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A Conversation with John Mlynczak - Part 1



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Upfront Q&A:
Fender's Christina Stejskal

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MUSICAL MERCHANDISE REVIEW

FEATURES

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Christina Stejskal is no stranger to Fender — or to telling the story of one of the most recognizable brands in the music products industry. After previously spending nearly a decade helping shape Fender's global communications through a period of substantial growth and digital transformation, Stejskal has returned to the company as chief communications officer. In her new role, she'll oversee everything from brand and product communications to creator strategy and corporate reputation as Fender continues to balance its considerable legacy with an ever-evolving role in music and culture. *MMR* recently caught up with Stejskal to discuss her return to Fender, what's changed since her first tenure, and how she plans to help tell the company's story in the years ahead.

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For a drummer, moving beyond that first kit is a milestone. It's the point where an instrument becomes more than something to learn on and starts reflecting the player's developing sound, style, and ambitions. Today's step-up market gives those players more choices than ever, with premium woods, upgraded hardware, expanded configurations, and increasingly sophisticated finishes available without making the leap to a top-tier professional kit. For this month's cover feature, "A Step Above: Acoustic Drum Kits for Players Ready for More," we check in with Scott Donnell of Drum Workshop, Bill Ludwig of TAMA, Matt Rudin of Yamaha, and Jeff Mulvihill of KHS to discuss what's selling, what today's players expect from a step-up kit, and where this important segment of the acoustic drum market is headed.

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DEALERS' CHOICE AWARDS

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The nominees are in, and now it's time for MI retailers to have their say. *MMR*'s annual Dealers' Choice Awards recognize the products and brands that stood out in the music products industry over the past year — and, as always, the winners are determined by you, the dealers. Take a look at this year's nominees and cast your votes for the people and products you feel deserve top honors in 2026. Voting closes at 5 p.m. ET on December 15, so be sure to make your choices before the deadline.

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By Christian Wissmuller

STEPPING UP AND STANDING OUT

There are certain product categories where the phrase “step-up” means a little more than it does elsewhere.

A beginning guitarist can pick up a more expensive guitar and immediately appreciate a nicer finish, better hardware, or simply the name on the headstock. With acoustic drums, the differences that come with moving beyond an entry-level kit can be just as apparent, but they're also wonderfully physical. Better shells, better bearing edges, better hardware, more thoughtful configurations — and, most importantly, a sound and feel that tell a developing drummer that he or she has moved into different territory.

That makes the step-up acoustic drum market an interesting one for retailers. These aren't typically impulse purchases, nor are they necessarily instruments destined for seasoned professionals. The customer is often someone in between: a student who has stuck with it, a young player joining a serious band, an adult returning to drumming, or a musician who has simply reached the point where the starter kit no longer cuts it.

In other words, this is a sale that often comes with a story.

It also remains an area where a knowledgeable dealer can make a real difference. Specifications are readily available online, as are countless demos, reviews, shootouts, and opinions — some considerably more informed than others. But drums are tactile instruments. Sitting behind a kit, feeling the response of the shells and hardware, hearing how it sounds in the room, and comparing one setup with another can reveal things that a spec sheet or YouTube video simply can't.

That's particularly important when the customer may not yet know exactly what he or she is looking for. Does spending more mean better shells? Better hardware? Greater durability? A more versatile sound? How much of the budget should go toward the drums themselves versus cymbals and hardware? And at what point does an upgrade become substantial enough to justify replacing what's already at home?

Those are questions that create an opportunity for retailers to do what good MI dealers have always done: listen first and sell second.

In this issue, we take a closer look at the step-up acoustic drum category and hear from suppliers about what players are looking for, where the market is headed, and how manufacturers are approaching that important territory between the beginner kit and the high-end professional instrument. At a time when every discretionary purchase is being

scrutinized a little more carefully, giving customers a clear reason to make that leap matters.

Of course, this issue also marks the beginning of another annual *MMR* tradition: the **Dealers' Choice Awards**.

This month, we officially announce the nominees for the 2026 DCAs, recognizing the instruments, products, and companies that have made an impression on the MI marketplace over the past year. As always, the awards are intended to reflect the perspective of the people who are actually on the front lines of this industry — the dealers who see what customers ask for, what moves off the floor, what comes back, what doesn't, and which brands consistently deliver.

There's no shortage of awards in the world, and it's easy for any of them to become just another logo on an advertisement. What has always made the Dealers' Choice Awards meaningful is right there in the name. These aren't selections made in a conference room at *MMR*. The winners are determined by the retailers who work with these products and brands every day.

And while new products understandably attract plenty of attention, “best” doesn't always mean newest, flashiest, or most technologically ambitious. Sometimes it's the product that quietly sells week after week. Sometimes it's the supplier that answers the phone when a dealer has a problem. Sometimes it's an instrument that hits exactly the right combination of quality and price. And sometimes it's a product that reminds everyone why they got excited about making music in the first place.

That's the connection between our two major themes this month.

A drummer deciding it's finally time to move beyond that first kit is making an investment — not only in a better instrument, but in continuing to play. The dealer who helps make that decision is drawing on experience with products, manufacturers, customers, and countless previous sales. That same accumulated experience is what we ask retailers to bring to the Dealers' Choice Awards.

So take a look at this year's nominees. Think about what has worked in your store, what has impressed your customers, and which suppliers have earned your business during the past year. Then cast your ballot.

We're looking forward to seeing what you choose.

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ROLAND OPENS FIRST STANDALONE U.S. RETAIL STORE IN NEW YORK CITY

Roland Corporation will open its first standalone retail store in the United States this October, establishing a direct physical presence in Manhattan after reaching US customers through dealers for decades. According to We Rave You, the new Roland Store New York City occupies over 9,000 square feet in the Meatpacking District, joining existing flagships in London and Tokyo. The expansive space includes warehouse areas and is split into zones for pianos, drums, guitars, synthesizers, dance gear, DJ equipment, and Roland Cloud services.

We Rave You reports the location features dedicated rooms unique to this site, including a grand piano showroom, the only DW showroom in the US, and the BOSS Cavern focused on guitar effects. The floor displays various products like V-Drums, BOSS pedals, SP samplers, TR drum machines, and the FP-40 piano with built-in Wi-Fi. An AI system called Roland Soundscapes generates continuous background music by responding to movement, MIDI input, time of day, and weather conditions outside. Visitors can book free thirty-minute sessions with legacy hardware like the TR-808, while rotating exhibits showcase other historic items. The store also provides free workshops, one-on-one product appointments, and after-sales training staffed by specialists. This expansion allows the company to present complex business aspects that are harder to sell online. The opening aligns with the Then. Now. Next. campaign, celebrating ten years since a major 2016 livestream event. Executives Masahiro Minowa and Manuele Barbini are expected to attend the invitation-only launch on October 10 before regular hours begin.



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NAMM RELEASES APP AND INTERACTIVE MAP FOR 2027 SHOW

NAMM has launched its 2027 NAMM Show app and interactive floor map, giving music products industry attendees tools to find exhibitors, plan their schedules and connect with other show participants.

Available on mobile devices and desktop computers, the platform includes exhibitor and product searches, session and event details, and personalized scheduling. Attendees can use the interactive floor map to locate brands and plan booth visits.

Additional features include networking tools, push notifications, favorites and notes, allowing users to organize their show plans before arriving in Anaheim and keep information accessible throughout the event.

NAMM Week is scheduled for Jan. 26-30, 2027, at the Anaheim Convention Center in Southern California, with exhibits open Jan. 28-30.



POLAR BECOMES EXCLUSIVE UK DISTRIBUTOR FOR CHINESE AI AUDIO FIRM

Polar will host the official launch of AISpeech technology in the UK and Ireland on October 14 at the Frezza Showroom in Central London. The Chinese manufacturer supplies AI-powered audio and video hardware designed for professional meeting spaces in corporate and education sectors. Its product lineup includes conference speakerphones, 360-degree noise-cancelling microphones, ceiling microphone arrays, 4K video-conferencing cameras, and intelligent audio-visual tracking systems aimed at improving sound clarity and speaker tracking during hybrid presentations.

As the newly appointed exclusive distributor, Polar will introduce these products to press, consultants, integrators, and end-users. Will Turney, Polar head of integrated solutions, stated

that the award-winning technology fills a genuine gap in the local conferencing market. He noted that the range stands up against established players on performance while offering a differentiated value proposition for integrator partners. This partnership aims to expand presence across corporate, education, and government verticals.

Dr. Ping Zou, AISpeech director of overseas business, highlighted the significance of returning to the UK market with industry-leading smart office products. The launch event marks the beginning of the partnership and the brand's entry into the region, intending to serve integrator partners and end-user projects with excellent AI-powered solutions.



