fender has. I'm excited to help tell the stories behind our people, our products and the players who inspire us every day, while helping write this iconic company's next chapter."

Stejskal has been recognized by Reuters, Ragan, PRWeek and The PR Net, including Reuters' Trailblazing Women in Marketing, Service & Experience, Ragan Top Women in Communications — Trailblazer, The PR Net's MarComms Most Influential and PRWeek Women to Watch.



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GC CEO GABE DALPORTO FINDS THE GROOVE WITH BEAT LAB

By Christian Wissmuller

Guitar Center CEO Gabe Dalporto with Beat Lab

“A lot of people who are interested in music production don’t know where to begin and gear like samplers, synthesizers, and drum machines can feel intimidating if you’ve never used them before.”

For decades, Guitar Center has been synonymous with guitars, amps, and live performance. But as music creation continues to evolve, so does the retailer's approach to serving today's musicians. Beat Lab reflects that shift, offering immersive production-focused experiences designed to inspire new creators while introducing them to the latest technology. Guitar Center CEO Gabe Dalporto shares how the initiative came together, what it means for the company's future, and why experiential retail remains a key differentiator in the MI market.

What opportunity did Guitar Center identify in the music production and DJ categories that led to the creation of the Beat Lab concept?

Hip-hop and electronic music aren't emerging genres anymore, they're at the center of music culture today. Guitar Center built its reputation on rock and roll, and we're proud of that history. But today's musician is just as likely to be producing a track on an MPC, creating in a home studio, or DJing a set as they are picking up a guitar. We built Beat Lab because producers, beat-makers, and DJs deserve a dedicated place within Guitar Center, not just a section of the store.

Beat Lab is our commitment to that community and to supporting the next generation of music creators.

Beat Lab is designed as a hands-on, interactive destination rather than a traditional product display. How does this approach reflect changing customer expectations?

Look, you can buy anything online. So why do people go to a retail store? Three reasons. First, they want it right now and can't wait for shipping. Second, they want to try it out and experience the product. You just can't get that online. Third, they want to connect with other like-minded musicians. So, our mission is to have the hottest product available right now in the stores, to have that product out of the box, powered up, and ready to experience, and to have a dedicated space where similar artists can hang.

We're still learning and evolving the concept, but our goal is simple: wherever there's a strong producer and DJ community, we want Beat Lab to be part of it.

What factors influenced the selection of the first Beat Lab locations?

We selected our pilot stores based on where we believed we could learn the most, the fastest.

First, we looked at markets where demand for production gear, DJ equipment, synthesizers, and beat-making tools was already strong. Second, we wanted a mix of store formats because this concept needs to work across our entire footprint, not just in flagship locations. Third, we intentionally selected stores with varying levels of expertise in the category.

If Beat Lab is going to scale successfully, it has to work for different teams, different customers, and different types of stores.

How important is product discovery and experimentation?

Product discovery and experimentation are incredibly important. A lot of people who are interested in music production don't know where to begin and gear like samplers, synthesizers, and drum machines can feel intimidating if you've never used them before.

Beat Lab is designed for both experienced producers and people who are just getting started. It might be a hip-hop fan who wants to understand how a track is built, or a drummer exploring electronic music for the first time. Either way, we want to create an environment where people feel comfortable learning, experimenting, and creating.

How does Beat Lab fit into Guitar Center's broader strategy?

Our mission has never changed: serve people who make music. What has changed is how music gets made.

Technology and software have made music creation more accessible than ever, and that's a great thing. At the same time, there's still something powerful about physically interacting with an instrument, turning a knob, triggering a pad, or playing a keyboard. That hands-on connection inspires creativity in a way that's difficult to replicate on a screen.

Beat Lab brings those worlds together and gives customers the opportunity to experience that connection firsthand.

What role do education, artist engagement, and community-building play?

Education, artist engagement, and community-building are central to the Beat Lab experience.

From the beginning, our vision wasn't to create a product display. It was to create a gathering place where producers, DJs, and creators could learn from one another, share ideas, and develop their craft.

We saw that come to life at our early events. Beat battles created incredible energy, while artist-led sessions and master classes with iconic producers, such as Zaytoven, gave attendees direct access to experienced creators and their creative process. In Atlanta, we saw the same thing: people showing up eager to learn, ask questions, exchange ideas, and connect with others in the community. That's the long-term vision for Beat Lab. We want it to be a place where people come together to learn, create, and grow as artists.

MAKING THE GRADE: INDUSTRY LEADERS DISCUSS THE STATE OF MUSIC EDUCATION

By Christian Wissmuller

Music education has long been the foundation of the musical instrument industry, creating the next generation of players, performers, educators, and lifelong customers. But as schools navigate evolving budgets, shifting priorities, changing student interests, and new approaches to learning, the path from first lesson to lifelong musician is becoming more complex. At the same time, retailers, manufacturers, and industry organizations are finding new ways to support educators, expand access, and ensure music remains an essential part of every student's education.

To explore the challenges and opportunities shaping music education today, we invited leaders from across the industry — including the president and CEO of NAMM, retailers, representatives from advocacy groups, and supplier executives — to share their perspectives on what's working, where the greatest needs exist, and how the MI community can work together to strengthen the future of school music programs.

What do you see as the biggest opportunities — and the biggest challenges — for music education today, and how can the music products industry play a more meaningful role in addressing them?



Mark Maxwell, Owner of Maxwell's House of Music

Mark Maxwell: The most obvious challenge is the impact of funding cuts to school-based music programs. I know organizations in our industry, especially groups like NAMM and NAFME, put a lot of effort into music advocacy, program funding, scholarships, and educator support. Even with all of their work, it is still a constant struggle to secure the resources music and the arts deserve.

Beyond that, I also think community-based music education programs, like ours here at Maxwell's House of Music, are sometimes overlooked as an important part of the broader music education ecosystem. We all should be seen as additional resources for people whether as a supplement to school programs, a partner with school programs, or a standalone option for students of all ages.

Additionally, we are also competing for people's time and attention, and even when families value music, busy schedules can make consistent participation difficult. An opportunity for all of us in this industry is to communicate that music education is worth their time. It's an investment in a person's lifelong well-being. That is a fabulous gift to a child!

John Mlynczak: Declining interest in music education as a career field along with public attack on education institutions and the arts is a real challenge. It is vital that we fill the pipeline of music teachers and that the field of education is one that has support and value.

The music products industry is a partner in workforce development by collaborating with NAMM members, school counselors, and music

educators. Opportunities include career exploration, mentorship, internships, classroom engagement, workplace experiences, and other types of career-connected learning.

Expanding how success in music education is defined would be one opportunity. Music education has traditionally been good at preparing students to perform, but today's environment requires demonstrating how music also develops durable workforce skills — creativity, collaboration, communication, leadership, critical thinking and problem-solving as competencies valued across every industry. Decision makers must understand that music education teaches durable skills and creates a better future workforce, in addition to providing a fulfilling musical journey.



Lisa MacDonald — Director of Marketing, Vertical, Yamaha

Lisa MacDonald: In every school, there is a percentage of the student body that is not yet taking advantage of the existing opportunities to make music — more than 20 million of them in K-12. They can be engaged if we address the nature of their disengagement. The win is not to convince them to tolerate a thing they think they won't like; it's to present them with an opportunity to do a thing they believe they could love.

Setting aside the external pressures — funding cuts, misguided parents, workforce readiness mandates — the math is problematic. We are in the middle of a 10-year drop in enrollment due to declining birth rates, so it is critical that we realize the very existence of school music depends on bringing a higher percentage of the student body into the band room.

Research shows that students want experiences that reflect their family, their values, and what they see in their community. What that means

■ roundtable

is unique to each program, but it boils down to representation — a challenge that can easily be turned into an opportunity. When students can't see themselves in the music experience, they choose something else. So, give them a place where they CAN see themselves, their friends, their family and their passions.

The industry is already active and engaged, serving the needs of educators, but we can take a more proactive role in driving the conversation. Through our own internal investments and NAMM's work, we have access to research, legislative and advocacy information that can inform and empower teachers to take strategically informed action.



Jessica Bartoshesky, Associate Educational Brand Manager at KHS America

Jessica Bartoshesky: I believe one of the greatest opportunities in music education today is that students have more ways than ever to connect with music. Whether through traditional ensembles, online platforms, digital music production, or content creation, music-making has become more accessible and relevant to a broader range of learners. This creates new opportunities to engage students who have not found a place in traditional music programs. At the same time, I believe that access remains one of the greatest challenges. Many schools continue to face budget constraints, staffing shortages, and increasing pressure to prioritize standardized testing and core academic subjects. As a result, music education is often forced to compete for limited resources, despite its critical role in developing well-rounded students. Educators are continually being asked to do more with less, making it increasingly difficult to sustain and grow programs. We can make a greater impact by looking beyond the sales. While our products are essential, our responsibility goes far beyond the products we make. We need to support the long-term health of music education through teacher development, advocacy efforts, and assist in developing programs that create more diverse student engagement. At KHS, we believe music is an essential part of life. Our name, Kung Hsue She, means "contribution to school and society," and that philosophy guides everything we do. We believe that music education helps develop creativity, confidence, collaboration, and human connection. Music education is not simply about building proficiency on an instrument...it is about inspiring future generations and developing skills that extend far beyond the band room. Its impact reaches our communities and ultimately contributes to society as a whole.