Cole Coleman

ROCK MUSIC ALLIANCE SEEKS SPONSORS TO FILL AWARDS VOID

Rock Music Alliance, a nonprofit founded in January 2020 by entrepreneur Cole Coleman, is establishing an awards program designed to recognize outstanding new music regardless of the artist's celebrity status. The organization aims to fill a void in mainstream awards-show visibility that has seen rock and metal genres gradually disappear in favor of pop and other styles. Coleman created the group after observing the shift away from rock at televised events like the Grammys, believing reports of the genre's demise were exaggerated.

Entries for the awards must be commercially released within a designated period and fall within the group's broad spectrum of rock, metal, and progressive styles, which currently includes a dozen distinct genres ranging from classic rock to symphonic metal. An Academy of Judges evaluates submissions for Best Album and Best Song or Track, with exceptional music receiving Awards of Recognition. The mission focuses on raising public awareness of new releases and providing professional peer recognition for artists across the industry.

Beyond the awards, the alliance utilizes a three-pronged approach involving podcasts, live events, and digital exposure to raise public awareness. The RMA Podcast features interviews with established artists and emerging talent, while playlists offer another avenue for discovery. The organization is actively seeking sponsors, donors, and celebrity support to fund performances and build the awards into a significant annual live celebration, providing a platform for unrecognized artists and fostering a community among musicians and fans.



APPLE OPENS LONDON VENUE WITH SPATIAL AUDIO AND BROADCAST FACILITIES

Apple has officially opened Apple Music Hall, a new performance venue located within the Battersea Power Station in London. Inavate reported that the facility integrates production infrastructure commonly associated with larger touring environments into a space designed for intimate performances. The site features an 11.6-meter-wide stage configurable for traditional front-facing shows or more in-the-round layouts, serving as a hub for live music and content creation.

The venue delivers audio through a 48-speaker spatial sound system positioned around the audience, enabling artists to perform in an immersive audio environment. Behind the performance space, the hall incorporates two recording and mix studios built to professional production standards.

Performances can be captured as multitrack recordings and mixed in Spatial Audio either live or after the event. The venue is also hardwired to accommodate 16 or more cameras feeding a purpose-built broadcast control room. This infrastructure supports conventional broadcast cameras alongside iPhone video capture running in parallel. Consequently, a single live performance can produce a finished Spatial Audio recording, broadcast-ready audio mix and multicamera video. Apple also plans to livestream performances from the venue globally. Oliver Schusser, Apple's vice president of Apple Music and International Content, stated that the opening represents an unprecedented step in supporting live music. Additionally, the company has established new Apple Music Radio studios at the site for its London-based programming.



PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

HK Audio announced that **Isabelle** of Sales Emerging Markets starting operations across the Middle East, HK Audio reported that Wear brings sales management and supervising professionals may recognize her from she led recruitment projects within Following thirteen years running her own back into a dedicated sales and business

Wear will drive business growth for designated territories. She plans to the International Sales Manager for these and broaden market reach. Christian stated that her international experience, and professional connections make her regional objectives. The company Wear to the team and anticipates a expansion goals in these important global



Wear has assumed the role of Head November 1. In this position, she oversees Africa, India, Australia, and New Zealand. extensive background in international major distribution networks. Industry her previous tenure at Interfacio, where the professional audio-visual sector. recruitment firm, she is now transitioning development capacity.

the German audio specialist in these collaborate closely with David Leonhard, areas, to reinforce current partnerships Jordan, CSO and CMO of HK Audio, market insight, entrepreneurial approach, a valuable addition to support strategic expressed enthusiasm about welcoming productive future together as they pursue markets through targeted leadership.

ESP Guitars has elevated four long-time employees to senior leadership positions following their significant contributions to the organization. According to an announcement from ESP guitars, **Miguel Soto** is now Executive Vice President, **Mike Brinker** serves as Director of U.S. Sales, **Ryan Dominguez** leads USA Manufacturing Operations, and **Tim Jennaway** takes over as Director of Product Development and Operations. These appointments reflect the company's recognition of deep institutional knowledge and specialized expertise within its workforce.

ESP president and COO Todd Binder expressed excitement regarding these well-deserved advancements, noting that

each individual has dedicated themselves to the brand over many years. In his expanded capacity, Soto will oversee all aspects of sales, marketing, support, and operations after previously managing global distribution networks. Brinker will now manage the domestic representative force and dealer network. Dominguez will direct activities at the ESP USA Shop in North Hollywood, while Jennaway replaces Binder as the primary contact for product development between the United States headquarters, the Japanese parent company, and partner factories across Asia. Jennaway will also supervise quality control, customer service, and warehousing functions at the Los Angeles facility.



Miguel Soto, Mike Brinker, Ryan Dominguez, and Tim Jennaway

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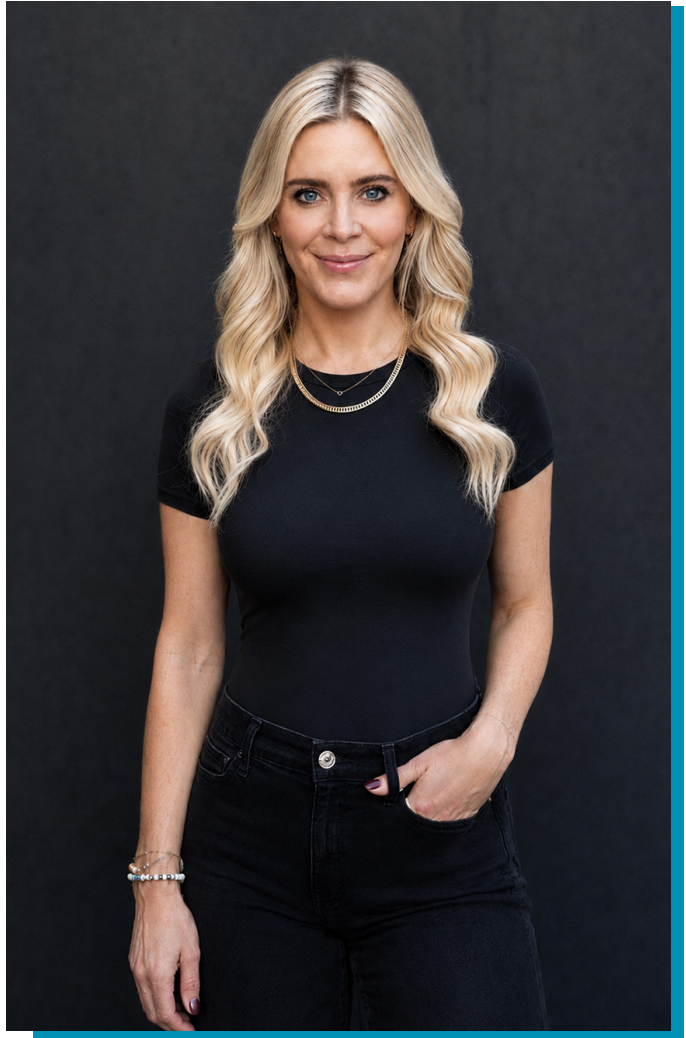


 **Roland**

FENDER'S CHRISTINA STEJSKAL

By Christian Wissmuller

Christina Stejskal is no stranger to Fender — or to telling the story of one of the most recognizable brands in the music products industry. After previously spending nearly a decade helping shape Fender's global communications through a period of substantial growth and digital transformation, Stejskal has returned to the company as chief communications officer. In her new role, she'll oversee everything from brand and product communications to creator strategy and corporate reputation as Fender continues to balance its considerable legacy with an ever-evolving role in music and culture. *MMR* recently caught up with Stejskal to discuss her return to Fender, what's changed since her first tenure, and how she plans to help tell the company's story in the years ahead.



For me, it's about finding the right balance: honoring the history and credibility

Fender has earned while meeting players where they are today and making sure the brand continues to feel relevant to the next generation.

Congratulations on your return to Fender and your new role as chief communications officer. What drew you back to the company, and what excites you most about this next chapter?

Thank you so much! There's something really special about coming back "home" to a company and a brand that has meant so much to me personally and professionally. I loved being part of my first chapter at Fender and helping tell the story of the brand during a really important period of growth and evolution.

Coming back feels like an opportunity to be part of the next chapter. There is so much happening across music, culture and technology, and so many new ways for Fender to connect with players and the broader community. I'm excited to help shape how we tell those stories, while always staying grounded in what makes Fender Fender.

You previously spent nearly a decade at Fender before moving to Dolby Laboratories. How did your experience at Dolby shape your perspective, and what new insights are you bringing back to Fender?

Dolby is an incredibly innovative company, and I had the opportunity to work alongside some really smart and talented people. One of the benefits of stepping outside of a company you know so well is that you get exposed to different ways of thinking, operating and solving problems.

I came back to Fender with a fresh perspective and an appreciation for different approaches to collaboration, storytelling and innovation. I also gained a deeper understanding of how technology and innovation stories can be made relevant and accessible to broader audiences. Every experience gives you new tools and perspectives, and I'm excited to bring those learnings with me while building on everything that already makes Fender such a special place.

Fender is one of the most iconic brands in music history. How do you approach communicating the company's legacy while continuing to tell a story that resonates with today's musicians and new generations of players?

Heritage is part of Fender's DNA. You can't tell the story of Fender without telling the story of the artists, instruments and cultural moments that have shaped music for generations. But what I love is that our history isn't static — it continues to influence what comes next.

The way people discover music, learn instruments, find inspiration and connect with one another has changed dramatically, and communications has to evolve with that. For me, it's about finding the right balance: honoring the history and credibility Fender has earned while meeting players where they are today and making sure the brand continues to feel relevant to the next generation.

During your previous tenure at Fender, you helped lead communications around major initiatives including the American Professional Series, American Acoustasonic Telecaster, Fender's digital ecosystem, and the Tokyo flagship store. What did those launches teach you about connecting products and brand storytelling with players?

One of the biggest opportunities is recognizing that it's about more than just the product. We have an incredibly innovative team that is constantly pushing the boundaries of design, craftsmanship and what an instrument can do for a player. Communications gives us the opportunity to tell the bigger story behind that work — why we created something, what inspired it, what it enables creatively and why it matters.

I've also learned there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. What resonates with a gear-focused audience may be different from what connects with a broader cultural audience, and a story may come to life differently around the world. The opportunity is to find the universal truth at the center and then tell it in a way that feels authentic and relevant to each audience.

The ways musicians discover, learn, and engage with instruments continue to evolve through digital platforms, creators, and online communities. How do you see these channels shaping Fender's communications strategy moving forward?

This is one of the areas I'm most excited about because the way people discover brands, music and each other continues to evolve so quickly. The definition of media has expanded, and creators and online communities have an incredibly important role in shaping conversations and culture.

For us, that means thinking beyond traditional PR and looking at earned media, creators, artists, social and our own channels as a connected ecosystem. It also means staying close to our community, moving at the speed of culture and not being afraid to experiment with new platforms, formats and ways of storytelling. We're continuously learning and looking at what's

happening both inside and outside our industry for inspiration. Ultimately, it comes back to meeting players where they are and finding authentic ways to be part of the conversations they care about.

Fender has made significant efforts to expand its reach to new and diverse audiences while remaining connected to its core player base. How do you balance honoring Fender's heritage with creating a more inclusive vision for the future?

Fender's heritage has always been shaped by the people who pick up our instruments and make them their own. As we look forward, we want to continue celebrating that history while making sure the next generation of players can see themselves as part of Fender's story.

Music has this incredible ability to connect people across generations, backgrounds, genres and geographies. Our role is to celebrate the breadth of that community, continue creating opportunities for new voices and perspectives, and make sure Fender feels welcoming and relevant to anyone who wants to pick up an instrument and create.

As chief communications officer, you'll oversee brand, product, executive, internal, and corporate communications. What are some of your key priorities as you step into this expanded role?

My biggest priority is making sure we're telling a clear, connected Fender story across everything we do. There is so much happening across the company — from product and innovation to artists, culture and our global business — and I want communications to help connect those dots.

I'm also focused on continuing to strengthen how we engage with our employees, players, partners and the broader music community. And, of course, a big part of my role is looking ahead: identifying where Fender can contribute meaningfully to conversations around music and culture and finding new ways to tell those stories.

Looking ahead, what excites you most about Fender's future and the opportunity to help tell the stories of the musicians, creators, and communities that continue to shape the brand?

What excites me most is the community around Fender. Our history has been shaped by generations of musicians, artists, creators, builders, dealers, employees and fans who have their own relationship with the brand — and that community continues to evolve.

There are more ways than ever for someone to discover music, learn to play, create something of their own and find other people who share that passion. I love that someone can learn their first chord from a creator across the world, discover an artist through a completely unexpected platform or make music in their bedroom that reaches millions of people.

Being able to celebrate that community, tell those stories and help shape what the next chapter of Fender looks like is a pretty special opportunity.

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STARR POWER:

STARR'S GUITARS CELEBRATES 25 YEARS

“

The online-only approach is aimed at offering a purchase and not much else. I want people to leave my shop knowing they paid a fair price for the right instrument or piece of gear.

”

By Christian Wissmuller

For 25 years, Starr's Guitars has been part of the musical landscape in Cedaredge, Colorado, weathering seismic changes in both the music products industry and the way musicians shop for gear. Through it all, owner David Starr has kept the focus on the things that independent retailers have always done best: knowing their customers, knowing their products, and creating a place where musicians want to spend time. As Starr's Guitars celebrates its 25th anniversary, *MMR* caught up with Starr to look back at the store's beginnings, the lessons learned along the way, and what keeps him excited about the business a quarter-century later.



Congratulations on 25 years! When you look back at the journey from opening your first store in Little Rock to building Starr's Guitars in Cedaredge, what are the milestones you're most proud of?

What first comes to mind is true gratitude for my community and customers. And for the fact that I've managed to survive through a period of immense change in retail. But, I'm most proud of the fact that my shop is a community resource for not just instruments and accessories, but for advice and inspiration to those seeking to make music.

Independent music retailers have faced enormous changes over the past quarter century. What do you believe has allowed Starr's Guitars not only to survive, but to thrive?

Since everything is literally available everywhere in the internet age, I feel that we have to offer an experience beyond the online one. Creating a welcoming in-store vibe and offering great customer service is what we are all about. My manager, Candace McCoy, is a true treasure when it comes to making folks feel at ease when they come into the shop.

In an era of online shopping, what can an independent music store offer that simply can't be replicated through e-commerce?

I think the main thing is that we work to provide that experience for our customers. We offer not just gear, but a certain amount of institutional knowledge that simply cannot be imparted in a click-to-buy setting. I grew up playing in bands and I spent many a Saturday in my local music store when I was young. The online-only approach is aimed at offering a purchase and not much else. I want people to leave my shop knowing they paid a fair price for the right instrument or piece of gear.

You're in the unique position of being both a touring, recording artist and a music retailer. How has your experience as a working musician influenced the way you buy inventory, interact with customers, and run the business?

It goes back to that institutional knowledge thing. I've had the opportunity to spend enough time on the road and in the studio to know it's the individual who makes the magic, not the gear. But the right gear in the right hands makes all the difference. The internet tells the consumer a different story. There is no substitute for a hands-on experience when it comes to musical instruments.

Through initiatives like the Grand Mesa Songwriter Festival, AppleFest, and your work with the Grand Mesa Arts & Events Center, you've invested heavily in your local music scene. How have those efforts strengthened the store, and how has the store strengthened the community in return?

I've helped curate and sponsor the music for Applefest for 25 years. My shop is the main sponsor for our songwriter festival. And, I am a founding board member of the Grand Mesa Arts & Events Center. I think all of those activities have helped Starr's Guitars become a local hub for a music scene in Cedaredge, Colorado that just didn't exist 25 years ago. My parents' example of investing in the arts has been a big motivating factor in my decisions to support these and other local activities and organizations. I also work with and sponsor a veterans music therapy program that helps vets work through PTSD issues via songwriting.

Starr's Guitars has become much more than a retail store — it's helped establish Cedaredge as a destination for music and the arts. Was community-building always part of your vision, or did that evolve organically over time?

My philosophy is that if you want the community to support you, you must support the community. My shop is involved in all kinds of local efforts. Our arts center, local community radio stations and songwriter festivals are good examples. We stand behind those events and institutions both financially and with gear when needed.

Vintage and used instruments remain a major draw for guitar enthusiasts. What do you look for when selecting instruments for the shop, and what trends are you seeing in today's guitar market?

I look for high quality vintage and used instruments that I can buy at a competitive price. Name brands are preferred since that's what players are most often looking for. I get a lot of my instruments from longtime customers who've decided to sell their guitars for any number of reasons. I prefer to buy them outright as opposed to consigning them. They usually prefer that arrangement as well.

Looking across the industry today, what advice would you give to other independent music retailers trying to differentiate themselves and remain relevant in an increasingly competitive marketplace?

I'd advise them to seek out opportunities to support local arts initiatives in ways that support their store mission. It doesn't cost much to get involved and it pays off in local support. In a world where online shopping is so easy for folks, it's just not enough to hang guitars on the wall and wait; retailers have to be proactive in their communities and neighborhoods. Evolution and reinvention are also the key. As manufacturers continue to sell direct to consumers online and as those companies often push dealer quotas, I have made the deliberate decision to offer more vintage and used instruments. Since we are off the beaten path, folks have to make an extra effort to find us. I want that trip to be worth it by offering something personal that big box stores can't. I also try to make shifts in inventory price points when economic conditions warrant.

After 25 years, are there any customer stories or memorable moments that perfectly capture what Starr's Guitars has meant to musicians over the years?