Michelle Kirk: One of the greatest opportunities in music education is the growing recognition that participating in music does much more than teach students how to perform. It builds confidence, connection, collaboration, discipline and a sense of belonging. At a time when young people are navigating increased pressures, music classrooms can be some of the most powerful and welcoming spaces within a school.

The challenge is that access remains deeply uneven. Whether a student has the opportunity to participate can depend on geography, school funding, transportation, or whether a program has enough functioning instruments for every student who wants to learn.

The music products industry can help close those gaps by looking beyond one-time donations and building sustained partnerships with schools and community organizations. Instruments are essential, but so are maintenance, replacement plans, educator support, culturally relevant materials, and long-term program growth. We have found the most meaningful partnerships begin by listening to educators and investing in what they say their students and programs need.

George Quinlan: One of the more serious, yet somewhat hidden challenges facing music education today involves the "higher education cliff". It is reported that the number of traditional college-aged students is currently experiencing an approximate 15% decline. In Illinois, high school graduates are expected to decline over 30% in the near future. As existing Band & Orchestra directors near retirement, it will become challenging to fill their roles, particularly in lower-income and more rural areas. Every challenge is an opportunity, right? Since Bands and Orchestras require a critical mass of students to match traditional instrumentation needs, it represents an opportunity for us to help recruit and retain a higher percentage of students at the beginner level.



Menzie Pittman, President-Owner, Contemporary Music Center

Menzie Pittman: Oddly I see the biggest opportunities and the biggest challenge for music education exactly the same way as I do for music performance and music creativity. But my position isn't always popular, so let me elaborate.

I think you have to go with continual improvements in quality and accessibility in technology, and another big opportunity is ease of connectivity. I believe everyone in today's music industry understands the value of connectivity.

Today's musicians and educators are easily accessible. The word can't be a term from yesterday. Today you can record on the East Coast and fly or send materials electronically to the West Coast in a matter of no-time. My point is that the connect-ability only gets better.

Because of technology, music education has drastically changed in approach. That's good and bad news. Simply said, when musicians become distracted by the overuse of gadgetry, the actual fundamentals of music can suffer. I am not saying technology is bad by any means, but with music education you have to start with the fundamentals of music, and now with technology we have an entirely new layer of learning for musicians and educators to accomplish to stay up to speed. The good news is those that understand the new rules will become the new leaders in both education and performance.

Brian Piccolo: There is strong evidence that we are living through the

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largest expansion of music creation in history. Young people constantly consume, remix, and produce content, and they have greater access to music-making technology than any previous generation. The challenge isn't sparking interest. It's converting that interest into sustained participation.

Today's students expect learning to be personalized and available whenever inspiration strikes, not confined to a 45-minute weekly lesson. Classroom instruction remains invaluable, but it can no longer be the sole pathway to music.

Casio has long held that music should be accessible to everyone, regardless of age, experience, or budget, and that technology should remove barriers, not replace musicianship. If a student can make something that sounds good right away, they will return. Our job as an industry is to lower the barrier to that first moment of success and give students a reason to pursue the next.

How can retailers, suppliers, and organizations such as NAMM, CMAF, and NAFME work together more effectively to support school music programs beyond simply providing instruments and equipment?

MM: I think there is an incorrect perception by some that quality music education can only be provided in a school setting. For community-based music education programs like ours, it would be valuable to expand the definition of "music education" to more clearly include independent music lessons outside the K-12 and college setting. We want to be seen as music education partners with schools and a resource for everyone, not simply as vendors. Organizations like NAMM and NAFME have powerful voices, and their ongoing support in recognizing our role as a legitimate music education resource for students of all ages is incredibly meaningful. No matter where that education takes place, the whole community benefits, especially the person making the music for the rest of their lives.

LM: I think that with each passing school year, we are better and better equipped to demonstrate how integral music-making is to the school environment as a whole. Now, thanks to initiatives like NAMM's Careers in Music, we are also getting better at discussing how skills mastered in the band room — collaboration, listening, teamwork, creativity — are the superpowers that will enable our children to thrive as adults in the workforce. The impact music-making has on career readiness — the life skills that will pay off in any field, for every student — is stunning.

We also need to make sure students, teachers, counselors and administrators understand the variety of amazing jobs available in music. We're doing our kids and their parents a disservice by letting them think music only presents them with a future path of performing or teaching.

Eric Eble at NAMM has already built a fantastic template, so industry members can offer a Careers in Music experience to as many programs as possible.

The NAMM Fly-in is another terrific example of how we work together to support school music, but there are state and local opportunities to advocate that are equally, if not more, impactful. Only 8% of education funding comes from the federal government, so strong advocacy at the state and LEA level is key to supporting school music.

BP: Each part of this ecosystem brings something the others can't replicate. Retailers have local, face-to-face relationships. They know the band director, the parents, and the kid who's on the fence about continuing lessons. Manufacturers bring product innovation and the resources to build curriculum and training at scale. Organizations like NAMM, NAFME and Music for All bring the research and advocacy that lend credibility to all of this with school boards and policymakers.

Where I'd like to see more investment is in collaboration between those three core groups. It could take the form of joint teacher-training events, co-branded family nights, and retailer-hosted workshops using manufacturer content. Right now, much of that happens in silos. The programs that work best are those where a retailer, a manufacturer rep, and a music educator are in the same room, designing the program

together rather than handing it off from one party to the next.

MP: NAMM does the yearly Fly-In to Capitol Hill and that brings some attention to the importance of supporting school music programs. However, to get all the horses pulling in the same direction takes a herculean effort. I think retailers with music education programs benefit when they align with NAMM and NAFME, but I believe a louder message is still necessary. If the entertainment industry as a whole pulled together consistently, the chance to move the needle would improve tremendously; but for now, it is a local fight. Unifying the message and pulling together is the answer. Making that happen is a steep hill.



Michelle Kirk, Senior Director, CMA Foundation

MK: We each bring something different to the table. Educators understand their students and communities. Advocacy organizations can influence policy and elevate the importance of music education. Retailers and manufacturers bring product expertise, technical knowledge and local relationships. Organizations like the CMA Foundation can help connect those resources to educators and programs with demonstrated needs and organizations like NAMM and NAFME can help elevate the importance of music education among decision-makers, parents and communities.

The opportunity is to coordinate those strengths rather than operating in separate lanes. That could include professional development for teachers, instrument repair and maintenance support, career exposure for students, curriculum resources and stronger advocacy. Advocacy can take many forms, from helping school leaders understand the value of music education to equipping parents and communities with tools to support music programs in their local schools.

We should also create clearer pathways for educators to communicate what they need. Too often, support is based on what a company or organization has available rather than what will make the greatest difference for a particular program. Effective collaboration starts with listening, continues through implementation and includes follow-up to ensure the investment is sustainable.

GQ: Astute retailers often partner with school music programs to share best practices in their areas to promote better recruiting practices and retention ideas. NASMD does a great job in this area. The Music Achievement Council, with the support of the NAMM Foundation, has worked tirelessly for decades providing tools and ideas to help recruit

and retain more beginning B&O students.

JB: Like other aspects of life, the most effective partnerships begin when we understand that we all share a common goal: helping students experience the lifelong benefits of music. Retailers, manufacturers, NAMM, NAFME, and educators each bring unique perspectives to the music education ecosystem. By using this collective knowledge, we can create greater support systems for schools. For example, by providing professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, parent education initiatives, advocacy campaigns and community events. From each unique perspective we can improve communication that spreads the importance of music education to administrators, parents, and school boards. Music programs are most often seen and judged only in terms of budgets, but their impact extends far beyond musical performance and/or proficiency on an instrument. Music develops critical thinking, discipline, teamwork, and emotional well-being. We must recognize that we have a shared mission. Working together aligns resources, and expertise. This can create a greater impact than any one organization can achieve by themselves

JM: NAMM and NAFME, along with other organizations like Music for All, ASTA, ACDA, NASMD, and many non-profit partners, collaborate constantly. The NAMM SupportMusic Coalition, the TeachMusic coalition, MusicSEducation coalition, and the Music Achievement Council are just a few examples of ways we are working together.

We welcome any and all retailers, suppliers, and organizations to join in these collaborative efforts.

As school districts continue to face budget constraints and changing educational priorities, what innovative partnerships or programs have you seen successfully expand access to music education, and what lessons can the industry learn from them?



Amy D. Tomassone, Vice President of School Service, Menckey Music Service

Amy D Tomassone: One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that the strongest music programs are built on partnerships. No single organization can do it alone. When school districts, music retailers, manufacturers, nonprofits, and community organizations work together, we can accomplish far more than any one of us could individually. We have seen great success through partnerships that provide instrument donations, scholarship instruments, repair assistance, teacher

professional development, and programs that help remove financial barriers for students. These collaborations have expanded access to music education, allowed more students to participate, and helped schools sustain their music programs while stretching limited budgets.

MP: I believe NAMM's and NAFME's efforts have been successful but drilling it down to the local level is the challenge. School districts reach out when they are hurting, but a more consistent connectivity between manufacturers, schools, retailers and educators is what is necessary to truly move the needle. That synergy is difficult to align; the ultimate challenge is getting the value of music education understood by the masses, and all horses pulling in the same direction.