I've watched a number of young kids take lessons or buy their first instrument here and go on to grow into mature, seasoned players and performers. There's a young gal who started out on a junior-sized guitar when she was barely big enough to hold it. She is now a regular open mic favorite and will be playing her first paying gig this weekend. She's done the work, but I am honored to have been along for the journey!

As you celebrate this milestone, what excites you most about the future — both for Starr's Guitars and for the role independent music stores will continue to play in inspiring the next generation of musicians?

I am most excited when a young family comes in with a child who wants to play an instrument. And I'm seeing that more lately! Our job is to help parents spend wisely and get full value when they make a purchase.

A STEP ABOVE: ACOUSTIC DRUM KITS FOR PLAYERS READY FOR MORE

By Christian Wissmuller

For a drummer, moving beyond that first kit is a milestone. It's the point where an instrument becomes more than something to learn on and starts reflecting the player's developing sound, style, and ambitions. Today's step-up market gives those players more choices than ever, with premium woods, upgraded hardware, expanded configurations, and increasingly sophisticated finishes available without making the leap to a top-tier professional kit.

But more choice also means a more complicated buying decision. Price and value remain critical, while social media, online research, electronic drums, and changing purchasing habits are reshaping how players arrive at that second serious kit — and making the expertise of trusted MI retailers especially valuable.

For this month's cover feature, "A Step Above: Acoustic Drum Kits for Players Ready for More," we check in with Scott Donnell of Drum Workshop, Bill Ludwig of TAMA, Matt Rudin of Yamaha, and Jeff Mulvihill of KHS to discuss what's selling, what today's players expect from a step-up kit, and where this important segment of the acoustic drum market is headed.

What is (are) currently your best-selling step-up acoustic drum kit(s), and what do you think is driving their success?

Scott Donnell: Our PDP brand has established incredible value for drummers over the years. We were the first to have an all-maple kit at an accessible price — the same maple we use on our custom kits. We have worked hard to carry over that value proposition with professional, boutique-inspired features that more drummers can access. The Concept Series is the perfect example of a "step-up" kit that is full-featured and built to last. It's also the perfect bridge into the DW Design Series range.

Bill Ludwig: Starclassic Performer Maple/Birch and Starclassic Walnut/Birch are the two best-selling kits from TAMA. I would consider a "step up" kit. TAMA's long running reputation for dependable, innovative products helps drive our success, along with a high value. Starclassic was introduced in the mid-90s and has since been considered TAMA's professional workhorse kit, and our Starclassic Performer line especially packs a large amount of higher end features into an extremely reasonable price point.

Jeff Mulvihill: For Mapex, the Armory Series has been a cornerstone of the mid-range or "Step-up" market for more than 10 years and it's not slowing down. There is so much value packed into this product that it catches the eyes and ears of both aspiring step-up customers as well as pro players. Hybrid shell, proprietary bearing edges, veneer outer finish with fade lacquer colors in several choices both subtle and vibrant is driving the success. There is really something for every drummer here.

Last year Sonor celebrated its 150th anniversary and as part of that celebration we produced a special anniversary edition of the Mid-range AQ2 series kits appointed with an Ebony grain vertical outer veneer that presented a stunning product in the Step-up space. These kits have continued to be very successful beyond our anniversary year.

How do you define a "step-up" acoustic kit in today's market? What separates these instruments from entry-level offerings?

Matt Rudin: We (Yamaha Marketing) consider step-up products anything a customer would buy at a higher price point than the model they're currently playing. When we talk about Yamaha products, this goes all the way up to our professional-grade drum sets, like the Recording Custom, Absolute Hybrid Maple or Live Custom Hybrid Oak.

Then there is the standard industry definition of "step-up," which focuses on intermediate drums, between the 700s and low to mid-1,000s price range. These drums offer drummers a bit more in tone, build quality and options.

Step-up drums offer higher-quality materials and hardware and, in the case of the Stage Custom and Tour Custom lines, individual components as well as one-box solutions. This gives drummers looking to expand their kit with different bass drum sizes, additional toms or floor toms, the ability to do so at any time. This is something you won't find in an entry-level line.

JM: When you make the jump from an entry level kit to a step up or mid-range kit one main difference is that you make the transition to a shell pack only rather than a fully outfitted set with hardware, pedals and sometimes even cymbals. This is where the value shifts and your money goes into the higher quality of the shell, finish, and sound rather than a complete package of entry level drums and hardware.

BL: Many kits can really be a step up from entry level, depending on the individual. Higher quality features, shells, and parts are typically what differentiates entry level from the next step up. However, I feel drummers who are looking to make an improvement to their sound with a 'step up' kit may look a step or two higher than entry level and willing to spend a little more if it's within their budget.



Scott Donnell, Director of Brand Management, Drum Workshop Inc.

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Jeff Mulvihill, SONOR and Mapex Brand Manager, KHS



SD: There's no doubt that expectations and specifications have evolved in recent times. It's truly incredible what drummers can get for their money in today's competitive world of mid-priced drum sets. These kits now feature premium tone woods, drum hardware innovations developed for our high-end models, as well as elevated finish options.

What features are drummers prioritizing when moving up to their second or more serious kit — shell materials and construction, hardware, finishes, configuration, brand reputation, or something else?

SD: Drummers have a wide selection of choices when it comes to graduating to the next level. They can choose their preferences and sound characteristics from a myriad of shell types that include both popular tone woods such as maple and birch and esoteric hybrid options. Finishes have also become a key differentiator. Our Slingerland Studio King lineup has some very cool retro offerings with more on the way. Configurations are also important. Drummers are still partial to DW F.A.S.T (fundamentally accurate sized toms) while traditional sizes seem to be the trend in recent years.

BL: All of the above, really. Shell materials can target specific genres or offer a sonic quality they don't have with their previous kit(s). Drummers in the market for a new kit will typically compare any potential candidate against their current kit. This can really lead them towards specific materials, hardware, finishes, and even brand preference based on their past kits and experience.

JM: The factors listed here are exactly right on, and I think that maybe the one thing to add would be image. What I mean by that is prioritizing your purchase by what image you love, who your favorite drum heroes are, what your friends might be playing, or how you see your own style taking shape as a player.

MR: There isn't one feature that stands out above the rest when it comes to step-up drums. A first step-up drum set is often a huge milestone for drummers. By the time they have reached this point in their musical journey, they have begun to refine their sound and style, discovered new drummers that they find influential and inspirational and have expanded their knowledge base of drum manufacturers and what is available on the market. It is a collection of all these things that will help shape what a drummer prioritizes.

A step-up customer may be looking for a kit with an exciting finish that they can add an 8" tom or 18" floor tom to, or they may want to start sharing more content online and need a kit that sounds better than what they currently have. Often it is the case that they want a kit that they can start gigging frequently with, that has durable hardware and will sound great in any venue they find themselves in; that is why our Tour Custom is a top choice for many drummers that want a kit that they can take on the road and will deliver night after night, no matter the gig, while still being affordable.

How important is price in the step-up category right now, and where do you see the sweet spot between affordability and the features players expect from a more serious instrument?

JM: Price is important in nearly every category and for this mid-range the sweet spot is \$1,500. This range is where this business lives.

BL: Price is always important and trends will come and go depending on what drummers want, what choices they have in their budget, and the feedback they get from other drummers/artists/experts. I've mentioned that our Starclassic lines have been successful "step up" kits, but it's worth mentioning that TAMA has always focused on "value" as a core priority. True for our whole lineup, we want drummers buying at any price point to get more features and benefits relative to the price they pay.

MR: For many drummers right now, price is a major factor in buying a step-up drum set. Because of this, we find that putting emphasis on value is very important. At this stage drummers may be taking more serious gigs, having a drum set that won't break the bank, yet at the same time is reliable on the road, easy to tune, and will get the job done no matter what the situations or setting. They may also be looking into recording and want a versatile set that sounds great no matter what style of music they play.

While features are important, this segment of customers is often on a tight budget and may not be looking for just drums. They may need to balance their budget on drum shells, cymbals, recording gear, and more.

So, delivering a high-quality set within their budget is very important.

SD: Price is always an important factor. When designing ultra high-end, made-to-order instruments it's easy to dream first and consider the price tag later. That customer experience has been well established. The challenge is to offer a premium instrument that doesn't break the bank and is in-line with the competition. Drummers are brand loyal, but only to point. They expect pro quality when stepping up.

Are today's customers approaching their first major drum-kit upgrade differently than they did five or ten years ago? If so, what has changed?

SD: Many of today's players are starting on electronic kits. The ability to control volume and a compact footprint are compelling for parents and those with less real estate to spare. This is a change from previous generations that exclusively learned on entry level acoustic kits. Going from electronic to acoustic is obviously a very different transition. This is probably the most notable change we've experienced.

BL: I'm not sure if they are approaching it differently, but it does seem that the current trend has more drummers looking to 'buy up' as opposed to 'buy often'. Surely not true for all, but some drummers are more willing to make larger jumps in the price/quality of their kit when upgrading.

MR: A lot of what drummers are looking for in acoustic drum kits has stayed the same; however, customers have much more choice now than they did 10 years ago. On top of this, the way they receive information and influence on what kit to buy has changed dramatically. We all know social media plays a larger role in decision-making than it ever has, and consumers gather information on specs, quality, sonic properties, new products and just about every detail that influences the purchasing decision. Some of this information is great and helps keep them informed, but unfortunately there's also misleading information out there.

JM: The main change continues to be online purchasing, which continues to evolve even beyond what we have been seeing from five or ten years ago. It has become such a daily and routine part of life. This activity was once relegated to smaller purchases and lower cost items and today we see online purchases increase into the thousands of dollars without blinking an eye.

What role does the independent drum shop or music retailer play in selling step-up kits, particularly when customers can research and compare seemingly endless options online?

MR: Having a lot of information to choose from can be great for a customer. However, since there is so much noise and not all of the information is authentic or verified to be true, it is now more important than ever for dealers and shop owners to reach out to audiences as trusted experts with information that resonates with their audience and reflects how unique their individual shops and employees are. No algorithm- or AI-built content can build consumer trust like a well-known shop owner and their staff. On top of this, retailers can offer consumers a place to physically come and test out products or just hang out with like-minded musicians.

JM: The retailer role is important when a culture is part of the customer experience. Getting an entry level purchase for a first-time drummer is not the end of the process. Win the loyalty of the parents, spread the friendly atmosphere that musicians enjoy, allow that young person to feel comfortable and confident so that they grow into the next step-up experience with the shop playing a role every time along the way.

BL: I think drummers respect opinions of other drummers and ultimately seek out help and opinions from their trusted sources. For many, this is their local music store or drum shop. The internet is always going to make it easier to find the information you want, but I believe that drummers finding this information online will end up looking at content from drum shops and retailers, especially when buying something above an entry level kit.

SD: Our independent retail partners are incredibly important, not just to our business, but to the market segment at large. Generally speaking, they're focused on product knowledge and provide hands-on advice when drummers are considering their next big purchase. Yes, we are in a digital world and most consumers research key buying decisions online, but the support at smaller retail shops reinforces those



Bill Ludwig, Sales Strategist Drums/Strategic Accounts and B&O Manager, TAMA





*Matt Rudin, Product Marketing Manager, Drums,
Yamaha Corporation of America*

considerations—it's where the rubber meets the road.

Looking ahead, what trends do you expect to shape the step-up acoustic drum market over the next few years, and what should retailers be paying attention to?

SD: There are some external factors that will help inform this price point over the coming years. Tariffs and material costs continue to rise, challenging the value-for-money proposition that drives mine level drums. At Drum Workshop, we will continue to elevate and innovate the instrument and the art form and give drummers "more choices" so they can find their sound and look. Our PDP tagline says it all: "Play What Inspires You."

JM: This might be a long shot and might get under some people's skin out there, but I am hopeful that we truly see an increase in step-up acoustic drum sales as a result of eliminating the electronic drum kit script. Yes, they are quieter, and yes, they perhaps are more appealing for parents and landlords, but if we are drumming, LET'S DRUM! And let's drum on REAL DRUMS so you and your fellow musicians can feel the actual power and thrill of making music together.

BL: Trends are hard to predict and can change quickly. I think retailers who are able to develop a drum community in their store or online presence will attract more drummers and ultimately improve all aspects of the drum business. Making it exciting and interesting to visit your store(s) and becoming the information source for all drummers will make you a trusted source and "go-to" when they're looking for that step-up kit.

MR: I am not sure much will change in the physical construction of step-up acoustic drums. While there could be small changes to hardware or even finishes, the biggest trends will revolve around supplementary technology. More consumers will start to incorporate electronics/devices into their acoustic setups and performances. Whether for recording, bringing in electronic sounds/samples, or even how they gather information to make purchasing decisions, new technologies are reshaping everything. While it is important to pay attention to these trends, keeping things simple and focusing on the basic needs of balancing value with durability, options and quality of sound will help customers find a great step-up acoustic drum set, no matter what the trends may be.



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THE 2027 NAMM SHOW:

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN MLYNCZAK, PRESIDENT & CEO OF NAMM

By Christian Wissmuller

As the music products industry looks ahead to 2027, the NAMM Show is once again preparing to bring together the people, products, ideas, and technologies shaping what comes next. But the show itself continues to evolve alongside the industry it serves. In the first installment of a three-part conversation, *MMR* sits down with NAMM President and CEO John Mlynczak to discuss the 2027 gathering in Anaheim, how NAMM is responding to a changing marketplace, and what attendees can expect when the global music community comes together once again.

As preparations for The 2027 NAMM Show take shape, what is the overall vision for the event, and what do you hope attendees will experience differently this time around?

The experience is everything at the 2027 NAMM Show. It's what we build the entire event around, and it comes from convergence — the products and brands, the influencers and artists who bring them to life, and the live stage and event programming across ACC North and the surrounding campus. When product, performance, and people come together in one place, that's what creates the experience attendees remember.

This year, my advice to every attendee is simple: download the NAMM app now. You can search sessions and events happening in booths across the entire campus and start building your plan today. NAMM Connect even offers AI-powered recommendations based on your interests, so you can make the most of every minute on-site.

The NAMM Show has evolved considerably over the years, from its roots as a traditional trade show to a much broader global gathering. How do you define what the Show is today — and what do you see it becoming?

At its heart, the NAMM Show is still what it has always been: the music industry's single largest driver of annual growth, and our industry's one moment each year to come together and create energy and excitement around the products and brands that drive us forward.

What's evolving is who shows up to help amplify those products. We've

always had retailers and distributors from around the world learning about and buying product. Now we also have music educators shaping how the next generation learns, influencers promoting products to global audiences, and artists performing and recording with them in front of millions. That combination — retailers, distributors, educators, influencers, and artists — is where the future of the NAMM Show is headed. We're building a show that serves every audience that helps amplify our industry's products.

Face-to-face connection has always been central to the NAMM Show, even as the ways our industry communicates and conducts business continue to change. What makes bringing the global music community together in one place especially valuable today?

Face-to-face connection is essential to why people come to the NAMM Show. As an industry, we work together year-round — Zoom calls, phone calls, online buying portals, product launches built around social media and video. What we don't get anywhere else is the chance to be together, in person, all at once. That's what the NAMM Show creates.

Being together in one place generates an energy around growth, networking, and opportunity that you simply can't replicate remotely. Anyone who's attended the NAMM Show will tell you: you leave with more opportunities than you knew existed when you walked in.

NAMM now serves a remarkably broad community — manufacturers, retailers, distributors, artists, educators, creators, technology



John Mlyczak

companies and other music professionals. How do you create an event that delivers meaningful value to all of those constituencies while maintaining a cohesive identity?

Some would say you can't be all things to all people, and it's something we think about constantly. But the NAMM Show isn't one thing — it's a campus that brings together dozens of smaller communities, each with its own needs and its own networking. So when people think of NAMM, it's not a single audience. It's manufacturers, retailers, distributors, artists, educators, creators, and technology companies, plus all the intersections those audiences need with brands and with each other.

We look at the NAMM Show as a collection of many communities intersecting in one place. With more than 65,000 attendees, we know the average company or attendee isn't there to see all 65,000 people — they're there to see the 500 or 1,000 who will genuinely move the needle for their year. Our job — through technology, programming, and how we organize the campus — is to make sure every brand finds the specific audience that matters most to them.

The boundaries between traditional musical instruments, pro audio, music technology, content creation and other segments continue to blur. How is that evolution influencing the way you think about the 2027 Show and the companies and professionals it serves?

When I think about blur, I think about consolidation — companies innovating, growing, and consolidating rapidly, whether by opening new channels themselves or through mergers and acquisitions. Instruments, audio, and technology are all intersecting, and that intersection is part of the magic of the NAMM Show.

The real question is how we harness it to create the right experience. Some brands build out experiences across multiple floors. Others exhibit in several areas, so an audience might find fretted instruments in one part of the campus and pro audio and recording in another. What matters most to us isn't how a company sees its own consolidation — it's how the audience finds what they're looking for.

That's why we've built new categories into the app, aligned our education tracks with our product categories, and expanded NAMM Connect to help people navigate quickly. A company may be blurred across multiple categories, but for an attendee looking for the right recording gear or the right guitar, our focus is on that experience — helping them find what they need, because that's ultimately what brings brands to the NAMM Show in the first place: capturing that audience.

International participation has long been an important part of the NAMM Show. What are you seeing from the global music products community heading into 2027, and where do you see opportunities to strengthen those international connections?

Anyone who's attended the NAMM Show will tell you: you leave with more opportunities than you knew existed when you walked in.