Brian Piccolo, Senior General Manager, Casio America, Inc.

BP: One example we're especially proud of is Casio's partnership with Ben Folds' Keys for Kids initiative in North Carolina. The program was created to ensure that young people, particularly those who may not otherwise have access, can receive keyboards, quality instruction, and opportunities to develop their musical abilities. Since its launch, it has supported hundreds of students through nonprofit organizations across the state, and Casio has been honored to contribute keyboards to help expand its reach. We're also excited to continue supporting the initiative with additional keyboard donations as the program grows.

What makes this partnership so effective is that it goes beyond simply donating instruments. It brings together an artist passionate about music education, nonprofit organizations with deep community connections, arts organizations that administer the program, and an instrument manufacturer committed to making music more accessible. Each partner contributes something unique, creating an impact that none could achieve alone.

I think that's the lesson for our industry. The most successful partnerships don't start with products—they start with a shared commitment to expanding access to music education. When manufacturers, artists, educators, community organizations, and local advocates collaborate toward that common goal, we can create meaningful opportunities that inspire the next generation of musicians.

JM: The organizations mentioned above are all working toward expanded access in the environment of local budget shortfalls. The key is local business and educator involvement. School funding is local, the buck literally stops with the local school board. We need NAMM members and partners to engage locally, and with our coalitions, to work together toward the common goal of preserving and growing

music programs.

GQ: Over the last several decades, we have experienced growth and support from Educational Foundations initiated in many school districts. While funding is derived from the community, the funds are distributed by the foundation board. We need to continue to remind the board members about the benefits of an arts and music education. We have supported several local music education advocacy (non-profit) organizations whose mission is to promote and protect the fine arts programs in their school district. Never underestimate the power of a focused and highly motivated group of parents. Universally, parents truly want the best for their children. And, thanks to the work of music advocacy groups through the years, they realize the importance and benefits provided by fine arts educational opportunities for their children.

JB: The strongest initiatives unite schools, businesses, community groups, and industry partners around the common purpose of removing barriers to participation thus getting more people involved. Our Academic Alliance Program brings everyone together to grow the musical community through educator training, student focused events, and advocacy.

Lasting impact requires long-term commitment beyond fundraising. It demands ongoing support, relationship building, and measurable outcomes.

We must listen to educators. The industry cannot assume it knows what schools need. When manufacturers and retailers engage educators as true partners, our efforts become meaningful and sustainable.

MM: We have been a partner with some of our local schools for our Maxwell's Music Lab program, and we also do things like field trips and in-school talks that help introduce some basic music making opportunities. I think the number one lesson we can all learn from is to remember how busy school administration/teachers are every single day. The easier we can make a plan or a partnership for them, yet still beneficial for their students, the more likely it will be supported and successful.

LM: While band and orchestra are — and will always be — the backbone and primary engine of music-making in school, there are plenty of innovators championing lower-cost-of-entry options. Guitar is a fantastic gateway program, and organizations like GAMA are practically giving away the tools to start a guitar program with their Teaching Guitar Workshops. The manufacturing side of the industry has already come together to support GAMA (both Yamaha and Martin are hosting workshops at their headquarters this summer), but it's something more retailers could explore to support the schools in their areas.

Technology is also enabling digital composing, production, beat-making — all programs that scale easily, have plenty of low-cost tool options, and open the doors of the music room to a wider audience of students. Is it ideal that they're not touching a physical instrument? Of course not. But giving a child the power to think of themselves as creative, musical and capable? It's the start of a lifelong relationship with music-making. It's how we build lifelong music-makers.

I think the greatest lesson we can learn — whether in industry or education — is not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. The last six years have been an object lesson in letting go of our idealized expectations — sometimes you have to get scrappy. There is no one best way to build a music program. Knowing your student body and meeting them where they are with the best tools you can is more impactful than wasting time beating your head against the wall of not getting everything you want.

How can the MI industry better engage students, parents, and educators to foster a lifelong culture of music-making — not just participation in school ensembles, but continued musical engagement beyond graduation?

BP: One of our biggest blind spots as an industry is treating “musician” as a label reserved for those who perform at a certain level. Most people who pick up an instrument don't want to play Carnegie Hall.

They simply want to play their favorite songs, write something of their own, or jam with friends. If we only celebrate performance milestones, such as chair placements, competition wins, and recitals, we're implicitly telling everyone else that they don't count as musicians.

Parents also need better language to talk about music's non-musical value. Music develops discipline, creative confidence, and the ability to engage with something difficult until it clicks, skills that show up everywhere else in a kid's life. When parents understand that value, they're more likely to support music beyond the point where their kid “isn't going to be a pro.”

The industry's job is to ensure there's a place to land for each of those goals, including practice apps for the casual player, ensemble gear for the serious student, and home-recording tools for the kid who wants to write. In other words, different destinations with the same on ramp.



John Mlynczak, President and CEO, NAMM

JM: Encourage thinking beyond graduation as the endpoint. Reinforce that music making is a lifelong pursuit rather than simply a school activity. Connect lifelong participation with healthier communities and a stronger music ecosystem.

Technology is reshaping both education and music-making. How should retailers, manufacturers and educators balance traditional music education with emerging technologies, digital tools and new ways students create and learn music?

Position technology as an expansion of music education, not a replacement.

Acknowledge that today's students compose on laptops, collaborate online, record at home, create content for social media, explore music through digital platforms. Recognize these as legitimate creative pathways — and even valuable workforce skills. Balance this by reconfirming that ensemble participation, performance, listening, discipline, leadership and human collaboration remain foundational experiences that technology cannot easily replace.

GQ: We are fortunate to have a large number of community bands and orchestras in our area. Just as colleges recruit graduating high school students, and high schools recruit graduating middle school students,

we should work together to promote involvement in community musical ensembles upon completion of high school and/or college. As an industry, we should work together to encourage and promote active music-making beyond high school and college. Students who play their instruments for 5-10 years should feel it is as natural to join a community music ensemble as an athlete would to join an adult basketball or softball league.

JB: Reframing what is viewed as success in music education is the key. Our unified goal should be to help individuals develop a lifelong relationship with music. I think we can all agree that the majority of students will not become professional musicians. Every kid that plays football does not have a future in the NFL. Encouraging music participation for personal enjoyment throughout life is very important. Showing students examples of adults who continue making music throughout their lives, regardless of profession is paramount.

Parents need to be shown the benefits of music extend well beyond the classroom. We need to do a better job of supporting educator's messaging that there are multiple ways to stay connected with music after graduation. Music education creates lasting value.

MP: I truly believe that is "the question" we should be asking. I only know one answer, The music industry needs to accept the hard truth that we are not getting the job done, and I'm not sure if it's possible to get the industry all together on one page. To get that accomplished would take a true realignment of purpose as an industry. That's possible, but it would take united leadership to move in that direction.

However, currently I do see a new trend slowly emerging. Adults are returning to studying music in a big way, and that's a message worth promoting.

LM: There are kids for whom the B&O experience is the thing — they love the ensemble experience, they thrive on recognition of their hard work, they are inspired to pursue a life in music. And that's fantastic.

But every student — and their guardian — has the ability to recognize that music is language — and that being musical gives them the tools to express themselves when mere words cannot. The power in having a voice is tremendous, and we should encourage every music program participant to treasure their ability to communicate and be understood.

MK: We have to help young people see that there is no single way to participate in music. School ensembles are incredibly important, AND lifelong music-making can also include songwriting, production, beat-making, community ensembles, recording at home, attending live performances, or simply continuing to play for personal enjoyment.

Students are more likely to remain engaged when they can connect what they learn in school to the music they love and to the many ways music exists in their everyday lives. The industry can support that connection through artist engagement, accessible learning resources, community events, internships, and exposure to careers across the music ecosystem.

Parents also need to understand the value of participation, even if their child does not plan to pursue music professionally. Helping families understand how music supports confidence, creativity, academic growth and belonging is another important form of advocacy. The goal isn't to create the next generation of professional musicians. It is to create the next generation of music-makers, audiences, advocates and supporters.

MM: We all have to do more to strengthen the message that playing music lasts a lifetime. It is not just something tied to school programs alone. We have to shape the narrative that music education now (regardless of where) is worth the time and financial investment because it truly enriches people at every stage of life.

Instead of looking at it as simply being an extracurricular activity, it should be considered (and promoted) as a supplement for wellbeing throughout one's life.

AT: As a school band and orchestra dealer we need to do a better job of communicating that music isn't just a school activity, but something that can enrich a person's entire life. While school ensembles are often

where the journey begins, we should also help students see a path to continuing music long after graduation. That means reminding parents and educators that music develops confidence, discipline, creativity, and teamwork, not just musical ability. We also need to connect students with opportunities beyond school, whether that's community ensembles, private lessons, church groups, or simply making music for the enjoyment of it. I've seen firsthand that many of our employees are looking for ways to stay active as musicians and have found that connection by joining community bands and orchestras. That's exactly the kind of lifelong musical engagement we should be helping to foster.