As the only global music products trade show, we take international attendance seriously, and we continue to see strong international presence even amid global tensions and challenges. That international community is vital to the Show's success.

To help cultivate it, we hosted NAMM NeXT Europe in Amsterdam this past June, bringing together more than 80 industry leaders from across Europe to talk about the future of our industry and how we can cooperate more effectively. We're following that with NAMM NeXT Latin America in November.

So beyond the international receptions and activities we host at the Show itself, we're going out between NAMM Shows to gather the industry on other continents, learn their needs firsthand, and talk about the value of global cooperation. NAMM has become the global leader in bringing our industry together.

For someone in the industry who hasn't attended the NAMM Show recently — or perhaps has never attended — what would you tell them about why 2027 is a particularly important year to be there?

I'll answer this in two parts. For someone who has never attended, the NAMM Show is the culmination of your career, your brand, and your future. You'll find the people, the products, the energy, and the education you need to move forward. It's the room where it happens — and you'll see that even more in 2028 and beyond as we continue to grow.

For someone who hasn't attended recently, my advice is to come back in 2027 with a fresh perspective. Don't think of NAMM as just a retail buying channel or a trade-only event — that's the past. Think of it as a global branding experience. The value our audience creates on-site, combined with the audience watching from around the world, generates more brand demand in five days than the rest of the year combined. That's why 2027 is the year to see NAMM with fresh eyes.

IN GOOD HANDS:

DEALERS TALK HAND DRUM SALES

By Christian Wissmuller

Hand drums may not be setting the sales charts on fire, but the category remains a steady presence for many MI retailers, serving everyone from gigging percussionists and hobbyists to schools and wellness communities. In this month's dealer survey, half of respondents report sales holding level over the past 12 months, while cajons lead the pack among individual drum types and Latin Percussion remains the category's dominant brand. Looking ahead, dealers see opportunities in education, drum circles, and the continued popularity of Latin music — even as an unpredictable retail environment makes forecasting anything but easy.

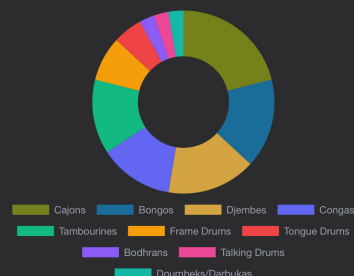
How would you characterize your overall sales of hand drums over the past 12 months?

- About level: 50%
- Down: 33.3%
- Up: 16.7%



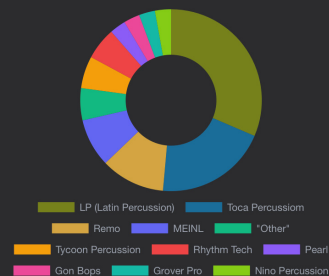
What specific types of hand drums are currently your strongest sellers?

- Cajons: 66%
- Bongos: 50%
- Djembes: 50%
- Congas: 41.7%
- Tambourines: 41.7%
- Frame Drums: 25%
- Tongue Drums: 16.7%
- Bodhrans: 8.3%
- Talking Drums: 8.3%
- Doumbeks/Darbukas: 8.3%



Which hand drum brands are currently the most popular with your customers?

- LP (Latin Percussion): 91.7%
- Toca Percussion: 58.3%
- Remo: 33.3%
- MEINL: 25%
- Tycoon Percussion: 16.7%
- Rhythm Tech: 16.7%
- Pearl: 8.3%
- Gon Bops: 8.3%
- Grover Pro: 8.3%
- Nino Percussion: 8.3%



Are you seeing any notable changes in who is buying hand drums or how customers are using them?

- [I'm] seeing a rise in use of hand drums in elementary school music programs.

JONI DEY
Herter Music Center
Bay City, MI

- There are generally more options available now, which can confuse customers when trying to find the right fit for the need. Drum circles, wellness communities, educational entities, and hobbyists are all target customers.

LAUREN CALKIN
West Music
Coralville, IA

What factors seem to matter most to customers when choosing a hand drum?

- Price, quality, and tone.

JERRY VESELEY
Veseley Music
Parowan, UT

- It just has to be the right "fit" in terms of style of drum, weight, tone, price.

TED PARRISH
Parrish Music
Viroqua, WI

- Price, sound, and appearance.

RICK WERTZ
Rick Wertz Music Emporium
Altoona, PA

Looking ahead, what do you expect from the hand drum category over the next year? Are there any particular products, styles, or trends you think retailers and manufacturers should be watching?

- With the continued popularity of Latino music, I predict an increase in handheld percussion sales forthcoming.

Veseley Music

- I have no expectations. Nothing is "business as usual" anymore.

RUSTY OLSON
Rockhaus
Milwaukee, WI

- Congas seem to be waning.

ERIC BURGESS
Alpha Music
Virginia Beach, VA

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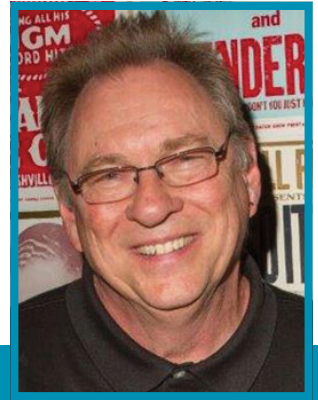
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MUSIC IN THE HOME: SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

By Menzie Pittman, Author of *The New Musician*



When Daniel's mom first reached out to me, she was very frustrated. She started the conversation with an unusual statement. "Before you say no to me, let me explain. My son Daniel is three and a half years old, and all he wants to do is play drums. He bangs on everything around the house, so we found a three-piece drum kit, and bought it for him." She went on to explain they had tried drum lessons with several teachers, but the teachers were short on patience and did not teach traditional skills such as "reading music." As a piano teacher, she knew that mastering the fundamentals set the stage for success.

Daniel's mom asked me if I would be willing to teach her young son lessons or at least give it a whirl. Of course, I stated that I was willing to try, although three and a half years old is an incredibly early age to start formal drum lessons. However, if the child is like "Traps the Drum Wonder" AKA Buddy Rich, the rules are different; parental involvement is necessary. So, we agreed that if she also participated as a co-coach, we could give drum lessons a whirl.

Daniel is now four years old, and he is playing like a champ. Per our agreement, mom attends the lessons and collaborates with him at home. As you might expect, we have a good groove going. Because mom's conviction was incredibly strong, I was willing to try. And the strategy of a joint approach has worked well. Together, along with Daniel's interest and talent, we have set the stage for success.

Environments have an enormous impact on the outcome of any creative undertaking.

Therefore, I beg the question, "Is three and a half years old too young to start individual music lessons?" That usually depends on the instrument, the parental support, and the home learning environment. Because of developing physicality, I am hesitant to teach drum lessons to anyone under the age of five, but in this scenario the parent and teacher initially agreed on certain necessary considerations; thus, in this situation, age has not played a factor. The most important ingredients in our approach have been teamwork and consistency. Without Daniel's mom being involved as a co-coach, what we would have accomplished would not have taken place until much later in Daniel's development.

Growing up. It is the mystique of music that invites you to be a musician.

In many cases the environment in which you live plays a big part in the allure music has on you. Daniel's mom consistently plays piano in their house, so Daniel's exposure to music is constant. He can see that his family reveres music. And by working with Daniel on his practice, she establishes more interest in music for Daniel.

The one approach that makes a dramatic difference for me as Daniel's teacher is his mom's reinforcement. I teach him to his true creative level, while also making his lessons fun. But his mom gently steps in to reinforce what he has learned which, in turn, helps make learning drums fun for Daniel.

Together, as a team, we celebrate and honor his learning. That is the main reason this scenario is working so well. We also know that as Daniel matures, the drum domain will solely become his. Daniel has grown up in a home that venerates music, so there is no doubt that this young musician will continue to be remarkably successful.

When teaching, I always try to remember what attracted me to play music.

In my house everyone appreciated music. My dad had two careers. His "day gig" was as a custom home builder, a career in which he was successful, but his true passion was playing jazz on the weekends with his sextet comprised of three saxes, piano, bass, and drums. It was then I watched my father morph into a more spirited fellow. He would switch from his '58 Volkswagen bug, to his 1964 red Cadillac convertible, and as he drove off, I would observe his demeanor evolve into one with more pep in its step. He replaced his construction garb and work boots with a tuxedo and shiny black shoes. Every two months or so, my dad's band would rehearse new charts at our house. We lived on a small street comprised of twelve houses that he had built, and when the band practiced, the neighborhood had a different vibe because music was in the air. The energy was electric! Seeing this excitement affected my brother who played drums which in turn affected me because drumming looked fun, and the drums were right downstairs in the basement, so why not? It was around that same time that Ed Sullivan introduced us to the Lads, and as I watched Ringo Starr, I knew unquestionably what I wanted to do for a living.

In music families, the apples don't fall far from the tree.