Technology is reshaping both education and music-making. How should retailers, manufacturers, and educators balance traditional music education with emerging technologies, digital tools, and new ways students create and learn music?

JB: Technology cannot replace traditional music education, but can be a powerful tool that expands opportunities for learning, creativity, and engagement. Fundamental skills such as listening, expression, technique, collaboration, and artistry remain important. These skills are not specific to any instrument, platform, or technology. That being said, students experience music differently than they did years ago. Discovery occurs on social platforms.

They create content digitally. True collaboration can occur worldwide. Educators, Administrators, and industry partners need to acknowledge and accept these realities. Successful programs will be those that blend traditional and technological innovation. Students should have opportunities to develop musicianship in a traditional way while also exploring modern tools that reflect today's musical landscape. The challenge (and opportunity) is to advocate that technology enhances musical growth rather than replace the traditional pedagogy. Technology creates an opportunity for more people to experience the joy and benefits of making music.

MP: Technology is huge in education and performance. There is also a counterculture that has re-embraced the natural qualities of music making; acoustic sounds and songwriting etc. There seems to be a natural divide between the two camps, but the musicians in the middle are the winners because they are embracing all the good qualities of both the traditional approaches and using technology to their advantage. I believe the wider we can stretch our creative thinking the better. That applies equally to business and craft; they should both be creative.

MM: There is a lot of technology out there that really can help improve and deliver music education and music making by helping to break down barriers or to increase access. Technology can be used for good, or not. And that is why this is a hard one, because I think we can easily be lured onto the path of least resistance (i.e., we may depend on technology - or AI - too much). But the reality is we have to embrace technology as a way to help support music education and music making. Technology should be used as a tool, not a replacement for a human's creativity and connection with music and through music. I believe the more we educate music students and musicians regarding the pros and cons of technology, the more carefully it will be used.

GQ: High schools began offering guitar classes after the Beatles revolutionized popular music in the 1960s, but it took almost 20 years before it became "mainstream" in many schools. As popular music evolves, it is vital that, as an industry, we need to implement innovative programs at a more rapid pace which address the "musical curiosity" of current students. While being careful to not displace traditional programs like Band, Orchestra, and Chorus, we need to work together to offer additional opportunities for those students not involved in these traditional music offerings in their schools.

MK: Fundamentally, I don't see this as a choice between traditional instruction and technology. Students benefit from foundational musical knowledge while also having opportunities to explore the tools shaping how music is created today.

Technology can make music education more accessible and relevant, particularly for students who may not initially see themselves in a

traditional ensemble. Production software, digital instruments and online learning tools can provide new entry points into music and give students more ways to create, collaborate and express themselves.

The industry can help by making these tools affordable, supporting teachers as they incorporate them into the classroom, and involving teachers in product and curriculum development. The goal should be to give educators more resources and students more pathways to discover how and where they connect with music.

LM: It's very easy to get caught up in "I sell English Horns, so I support programs that teach orchestral music," but it's short-sighted. More music-makers of any stripe beget more music-makers. Research shows that adding more types of music — commercial music, music technology — increases enrollment in traditional B&O programs at the same school.

I love how many professionals in the music industry understand that we advocate for the joy of music-making - not guitars, or band, or performance majors. It's a maturity and global perspective I've never experienced in another industry.

Technology represents disruption and change — but it brings tremendous opportunity. Technology can help programs scale, increase access, lower costs and reduce the administrative burden on (already overburdened) teachers. It's scary, and it's out of control, and it's here to stay, so let's figure it out, not fight it.

JM: Position technology as an expansion of music education, not a replacement.

Acknowledge that today's students compose on laptops, collaborate online, record at home, create content for social media, explore music through digital platforms. Recognize these as legitimate creative pathways — and even valuable workforce skills. Balance this by reconfirming that ensemble participation, performance, listening, discipline, leadership and human collaboration remain foundational experiences that technology cannot easily replace.

BP: Technology's job is to extend a teacher's reach, not replace their judgment. A good teacher can hear a phrasing problem in real time and adjust; no app can do that yet. What technology can do is fill the hours between lessons: reinforcing rhythm, providing instant feedback on pitch or timing, and keeping a student's momentum alive on a Tuesday night when the teacher isn't in the room.

The best educational experiences combine the strengths of great teachers with technology that keeps students motivated and progressing between lessons. It's not about choosing one over the other. It's about creating a more comprehensive learning experience.

Looking ahead five to ten years, what actions should the music products industry prioritize today to ensure school music programs remain relevant, accessible, and sustainable for future generations of students?

MP: Unified support is the best answer. The music products industry, schools, and small local music stores as well as the big box stores all compete for business. Humorously, it's usually smaller stores that have the best education programs.

Working together as an industry in support of music education in schools is the answer. As an industry, we need to keep quality education as a priority. When it comes to sustaining the music industry, Music education is a bigger topic than most folks realize, and it actually works from the bottom up. It starts with a person's curiosity. Our job as an industry is to nurture and encourage that curiosity with quality education and products; enabling young creatives to thrive.

GQ: One of the challenges impacting Band & Orchestra retailers is the critical shortage of qualified Band & Orchestra repair technicians. As an industry, we should be working with more local community colleges to develop and implement instrument repair training programs. We recently received good news that Southwestern Michigan College in Dowagiac, MI will begin offering this opportunity beginning in the 2027-28 school year spearheaded by the Director of Bands, Mark Hollandsworth.

BP: Three things. First, keep lowering the cost and complexity of getting started with instruments, apps, and materials that meet beginners where they are, not where advanced players are. Second, invest directly in educators: better training, better classroom-ready resources, and product design that makes a band or general-music teacher's day easier, not harder. Third, stay engaged in advocacy. The research linking music education to academic and social outcomes is strong, but it has to be renewed and re-argued in every budget cycle. Supporting new industry-wide initiatives such as TeachMusic.org and MusicsEducation.org is a good place to start.

I'd also push the industry to broaden how it measures its success. A sales number tells you what shipped. It doesn't tell you how many of those instruments are still being played in five years. That second number should guide where we invest.

MK: First, we have to invest in educators. A program cannot be sustained by equipment alone. Teachers need professional development, resources, peer networks, and recognition that help them remain energized and effective. Through the CMA Foundation's Music Teachers of Excellence program, we have supported and celebrated hundreds of teachers whose influence reaches far beyond the classroom. Honorees receive unique professional development, are recognized for the extraordinary work they are doing in their classrooms, and become part of a robust alumni network built over the program's first decade. That community provides continued connection, collaboration, and peer support throughout their career.

Second, we need long-term plans for the full life cycle of instruments and technology, including maintenance, repair, replacement and upgrades. A donation can open a door, but sustainability requires continued support.

Third, the industry should help schools offer more pathways into music. Band, orchestra and choir remain essential, while songwriting, production, music technology and other forms of contemporary music-making can welcome even more students into the experience. Programs like the CMA Foundation's Backstage Academy also give students the opportunity to explore careers throughout the music industry, helping them see themselves in roles and pathways they may not have known existed.

Finally, we need to help school leaders, parents and communities understand why music education is essential to a well-rounded education. We should equip them with the information, stories and tools they need to support music programs, particularly when budgets become strained. The millions of dollars invested by the CMA Foundation and the thousands of students reached through that work demonstrate what is possible when resources are paired with strong educators and trusted community partners.

MM: It comes down to how we position music education and its value: not as an optional extra, but as an essential part of growing up, whether it happens in a school or through a community-based partner like Maxwell's House of Music. I believe the strongest path forward may be helping families expect or demand music education access because they understand its lifelong benefits. Let's face it; it is our job to help create that spark!

JM: Participate in local, district and federal music education advocacy. Engage with the coalitions and at the local level. Build strong relationships now so they are ready when we need them in the future.

Collect data locally. Use powerful stories of how music students have successful careers today because of what a music class gave them.

Increase career awareness so students understand the breadth of opportunities throughout the music products industry. Ensure that all career advisors in a school district know the pathways that careers. namm.org identify.

LM: Music-making is universal. It is a skill, an art, and a pathway into workforce readiness. It is critical to mental health and social well-being. The skills taught in instrumental music cannot be gamed by AI. There are precious few options in the school environment that are so

AFTER SEVENTY YEARS, IT'S AS IF THE MUSIC IS JUST BEGINNING.

In 1956, a group of Chinese craftsmen gathered in a Guangzhou side street shed no larger than a single-car garage to pursue a dream. Their ambition was considered impossible: building a piano from scratch that would someday compete with the best in the world. By the end of the first year, these brave entrepreneurs had sold thirteen instruments, and Pearl River would soon become one of China's first domestic piano manufacturers.

Today, the Pearl River Piano Group has grown to be the world's largest piano manufacturer and one of the world's largest musical instrument makers. Besides our 3.2 million-square-foot facility, where Pearl River, Ritmüller, and Kayserburg pianos are crafted, we have expanded into producing guitars, violins, drums, brass, and woodwinds. Seventy years later, Pearl River is still guided by the same belief that started it all: the next great instrument is always ahead of us.



1956



**PEARL RIVER
PIANO**

Celebrating Our 70th Anniversary



2026

universally beneficial to all students. But it's not intuitive to see those benefits. Music needs cheerleaders, advocates and storytellers who can help their communities see and understand the importance of music not only for children but for all of us. A society that values music is the ultimate rising tide for the industry.

JB: As mentioned previously, the industry must make access, advocacy, and adaptability a priority. We need to keep removing barriers (financial, geographic, cultural, or technological) that prevent students from participating in music programs. We must continue to strengthen advocacy efforts and never assume people already understand the value of music education. We need to continually communicate its impact to school leaders, policymakers, and communities, showing the role music plays in developing well-rounded, engaged, and creative members of society. We must remain flexible and adaptable to the changing interests and needs of future students. This does not mean abandoning the traditional music classes; it means making sure that the classes and opportunities reflect the many ways students engage with music. Most importantly, we must remember why all this work matters. At KHS, we believe music is an essential part of life. If we keep students at the center of every decision and stay focused on the broader societal impact of music education, the industry will remain sustainable and, more than that, it will thrive.

If every stakeholder in the music education ecosystem — retailers, manufacturers, educators, advocacy organizations, and schools — could commit to one collaborative initiative over the next year, what would have the greatest impact on growing participation in music education and strengthening the pipeline of future musicians?

MM: Wouldn't it be amazing and powerful if all of us in this industry could collaborate by using one simple tagline or the same branding assets that supported what we know about the lifelong benefits of music education and music making? If we all collaborated together for one year by using the same message about the lifelong benefits of learning and making music (regardless of how you get that music education) — not to compete with each other, but to create one simple message from all of us. I think some brand copywriter should "Just Do It" (Thanks Nike, for that inspo!) — and we all jump on board to drive the point home — that Music Matters For Life!

JB: Creating a unified initiative where manufacturers, retailers, educators, advocacy organizations, and schools worked together to ensure that every student personally has an opportunity to be involved in music-making is paramount. The greatest opportunity we have is not simply to grow the next generation of musicians. It's creating the next generation of people who understand the value of music in their lives.

The future of music education isn't about selling more product, it's about creating more musicians, more advocates, and more people who view music as an essential part of life. When we strengthen music education, we strengthen society itself.

MP: This is a tough question, because many things have been tried. NAMM certainly has done a lot to unify the message with NAMM's Fly-in. That effort centers on getting law makers to support music education in schools, so it's important to maintain that effort.

But somehow, I feel the music industry could be more unified and louder about the message. It's all too clear that the industry is losing interest of our youth. Today young musicians want it faster with tools that make the craft of music easier to learn. The problem with that is that playing music is truly a craft. The industry has tried campaigns like "Music Makes You Smarter," but we are at a new crossroads, and unified campaigns are still the best path to rekindle the curiosity of learning. To maintain quality in music education we need curious young artists to be motivated to be great musicians. We also need a message that makes our youth curious to learn.

BP: I'd focus everything on the first year of a student's musical life. That's when most students quit, and it's also the window when the right support has the greatest leverage.

Concretely: every instrument purchase or school enrollment should include a clear next step — a retailer contact, a digital practice resource, or a teacher check-in point — so a student's path doesn't go cold the moment they leave the store or finish orientation.

The industry talks a lot about recruitment. Retention is the harder, more valuable problem, and it's the one most within our control. If retailers, manufacturers, educators, and advocacy groups treated the first-year experience as a shared responsibility rather than a handoff, we'd see the effect not only on this year's enrollment numbers but also on how many of today's beginners are still playing a decade from now.

LM: The more we can do to expand the definition of what "school music" is, the better off we'll all be.

Think about this: we haven't significantly changed the way we prepare music teachers for the classroom in 60 years. Young teachers are hungry for the tools and wherewithal to welcome more students to their classrooms — we should do everything we can to prepare them to bring every student into the music-making experience.

We can partner with collegiate Music Ed programs to advocate for expanded curriculum, we can collaborate with local innovators to deliver professional development through our music educators associations, we can host our own PD opportunities. The greatest barrier to scalability is access to the information — the desire is there, so we should focus our considerable creativity and organization to meet it.



George Quinlan, CEO and President, Quinlan & Fabish Music Company

GQ: When NAMM initially funded the Music and the Brain research, within just a few years, the ideas presented rapidly became "mainstream" in the minds of the parents of school-aged children. Even today, it's not uncommon to have parents extol the virtues of the benefits of music education outlined from this research at beginner B&O registration events. The work of Music Advocacy is never done. We need to continue to research and provide data for parents and school administrators to emphasize the benefits of a music education on developing the "whole child"...not an isolated artistic talent, but a holistic development tool that simultaneously develops a child's cognitive, social-emotional, physical and psychological growth. We are fortunate to have a leading authority on this subject in our area, Dr. Scott Edgar of Lake Forest College, IL.



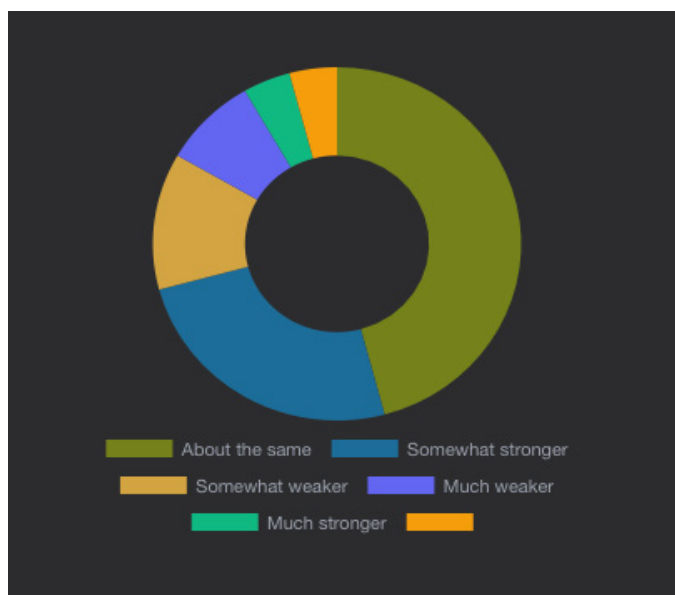
READY FOR THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL RUSH?

By Christian Wissmuller

Back-to-school season has long been one of the most significant sales periods on the musical instrument retail calendar, generating demand for band and orchestra instruments, accessories, rentals, repairs, and a wide range of educational services. For many dealers, the weeks leading up to the start of the school year set the tone for the months that follow, making careful planning, strong school relationships, and efficient operations especially critical. Success during this period often depends on balancing inventory levels, staffing needs, and customer service while responding to the unique demands of local school music programs.

Yet no two back-to-school seasons are exactly alike. Dealers continue to navigate shifting economic conditions, evolving consumer expectations, changing school enrollment patterns, and ongoing questions about pricing, product availability, and rental demand. At the same time, retailers are looking for new ways to strengthen customer relationships, improve the rental experience, and distinguish themselves in increasingly competitive markets. To better understand how music retailers are preparing for the season, we surveyed dealers across the country about their expectations, biggest challenges, sales outlook, inventory strategies, and priorities for the months ahead. Their responses offer a snapshot of the opportunities — and uncertainties — shaping this year's back-to-school business.

How would you describe your expectations for this year's back-to-school season compared to last year?



About the same: 43.5%

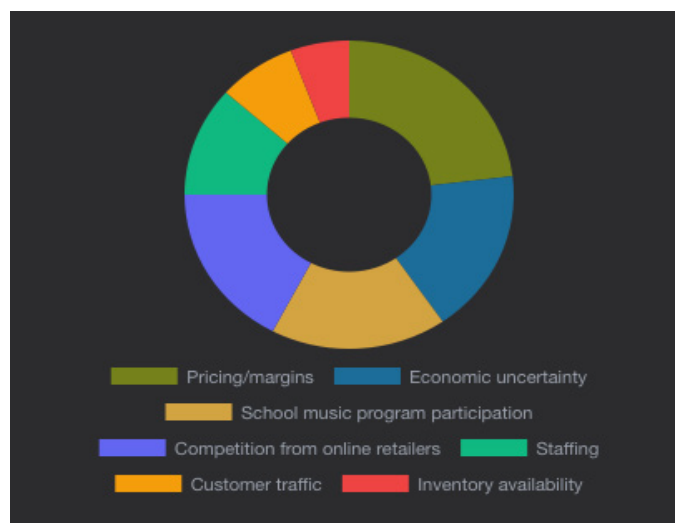
Somewhat stronger: 26.1%

Somewhat weaker: 13%

Much weaker: 8.7%

Much stronger: 4.3%

What are the biggest challenges your store is facing heading into back-to-school?



Pricing/margins: 52.4%

School music program participation: 42.9%

Economic uncertainty: 38.1%

Competition from online retailers: 38.1%

Staffing: 28.6%

Customer traffic: 19%

Inventory availability: 14.3%

ARE YOU DOING ANYTHING DIFFERENT THIS YEAR IN TERMS OF PROMOTIONS, EVENTS, RENTALS OR MARKETING? IF SO, WHAT?

"We have added a purchase credit to rental customers for the first time."

Connie Smith

Ward-Brodt Music

Fitchburg, WI

"We are trying a little bit different initial rental option to see how well it may work. So far, we do not see any substantial difference in the number of instruments rented from previous years"

Michael L. Shivelbine

Shivelbrine's Music

Cape Girardeau, MO

"Yes, we are having a "Back to Band Bash" with all the local schools invited to participate. We will have games, food, and a prize for the band with the most attendees."