THE NOMINEES ARE IN, AND NOW IT'S TIME FOR MI RETAILERS TO HAVE THEIR SAY.

CAST
YOUR
VOTE!

MMR's annual Dealers' Choice Awards recognize the products and brands that stood out in the music products industry over the past year — and, as always, the winners are determined by you, the dealers.

Take a look at this year's nominees and cast your votes for the people and products you feel deserve top honors in 2026. **Voting closes at 5 p.m. ET on December 15**, so be sure to make your choices before the deadline.

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Yamaha DXR mk3
Allen & Heath Qu Series
Focusrite ISA CBX
Kawai NV12

ACOUSTIC PIANO OF THE YEAR

Kawai GL-10
Yamaha SX Series
Hailun Piano H5P
Pearl River UP115M5

ACCESSORY LINE OF THE YEAR

On-Stage
Buffet Crampon ICON Series
Quik Lok
D'Addario & Co.

HOME DIGITAL KEYBOARD OF THE YEAR

Kawai CA401
Nord Piano 6
Casio PX-S7000
Roland GP9

PRO DIGITAL KEYBOARD OF THE YEAR

Kawai MP11SE
Nord Electro 7
Korg KROSS 2
Roland RD-2000EX

UKULELE OF THE YEAR

Mahalo Artist Elite Series
Kala KA-15S Soprano
Martin T1K Tenor
Córdoba 15CM Concert

ACOUSTIC GUITAR OF THE YEAR

Cort Earth GO
Seagull S6
Washburn Bella Tono
Martin 2026 HD-28

ELECTRIC BASS OF THE YEAR

Washburn SB4B Scavenger
Ibanez SR1425B SR Premium 5-String
Fender Player II Precision Bass
Sterling by Music Man StingRay RAY4



ELECTRIC GUITAR OF THE YEAR

Washburn Hawk
Fender Player II Stratocaster
Epiphone Les Paul
PRS SE Custom 24

AMPLIFIER LINE OF THE YEAR

Ashly Audio
HiWatt
BOSS/Roland
Fender

B&O LINE OF THE YEAR

Buffet Crampon
Conn-Selmer
Yamaha
Eastman

LIGHTING LINE OF THE YEAR

Chauvet DJ
ADJ
Blizzard
Eliminator Lighting

MICROPHONE OF THE YEAR

CAD Audio GXL4000
Sontronics Solo
Shure SM58
sE V7

RECORDING EQUIPMENT LINE OF THE YEAR

CAD Audio
Focusrite
Universal Audio
Heritage Audio

SOUND REINFORCEMENT LINE OF THE YEAR

Allen & Heath
Yamaha
Yorkville Sound
HK Audio

DRUM & PERCUSSION LINE OF THE YEAR

Pearl
DW
TAMA
Mapex

POPULAR MUSIC PRINT TITLE OF THE YEAR

Taylor Swift – The Life of a Showgirl (Hal Leonard)
KPop Demon Hunters (Hal Leonard)
Chart Hits 2025-2026 (Hal Leonard)
40 Sheet Music Bestsellers: Pop & Rock Hits (Alfred)

EDUCATIONAL PRINT TITLE OF THE YEAR

Alfred's Basic Piano Library: Lesson Book 1A (Alfred)
Suzuki Violin School, Volume 1 (Alfred)
Essential Elements for Band, Book 1 (Hal Leonard)
Better by Sight (Excelcia Music Publishing)

CAST
YOUR
VOTE!



**DEALERS'
CHOICE
AWARDS**

2026

NOMINEE

VOTE NOW

Accessories

D'Addario Releases Collier XS Strings and Vegan Strap with Taylor

D'Addario, in collaboration with Taylor Guitars, has launched the Jacob Collier Specialty XS Phosphor Bronze String Set and a signature vegan strap. The string set features custom gauges from .012 to .053, engineered specifically for Collier's symmetrical D-A-E-A-D tuning on his custom five-string acoustic models. The release utilizes an ultra-thin XS film coating on wound strings and a unique polymer treatment on plain steel strings to ensure maximum corrosion resistance and extended tone life. The packaging includes a 2.5-inch printed vinyl design reflecting Collier's aesthetic, while the accompanying strap is constructed from eco-conscious vegan materials designed for durability and comfort. These products are available globally through D'Addario authorized dealers and the company's official website.



Fender Releases SILENT SYSTEM to Eliminate Single-coil Hum in new Limited Models

Fender has unveiled the Fender Silent System, a patent-pending technology designed to eliminate single-coil pickup hum without requiring batteries or sacrificing authentic tone. According to Australian Musician, this breakthrough addresses an 80-year-old challenge facing the guitar community by integrating a passive system directly into the instrument. The technology debuts in Limited Edition American Professional Classic Stratocaster and Telecaster models, both priced at \$2,799 AUD. Australian Musician reports that these instruments feature vintage-inspired Coastline pickups and Modern C necks while utilizing the new silent architecture to provide working musicians with greater creative control over their signal chain. Unlike traditional noiseless pickups, this system allows players to retain the sonic characteristics of standard single-coils while removing unwanted electrical interference. The Stratocaster is available in finishes including 3-Color Sunburst and Daphne Blue with rosewood fingerboards, plus Olympic White and Candy Apple Red with maple options. The Telecaster lineup offers Candy Apple Red and Sonic Blue with rosewood, alongside Vintage Blonde and 3-Color Sunburst with maple fingerboards. This product launch represents a significant evolution for the fretted market, offering retailers a high-end solution that blends vintage aesthetics with modern performance capabilities for studio and stage applications.



Fretted

Sterling by Music Man releases StingRay Plus Bass with New Electronics

Sterling by Music Man has expanded its SUB Series lineup with the new StingRay Plus bass, available in both four- and five-string configurations. The instrument features a poplar body with an ash veneer offered in Vintage Sunburst or Seafoam Green colorways. While all models utilize a hard maple neck, the Seafoam Green versions include a jatoba fingerboard, whereas the Vintage Sunburst models feature a maple board. Additional hardware specifications include block inlays, open gear tuners, and a fixed bridge. no treble reported that the primary market impact of this release lies in its upgraded electronics designed to complement the existing ceramic humbucker and 2-band EQ. According to the manufacturer, a push-push volume control provides immediate access to increased punch and output for soloing or cutting through a mix without altering the overall setup. Furthermore, a new 3-way switch grants players flexibility to toggle between series, parallel, and single-coil pickup wiring. These settings deliver distinct tonal voices ranging from the classic StingRay snap to a hotter, fuller sound or a leaner, more articulate tone. The four-string model is priced at \$499, while the five-string version carries a price of \$549. The StingRay Plus is currently available for purchase at retailers.



BOSS Releases EX-4 Effects Expander for Pedalboard Versatility

BOSS has announced the release of the EX-4 Effects Expander, a compact processor intended to significantly increase sonic versatility for existing pedalboard configurations. The device is designed for musicians who require extensive effects coverage across multiple song styles or need to construct professional sounds rapidly during performance. This new utility pedal offers a massive boost in sonic versatility for modern players who carefully curate their pedalboard builds.

The unit delivers up to four simultaneous effects from a vast onboard library containing 120 selections spanning major categories such as distortion, modulation, delay, and reverb. It also includes bass-tuned effects and unique models like Slow Gear and Slicer. Dedicated utility blocks allow users to insert foot volume, noise suppression, and mixing functions anywhere within the signal chain, while a global EQ shapes the overall tone. A full colour 2.4-inch display provides clear viewing of the full effect signal chain, individual effect blocks, editing options, menus, and more.

Distribution will begin in October with a suggested retail price of \$299.99. The EX-4 features a 2.4-inch color display and four audio jacks that support mono or stereo connectivity, including an effect loop for integrating external pedals. MIDI I/O enables deep integration with switching systems and external clocking devices. This new product expands BOSS's lineup of creative tools, catering to players from beginners to touring professionals who value rugged durability and intuitive control in their gear.



Warm Audio Releases MOD Series Pedals with Black Keys Collaboration

Warm Audio has officially launched the Mod Series, a new collection of guitar pedals designed to offer slimmer, pedalboard-friendly footprints alongside added features on select models. This strategic expansion adds three specific units to the manufacturer's existing family of recreations, signaling a shift toward compact form factors that retailers can stock for touring and studio applications.

The Centavo Mod delivers a vintage-accurate overdrive circuit in a compact chassis with top-mounted jacks for easier integration. It retains premium components like TL072 op amps while adding a switch to extend low-end response. The WA-C1 Mod offers a faithful analog chorus and vibrato circuit in a reduced size, now featuring a new preamp bypass for improved gain staging control within complex signal chains.

Notably, the Black Keys Peach Fuzz represents a collaborative distribution effort with Dan Auerbach. This limited-edition unit combines a vintage-inspired fuzz and octave circuit with a selectable momentary or latching octave-up hold. Finished in special peach velvet to celebrate the band's upcoming release, the pedal carries a street price of \$199 USD. All Mod Series units are hand-tested, carry a five-year warranty, and are priced between \$189 and \$199 USD, entering the market to compete with other boutique overdrive and fuzz options.