Jon Hiller

TC3 music Supply

Metropolis, IL

"Next to impossible. Amro Music in Memphis, Tenn., has been the king for 70+ years with school programs. They have it locked down locally."

James L. Burke III

Blues City Music LLC

Memphis, TN

"We have increased our digital marketing and SEO Reach. We have also worked harder to engage the educators with greater frequency and purpose through the summer months to promote a support more successful recruiting year."

James Provost

Gerry's Music Shop

South Hadley, MA

"Trying to have a competitive rental program with quality instruments like we always have done. Free repairs on rentals helps."

Kevin Central Penn

IN ONE OR TWO SENTENCES, WHAT'S YOUR OVERALL OUTLOOK FOR THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL SEASON?

"I think it's going to be slow. I think prices are very high on some basic items and customers think we are the ones profiting on the last round of price hikes."

Rusty Olson

Rockhaus

Milwaukee, WI

"Not expecting a lot of growth. Concerned about the continuing increases in manufacturing prices and consumer sticker shock."

Randy Collins

Collins Music Center

El Campo, TX

"We are cautiously optimistic. The table seems to be well set, but headwinds of inflation, high fuel prices and economic uncertainty could prove problematic."

Robert Christie

A&G Central Music

Troy, MI

Are you seeing any changes in participation in local school music programs or beginning band/orchestra enrollment? If so, how is that affecting your business?

"Big problem is declining enrollment in schools. Some grades are down 30-40% in numbers of kids to pull from. Hard to increase rental numbers when less kids are available to begin an instrument."

Kevin Walters

Central Penn Music

Palmyra, PA

"I think from what we have seen so far we are about the same as last year as far as numbers at the schools we service. We did have one school announce just this week that they are looking for a teacher, as theirs just left the district. We have had a bunch of new customers from the Paducah, KY market come in over this summer, however, for both repairs and supplies (we are in Metropolis, IL, literally just across the Ohio River from Paducah), which has been nice, and hopefully as parents find out about us that will continue to grow."

Jon Hiller

Cowabunga Music

Metropolis, IL

"As noted above, the number of kids enrolled in public schools is decreasing. This effects the pool of potential students wanting to join their schools' music program. Decreasing enrollment, Municipal and school budget deficits, partnered with a much less engaged parent has significantly affected the excitement and draw to Beginning Band or Orchestra. The simple equation: Less students = less rentals. The X Factor in this equation is Educator. Partnering with a teacher who is committed, dynamic, energetic and engaging. Our goal is to foster these characteristics in younger teachers. These folks are on the frontline and do all they can to fight for music and students to join their program."

James Provost

Gerry's Music Shop

South Hadley, MA

"Fewer students are choosing to join band and orchestra, but retention rates are higher. It's harder for us to have a good stock of rental return instruments. We're relying more on renting new instruments, which scares some customers off with the higher total price tag."

Zach Haltvick

Music Street

Marshall, MN

PORTMAN'S MUSIC SUPERSTORE AT 90

By Christian Wissmuller

Ninety years is a remarkable milestone in any business, but in the MI industry, it speaks to something more than longevity. It reflects generations of customer relationships, an ability to adapt through changing markets, and a steadfast commitment to making music accessible. As Portman's Music celebrates its 90th anniversary, the family-owned retailer looks back on nearly a century of serving musicians while continuing to evolve for the future. This feature explores the company's history, the values that have sustained it, and the people who have shaped its legacy.

“There were moments when it would have been easier to sell, to downsize, or to walk away. We didn't. That commitment to staying in the fight, even when it was hard, is part of why we're still here.”

90 years is an extraordinary milestone in music retail. What do you believe are the key reasons Portman's has remained successful while so many independent music retailers have come and gone?

Relationships. That's the short answer. When you're a family-owned independent, you can't compete with a national chain on volume or marketing budget — so you have to compete on something they can never replicate, and that's genuine, long-term relationships with directors, students, and communities. Our Ed Reps have been in the same schools for years, sometimes decades. Directors know them by name. Parents trust them. When a chain sends a different rep every season, that matters.

We've also never tried to be everything to everyone. We know who we serve — school music programs across Georgia and South Carolina — and we've stayed focused on doing that exceptionally well rather than chasing every trend in the industry.

And honestly, stubbornness has served us well. There were moments when it would have been easier to sell, to downsize, or to walk away. We didn't. That commitment to staying in the fight, even when it was hard, is part of why we're still here.

The Portman family's connection to music retail dates back to Sam Portman selling instruments in Savannah as early as 1910. How has that family legacy shaped the company's culture and decision-making today?

It sets a standard you feel every day. When you know your grandfather was building this before you were born, you don't make decisions lightly. There's a weight to the name — a responsibility to the people who came before you and to the community that has supported this family for generations.

Practically, it means we think long. We're not making decisions based on this quarter's numbers. We're asking whether a decision is something Ben and Pearl would have made, whether it serves our community, whether it protects the people who work for us. Family businesses operate on a different clock than publicly traded companies, and that's always been an advantage for us.

It also means the people who work here aren't just employees — many of them have been with us long enough that they're part of the family story too. That continuity, that loyalty, flows directly from the culture Ben and Pearl established.

Music education has been central to Portman's since Ben and Pearl Portman formalized the business in 1936. How has your commitment to school music programs evolved over the decades?

The commitment hasn't changed — the sophistication of how we deliver it has. In the early years, serving school music programs

meant showing up with instruments and a handshake. Today it means a full rental program, dedicated Educational Representatives in every market, instrument repair and maintenance support, and a deep understanding of how school budgets, program structures, and director needs actually work.

What we've learned over 90 years is that school music programs need a partner, not a vendor. Directors are stretched thin. They're managing parents, budgets, administrators, and curriculum — the last thing they need is a music company that makes their job harder. We've built everything we do around making their job easier, and that philosophy has deepened significantly over the decades.

The addition of retired band directors to our Ed Rep team has been one of the most meaningful evolutions. When a director is talking to someone who has stood in front of a band, managed a rental night, and dealt with a tight budget — that's a different conversation than a traditional sales call.

Portman's has expanded from a single Savannah location to serving multiple markets across Georgia. What have been the biggest lessons you've learned about growing while maintaining a strong local presence?

The biggest lesson is that growth can hollow you out if you're not intentional. Every time we entered a new market, the temptation was to move fast. What we learned is that you have to earn your place in a community — you can't buy it or shortcut it.

Local presence isn't about having a storefront in a city. It's about having people in that community who are known, trusted, and invested. That means hiring reps who live in the markets they serve, supporting local schools and programs the way a neighbor would, and showing up consistently over years — not just during rental season.

We've also learned that each market has its own personality. What works in Savannah isn't automatically what works in Augusta, Brunswick or Albany. You have to listen before you lead.

Over nine decades, you've witnessed dramatic changes in the music products industry — from the rise of big-box retailers to e-commerce and now AI-driven technologies. Which industry shifts have had the greatest impact on your business?

The rise of national chains was the most disruptive thing we faced. When companies with enormous resources and national marketing budgets moved into our markets, a lot of independents didn't survive it. We had to get very clear about what we offered that they couldn't — and then get very good at saying it.

E-commerce changed consumer expectations in ways that affected every retailer. Parents started comparison shopping online before they ever walked into a store. That forced us to sharpen our value

proposition and be much more intentional about the service and expertise we bring that a website cannot.

What gives us confidence about AI and emerging technologies is that the core of what we do is human. A parent choosing an instrument for their child, a director trusting a rep with their program, a student picking up a horn for the first time — those are relationship moments.

Technology can support that, but it can't replace it. We intend to use it as a tool, not let it become a substitute.

Portman's has been recognized as a NAMM Top 100 Dealer multiple times in recent years. What aspects of your operation do you think most contributed to earning that recognition?

The rental program and our educational services model are the foundation of it. We've built a rental operation that is professional, parent-friendly, and deeply integrated with how school programs actually function. Directors recommend us because we make their programs stronger — and that drives volume and loyalty that shows up in the numbers NAMM evaluates.

But beyond metrics, we think recognition reflects a culture of continuous improvement. We don't coast. We're always asking what we can do better — better training for our reps, better service for directors, better experience for families. That mindset of never being satisfied, even after 90 years, is what keeps an operation competitive enough to earn that kind of recognition.

School music programs remain a vital part of many MI retailers' business models. What trends are you seeing today in band and orchestra participation, and what gives you optimism about the future of music education?

Participation is resilient in ways that continue to impress us. Even through the disruption of the pandemic years and the ongoing pressures on school budgets, directors have fought to keep their programs alive — and families have responded. When music education is championed by a passionate director, students show up. That hasn't changed.

What gives us the most optimism is the quality of the directors we work with today. They are advocates, not just teachers. They understand the research on music education and cognitive development, they make the case for their programs with data and passion, and they build communities around their ensembles that go well beyond the rehearsal room. When directors like that are leading programs in our markets, we feel good about the future.

As one of Georgia's oldest and most established music retailers, how do you balance honoring tradition with embracing innovation in areas such as technology, marketing, and customer engagement?