PRS Releases Limited Silver Sky Defender Collection with Land Rover

PRS Guitars has unveiled the Silver Sky Defender Color Collection, featuring eight limited-edition instruments developed with signature artist John Mayer and the British automotive brand. The website mia.org.uk reported that the lineup includes four classic Land Rover Defender colorways on US-made Silver Sky models and four contemporary finishes on SE Silver Sky guitars. Production of the US-made versions is strictly limited to 500 units per color worldwide. These specific models feature exclusive hard cases displaying the Defender wordmark, branded neckplates, and matching painted headstocks. The heritage color options specifically include white pickguards and control knobs to honor the vehicle history.

In contrast, the SE models will be available only during a restricted ordering period concluding in mid-2027. Both tiers are currently available for preorder through authorized PRS dealers. Mayer noted that the design draws inspiration from his personal long-term ownership of a Defender in Aries Blue, aiming to merge automotive heritage with musical expression. Paula Gharizi, Brand Director for JLR North America, stated that the iconic vehicle palette translates effectively to the guitar line. She anticipates strong demand from collectors and musicians alike. This release positions PRS to capture market interest from both fretted instrument enthusiasts and automotive aficionados through distinct aesthetic branding and shared values of exploration and individuality.



Fretted

Spira Adds Multiscale Seven-string and New Finish to Lineup

Spira Guitars has introduced the S-457 Multiscale TBL to its 450 Series, featuring a 25.5 to 27-inch scale layout designed to provide extra tension on lower strings while maintaining familiar playability higher up the neck. This addition targets modern extended-range players seeking clarity and control across all seven strings. The instrument features a roasted poplar body, quilted maple top, Canadian roasted maple neck, and Spira Villain seven-string humbuckers. It is priced at a UK SRP of £439 and is available immediately through Almires UK.

Joining the new model is the T-407 MGR, which now offers a Satin Green finish alongside its existing Satin Black option. The T-407 retains its 26.5-inch scale, roasted poplar body, and Ebony Tech fingerboard, maintaining a firm build for modern metal applications at a UK SRP of £339. Both models are distributed exclusively by Almires UK, which notes that seven-string guitars represent a strong growth area for the brand.

Lee Alexander, Managing Director of Almires UK, stated that Spira delivers quality and specification at price points that are difficult to match. The new additions provide dealers with increased inventory options in a category experiencing real momentum. These releases reinforce Spira's position in the extended-range market by offering modern specs and value to retailers and end-users alike. mia.org.uk reported that the company has been central to the growth of extended-range instruments, delivering high-quality specifications at competitive price points that are hard to match in the current market landscape.



Jackson and Charvel launch Sleep Token Signature Models

One of the biggest signature guitar launches of 2026 involved two musicians who have never spoken publicly or shown their faces. Despite the four-figure price tag, the Charvel and Jackson instruments sold out completely within days of being revealed to the world. This was not a surprise given the masked collective known as Sleep Token has become a phenomenon with a huge presence and a devoted following built on intricate mythology.

Tim Hillier-Brook is the artist marketing manager for Fender's specialty brands and helmed the collaboration between Sleep Token, Jackson and Charvel. It was the first ever joint launch for the two brands, with guitarist IV opting for a signature Jackson and bassist III creating his own Charvel bass. The team started with existing production models but moved to custom instruments after a year of discussions.

IV's guitar is a 30-inch baritone fitted with an EverTune and custom tension modules, tuned E-E an octave down. III's bass marks firsts as the first ever production reverse headstock Charvel and the only multi-scale Charvel bass. Both instruments reflect the ability to switch between different tunings used by the band.

For both instruments, the main word is clarity. The bass has multi-scale and active Fishman pickups to help things stay controlled, while the guitar has a mahogany body with a maple cap to add snappiness. The team ensured the price point was attainable for fans while getting the right specs for live use in large arenas.



Reverend Guitars Releases Limited Billy Corgan Infinite Sadness Models

Reverend Guitars has launched the Billy Corgan Infinite Sadness models, a limited-run series timed for the Smashing Pumpkins Rat In A Cage Tour celebrating the 30th anniversary of Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness. According to Premier Guitar, production is capped at 60 units total, split between 36 Z-One standard models and 24 Drop Z extended-scale guitars. Both feature Black Sparkle finishes, ebony fretboards, and a Mellon Collie moon graphic on the body. Each instrument ships in a two-tone soft case containing a Certificate of Authenticity and a special edition poster titled Mellon Collie Moon.

The Z-One model utilizes an alder body and Railhammer pickups with custom etched artwork, carrying a street price of \$1,899. This release marks the third signature collaboration between Corgan and Joe Naylor. The Drop Z variant combines similar aesthetics with a 26.25-inch scale neck designed specifically for drop tunings to maintain string tension and lists for \$1,999. The source notes that Corgan played this guitar during the band's summer 2026 Lollapalooza performance. The Z-One is inspired by heavier songs in the catalog, while the longer scale of the Drop Z ensures deep, full tones remain punchy and clear when down-tuned.



Print & Digital

Born to Boogie!, a Joyful Children's Picture Book About Music

Scott Murry has spent years photographing bands, interviewing musicians, crate-digging in record stores, and sharing music at home with his son. The Boston-based illustrator and designer is extending his lifelong love of music to a new generation with a joyful children's picture book titled *Born to Boogie!*, available from Inspired Girl Books.

A colorful read-aloud adventure for young readers and music-loving families, *Born to Boogie!* follows Pearl and Mr. Jones, a curious pair whose hungry hearts send them on a foot-stomping, hands-clapping, heart-hollering adventure. Traveling far and wide through sound, time and imagination, Pearl and Mr. Jones meet new friends who introduce them to the building blocks of music. Rhythm, melody, harmony, and soul help them understand how songs come together.

Classic in its sense of wonder, playful in its language, and rich with musical discovery, *Born to Boogie!* offers children an imaginative introduction to the bases of musical incarnation. From early percussion to folk traditions, blues and rock and roll—the book invites young readers to see music not only as something they hear, but as something they can feel, explore, and share.

Born to Boogie! has already drawn praise from an acclaimed group of musicians, producers, writers, and educators. Willie Nelson (!) called the book "a good reminder to find your tribe and follow your dreams." Grammy Award-winning singer and pianist Marcia Ball described it as "smart," "visually-delightful" and "educational." Kellindo Parker of Janelle Monae waxed nostalgic, "the illustrations along with the story takes me back to the luminous imagination of my childhood. I absolutely love it," and public-school music teacher Melody Long called it "great for reading aloud at home or in the classroom."

For Murry, *Born to Boogie!* began during a quiet summer in 2020, when singer/writer/musician Will Thompson of Austin, TX sparked the idea for his first picture book. Drawing on his life as a musician, storyteller, and father, the book turns the roots of music into a playful, movement-filled journey designed to feel as fun as the songs that inspired it.

"*Born to Boogie!* started with a simple idea: making a book that felt the way music feels to kids — loud, colorful, mysterious, a little wild, and completely full of joy," said Thompson. "As a musician and a dad, I loved the idea of giving young readers their first roadmap into where songs come from, without making it feel like a lesson. Pearl and Mr. Jones are chasing that magic feeling you get when a song stops you in your tracks, and just makes you move, and I hope families have as much fun reading it aloud as we had creating it." Murry wholeheartedly agreed and felt the inspiration even more deeply as parenthood entered his life. "Sharing the joy of music with my kiddo is a constant source of play and inspiration."

Born to Boogie! is available as a 10x10 hardcover picture book through Inspired Girl Books, a Division of Inspired Enterprises.



Cases & Stands

HERCULES Releases GS412BSW Auto-Grip Stand with Swivel Yoke

Hercules Stands has launched the GS412BSW Auto-Grip Guitar Stand, an updated model aimed at providing enhanced stability and protection for a wider variety of instruments. The manufacturer states the new stand accommodates neck sizes from 40 to 52 mm, making it compatible with most classical, acoustic, electric, and bass guitars.

The product features an innovative Auto-Swivel Yoke that automatically rotates to fit different headstock shapes, including asymmetrical and left-handed designs. Hercules claims this mechanism, combined with its signature Auto Grip System, secures instruments effectively. Additionally, the included N.I.N.A adjustment expands compatibility to narrow-neck instruments like banjos and mandolins.

A redesigned folding back rest offers multi-angle adjustment to support offset, unconventional, and hollow body styles. The stand supports instruments weighing up to 33 lbs and measures between 33.7 and 42.3 inches in height. Hercules notes the unit weighs just 3.2 lbs and folds compactly for transport. The company describes the design as a solution inspired by musicians globally, guiding their development, manufacturing, and worldwide distribution efforts.



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