The tradition we protect isn't the way we've always done things — it's why we've always done them. The values are non-negotiable: relationships, community, service, trust. The methods have to evolve or you become irrelevant.

We've invested in digital marketing, social media, and tools that help our reps be more effective and connected with directors. We've modernized our rental platform and how we communicate with families. We've embraced new ways of telling the Portman's story. None of that feels like a departure from who we are — it feels like honoring who we are by staying relevant.

The honest answer is that the balance isn't always easy. There are moments when an innovation feels like it's in contention with something we value. In those moments, we go back to the question: does this serve our customers and our community better? If the answer is yes, we move forward. If it doesn't, we don't.

What are some of the most memorable moments, customers, educators, or community partnerships that have defined Portman's journey over the past 90 years?

There are too many to name, and the ones that matter most often aren't the big milestones — they're the quiet ones. A director who called to thank us after a particularly hard year. A student who came back as an adult to tell us that renting that first instrument changed the direction of their life. A longtime Ed Rep retiring after decades in the same schools, and watching directors show up to honor him.

Woody Leonard's retirement is fresh on our minds. Forty years of relationship with this company, ten years as one of our reps — the response from the directors and schools who knew him was extraordinary. That's not a business transaction. That's community. Those moments remind us what this is really about.

The City of Savannah's recognition of our anniversary through a formal proclamation was deeply meaningful. To have this city — where Sam Portman first sold instruments over a century ago — formally acknowledge what the family has built here was something we won't forget.

When you look ahead to the next decade, what opportunities and challenges do you see for both Portman's Music and the broader music products industry?

The opportunity is consolidation of trust. As the industry continues to consolidate and more independents struggle, the retailers who have built genuine community roots and real relationships are going to stand out more, not less. Families and directors are going to want to know who they're dealing with. That plays to our strengths.

The challenge is staying ahead of how customers find, evaluate, and choose a music provider. The next generation of bandparents grew up online. We have to meet them where they are while still delivering the personal experience that has always set us apart.

For the broader industry, the health of school music education funding is always a concern. When budgets get cut, music is often an early target. We see ourselves as advocates for that cause, not just beneficiaries of it. Portman's will continue to invest in the argument for music education — because the stronger those programs are, the stronger our communities are.

If Ben and Pearl could walk into one of your stores today, what do you think would make them most proud? What would surprise them the most?

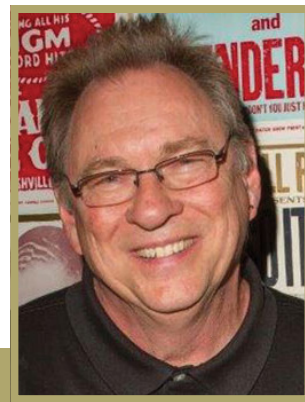
We think what would make them most proud is that it's still here. That the family kept going. That the name still means something in Savannah and across Georgia. Ben and Pearl built this in a time when there were no guarantees — a family business surviving one generation is an achievement, let alone reaching ninety years. We think they'd feel that their faith in this community, and the community's faith in them, was honored.

What would surprise them most? Probably the reach. The idea that Portman's would have locations in Augusta, Albany and Brunswick — serving school programs from the coast to the middle of the state — would have been hard to imagine in 1936. And the rental program as it exists today, the technology behind it, the scale of it — that would be remarkable to them.

But we also think they'd recognize the spirit of it immediately. The conversation between a rep and a director. A parent trying to figure out which instrument is right for their child. A young person holding a horn for the first time. That hasn't changed at all. And we hope it never does.

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT: Relationships Part II

By Menzie Pittman, Author of *The New Musician*



Last month I shed light on the unique relationships that develop between music stores, music educators, and rising music students.

When musicians first come into a music store, they are generally either seeking assistance with product needs, repair services, or they have a need for assistance in learning more about how to play music on a given instrument.

As we all know, when someone is studying music, the music teacher is the source of information. This includes educating the student in music styles, as well as techniques. The music teacher gives rising musicians guidance through whatever hurdles they encounter, and if a music teacher is lucky enough, those students usually stick with studying music for years because music is their priority, and so the mentoring relationship begins and can last years.

But let's flip the script. Let's rebrand the whole experience. Let's say the music student is extraordinarily capable and excited to learn to play music well. The family does their research and finds a qualified music store with an established lessons program. This is generally the formula that creates long-lasting relationships.

Now, fast forward ten years, and this is where the script really flips. The music students are now college students or young working professionals, and they have established reputations of their own. They have gone off to L.A., Nashville, or New York, and they are succeeding in a big way. But you're not off the hook by any means and thank goodness for that. There is a true reason you're not off the hook. The reason is that while you were teaching and guiding them through method books and technical drills, you kept them engaged.

The truth is effective teachers keep the atmosphere light and develop true friendships with their music families. They keep the learning atmosphere loose by sharing humorous anecdotes about crazy coincidences that they have personally encountered in the business.

In my case to keep the atmosphere relaxed, I tell stories such as the time that Lionel Hampton showed up in a rock club I was playing in in Florida. The waitress

approached me saying that Lionel Hampton is in the audience and wants to sit in. While I was laughing at the absurdity of what she was saying, Lionel Hampton walked up behind her, leaned in, and asked me directly if sitting in was okay with the band. Talk about eating humble pie.

Flipping that script, after years of studying, now it is the students turn to let you enjoy their successes; It's celebrations with a wink. Take for example the time my former student Cameron Thistle, who is in the band Saburnia, sent me a picture of Buddy Rich from Ronnie Scotts' Jazz club in London. He ever so casually let me know he was subbing with a friend's band, and they were gigging at Ronie Scotts. How crazy is that? Cameron struck again with a texted video from a BMI house party event in L.A. Cam and his brother Devin were excited about being at a record label party with guest Stevie Wonder; out of the blue Wonder spontaneously decided to play.

I don't normally receive too many video texts at 3 a.m., but in this instance it was perfect, and made my day! I'm sure their thought it was only midnight, so he'll still be up. He loves Stevie. And do you know what, they were right. I can think of nothing better than their flipping the script and leading the way.

Lastly, what could be more fun than receiving a photo text from my friend Jason Gano, asking if I recognize the girl in the picture? I have a feeling he knew I did. It was our longtime friend and former student Sela Campbell. Jason recently opened Guitar Works, a music shop on eighth street in Nashville and as luck would have it, Sela Campbell was in Nashville and happened to visit Guitar Works. Sela has just signed with Creative Artists Agency (CAA) and has released her debut EP, *Lovin' Made Me Mean*.

The long-lasting relationships we cultivate with our families and our students keeps us relevant, and up to speed with today's latest music trends. As music educators we also introduce students to music that remains relevant and that has been time-tested. Youth benefit from our knowledge of products, and music history, and music teachers and retail music shops certainly benefit from a flipped script, allowing today's young musicians to lead the way.

Cases & Stands

New Flight Cases from Gator

Gator Cases has expanded its ONYX Series of DJ flight cases with a new model designed for the AlphaTheta XDJ-AZ DJ System. The case features integrated LED lighting while maintaining the series' sleek blackout aesthetic.

The case features the ONYX Series' all-black 9 mm wood construction with black aluminum valances, a custom-fit interior and ATA-style hardware designed for protecting equipment during transport and use. The G-ONYXUD-XDJAZ-LED includes an integrated LED light strip system with remote control and USB power, offering multiple color options and adjustable modes to enhance visibility in low-light environments and complement stage lighting.

A smooth-gliding upper deck platform accommodates a laptop, while red recessed twist latches and spring-loaded rubber-gripped handles support secure closure and handling. The EVA-lined interior cushions the controller within the case.

The ONYX Series also includes models designed for AlphaTheta DJ equipment, including the DDJ-FLX10, XDJ-RX3, DDJ-FLX4, DJM-A9 and CDJ-3000, as well as the Rane One.

Additionally, Gator Cases has introduced a professional ATA-style flight case designed specifically for the Yamaha DM7 Compact digital mixer. Built for touring and live production environments, the case combines rugged protection with integrated cable management and accessory storage to support efficient transport and streamlined setup.

The GTOUR-DM7CMPCT is engineered to provide a secure, custom fit for the Yamaha DM7 Compact mixer, helping to protect the console during transport and performance. Constructed from rugged 9 mm plywood with a laminated exterior, the case is designed to withstand the demands of touring, production and live event applications.

An integrated doghouse compartment offers convenient cable routing and power connection management, helping maintain a cleaner and more organized workstation. Additional integrated lid compartments provide accessible storage for accessories and essentials.

The case features a durable aluminum valance that assists with precise lid alignment for a secure fit, while Gator's signature red recessed twist latches help keep the console protected during movement. Spring-loaded rubber grip handles and smooth-rolling lockable casters support comfortable handling and loadouts between venues and production environments. For more information about Gator Cases and its line of pro audio storage solutions, visit gatorco.com.

For more information, visit gatorcases.com.



Accessories

Levy's Introduces Untamed Animal Print Guitar Straps

Levy's Music has introduced the Untamed Animal Print Series, a collection of polyester guitar straps featuring wildlife-inspired patterns. Handcrafted in Nova Scotia, Canada, the series includes six animal-print designs.

Each strap in the Untamed Animal Print Series is constructed from 2-inch polyester and features genuine leather ends designed for secure instrument attachment. Adjustable from 35.25 inches to 60.5 inches (895 mm to 1,536 mm), the straps accommodate a variety of playing positions and instrument types.

Each model shares the same polyester construction and tri-glide adjustment system while offering a different animal print. The series includes Black and White Cow Print, Leopard Print, Rainbow Leopard Print, Brown Snake Print, Tiger Stripe Print and Black and White Zebra Stripe Print designs. For more information about these and other guitar straps offered by Levy's, visit levysleathers.com.

For more information, visit levysleathers.com.



Mojotone Introduces Hellbender Pickup Set with Bill Kelliher

Mojotone introduced the Hellbender Pickup Set, developed in collaboration with guitarist Bill Kelliher. The set is designed for modern high-gain applications while preserving clarity, note separation and dynamic response.

The Hellbender pairs a ceramic magnet with an Alnico 5 magnet. Mojotone says the combination retains the power and punch of ceramic while adding brighter highs, tighter bass response, upper-mid presence and improved string articulation.

The pickup set is designed around three requirements common to high-gain players: strong magnets, hum-cancelling construction and a balanced frequency curve. Wax potting helps prevent microphonics, while the frequency response emphasizes tight lows, focused mids and clear highs.

According to Mojotone, the collaboration began when Kelliher sought a high-output pickup capable of handling modern gain levels without sacrificing definition. The resulting set is intended to deliver heavy rhythm tones while remaining responsive in stage and studio settings.

For more information, visit mojotone.com.



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Pro Audio

Solid State Logic Launches Odyssey

Solid State Logic introduced Odyssey, a large-format analogue recording and mixing console with Instant Recall across the entire console. The system expands SSL's Future Analogue platform and joins the previously released Oracle console.

Powered by SSL's ActiveAnalogue technology, Odyssey combines analogue signal flow and tactile controls with digital management of console settings. Engineers can restore, compare and switch between complete console states during tracking, overdubbing, mixing, stem creation and client revisions.

Niall Feldman, director of special projects at SSL, said Odyssey expands the Instant Recall approach introduced with Oracle into a modular console platform with full channel processing and large and small faders.

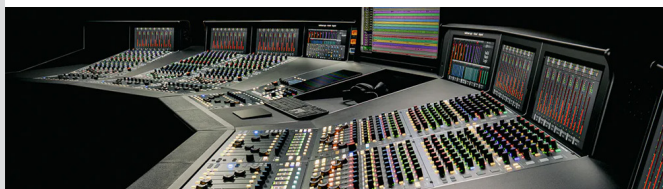
Each channel includes PureDrive microphone preamplifiers with DRIVE control, analogue dynamics, switchable E and G Series EQ, assignable high- and low-pass filters, insert points and motorized dual-fader control. Odyssey configurations range from 24+8 channels to 96+8 channels, with straight-frame, curved ProStation and custom-frame options.

The console provides four stereo main mix buses, 16 track buses, 10 auxiliary buses, eight stereo Flex Groups and three stereo foldback buses. Other features include per-bay DAW control, immersive monitoring support, SSL's O-Motion dynamic automation system and O-Control session and configuration software.

Odyssey's center section integrates monitoring, routing, mix control, bus processing, communications, automation and DAW integration. It includes THE BUS+, Analogue Dynamic EQ and support for immersive monitoring systems, including Dolby Atmos renderer control. Analogue circuitry is housed in dedicated remote processing racks.

SSL also announced O Series V2.0, which adds project compatibility between Odyssey and Oracle. The update brings Snapshot filtering, O-Motion DAW plug-in automation and Odyssey's TouchView dynamics display to Oracle. Odyssey is available in Standard, ProStation and custom configurations.

For more information, visit solidstatellogic.com.



Amplifiers

Bad Cat Amplifiers Unveils Cub 15 Mod Shop Edition

Bad Cat Amplifiers introduced the Cub 15 Mod Shop Edition, a handcrafted, American-built amplifier that returns one of the company's most beloved designs to its original philosophy. Available as either a 1×12 combo or head, the Cub 15 Mod Shop Edition traces its lineage directly back to the original 1999 Mark Sampson Cub.

Rather than chasing higher gain or additional complexity, Bad Cat focused on refining what made the original amplifier exceptional. Key attributes include dynamic response, touch sensitivity, harmonic richness and effortless musicality. Powered by two EL84 output tubes delivering 15 watts, the Cub features a completely re-voiced EQ section engineered to more closely capture the character of the original Cub while expanding its versatility for modern players.

A single-channel layout is paired with a Clean/Overdrive selector and dual foot-switchable master volumes. This allows players to move seamlessly between rhythm and lead settings without sacrificing simplicity. Additional features include Bass, Middle, Treble and Global Presence controls, a buffered effects loop, a balanced line output and a two-button footswitch included with every amplifier.

Built entirely in Costa Mesa, California, each Cub 15 Mod Shop Edition features Bad Cat hand-wound transformers and a Baltic birch cabinet. The combo model includes a UK-made 12-inch Celestion Greenback speaker.

The Cub helped define who Bad Cat became, said Jon Bingham, Director of Sales at Bad Cat Amplifiers. This was not about creating another version of the Cub. It was about rediscovering what made players fall in love with it in the first place. Every decision was made to preserve the feel, immediacy and musical response that made the original amplifier so inspiring.

The Cub occupies a unique place in the Bad Cat lineup. While many amplifiers attempt to recreate classic British tones, the Cub builds upon that heritage with greater dynamic range and tighter low-end response. Whether played clean, pushed into edge-of-breakup or driven into singing overdrive, the Cub responds naturally to the player's touch rather than relying on excessive preamp gain.

The Cub 15 Mod Shop Edition Head carries a U.S. street price of \$1,999.99. The 1×12 Combo is priced at \$2,199.99. Both models are available at all authorized Bad Cat dealers beginning July 30, 2026. The amplifier includes a five-year limited warranty.

For more information, visit badcatamps.com.



Fretted

Winzz Guitars Introduces Neck-Through-Body Bass Guitars

Winzz Guitars has expanded its fretted instrument lineup with the EBS714 four-string and EBS715 five-string electric bass guitars. The neck-through-body instruments are designed for modern stage and studio use, with a thick, articulate low-end response.

Both models feature solid okoume body sides with a walnut top and a matte finish. A continuous okoume neck-through construction uses a C-shaped profile and a 35-inch scale length. The instruments have 24-fret fingerboards with shell inlays.

The EBS714 and EBS715 use active dual-humbucker pickup configurations. Controls include master volume and a three-band EQ with boost and cut for bass, middle and treble frequencies.

A through-body stringing design is intended to increase sustain and mechanical string tension. The instruments are finished with chrome hardware.

The EBS714 has a street price of \$379.99, while the EBS715 is priced at \$409.99. For more information, visit winzzguitars.com.



Furch Guitars Marks 45th Anniversary with Updated and Limited-Edition Instruments

Furch Guitars is marking its 45th anniversary in 2026 with updates across its acoustic-guitar portfolio and limited-edition commemorative instruments.

The company's updated Vintage Series introduces refined specifications, an expanded model range and a renewed visual identity. The instruments carry a Furch Heritage logo inspired by the company's historic headstock designs.

Furch has also introduced the Violet Anniversary Gc-EM a Anthem, a limited-edition acoustic guitar produced in a run of 90 instruments worldwide. The model pairs an Engelmann spruce top with African mahogany back and sides and includes the company's CNR System Active neck joint, Booster Soundport and Bevel Duo ergonomic treatment.

The anniversary model includes commemorative graphics on its headstock and pickguard and is factory-equipped with an LR Baggs Anthem pickup. Additional information is available from Furch Guitars.

For more information, visit furchguitars.com.



PRS Guitars unveils Custom 24 Birds of a Feather Edition

PRS Guitars announced the Custom 24 Birds of a Feather Limited Edition, built as part of the Core series. Limited to 350 pieces worldwide, the guitar features the PRS Birds of a Feather inlay, celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. The inlay was previously available only through Private Stock.

The distinctive interpretation of PRS's iconic bird inlays was designed by Paul Miles, now director of manufacturing and head of Private Stock.

"Very often, Private Stock is an incubator for what we can do on Core. This helps our production line grow and learn new techniques that we would usually save for custom builds. We have passed down colors, processes, and inlay to offer more options for dealers who are looking for custom work, making the Core series a branch of the Private Stock shop," Miles said.

The Custom 24 Birds of a Feather Limited Edition retains everything players love about the Custom 24 model: a figured maple top, mahogany back, 25-inch scale length, and PRS DMO pickups. The Pattern Thin mahogany neck and rosewood fretboard offer a fast, familiar feel, while PRS Phase III locking tuners and the patented Gen III tremolo provide tuning stability and resonance.

More than a commemorative instrument, the Custom 24 Birds of a Feather Limited Edition is a celebration of craftsmanship, identity, and the enduring spirit of the guitar that started it all.

The model is available in Blood Red, Charcoal Microburst, and Honey Gold.

For all of the latest news, visit prsguitars.com and follow @prsguitars on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, and YouTube.

For more information, visit prsguitars.com.



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