

THE BIRTH OF MUSIC STAR PRODUCTIONS

By Brian Berk

There's an old BASF ad that states, "We don't make a lot of the products you buy. We make a lot of the products you buy better." Patrick McCormick and Tony Williams wanted to make something better, namely music instruction books. "We're both musicians and many times when we bought music instruction books, the transcriptions were incorrect," said McCormick. "We're big Kiss fans, and you wouldn't think it would be that difficult to transcribe some of the Kiss songs. They're a lot of fun to play, but often not the most difficult [to learn]. We'd see the same Kiss songs in several books and they were all transcribed differently. It was frustrating. So we wanted to have the musicians who played in these bands show people how to play their songs."

That's how Music Star Productions, manufacturers of the Icons of Rock series of DVDs, was born. But how did McCormick and Williams know their idea would be fruitful? "We knew what we wanted as musicians, so we went to the NAMM Show," said McCormick. "We met different artists and had interest from some and none from others. Of course, being Kiss fans, we approached Gene Simmons and he said to us, 'Ideas never work. But businesses do. So come to me when you have a business.' That was incentive enough that we were on to something. So we started with our first product called 'Learning Guitar: Step 1.' The very next project was with Greg Douglass, a guitarist who wrote 'Jungle Love' with Steve Miller. It was really exciting that our second project was with a multi-platinum-selling artist. And the interest kept growing. And [by the way], before we were even a year old, we worked with Bruce and Bob Kulick of Kiss. That was a big feather in our cap."

Music Star Productions has 18 DVDs available now, and just released five books with DVDs included. Videos are available for guitars, drums, basses, keyboards, banjos, and mandolins, and even one for how to use Digidesign ProTools. But why does the company need to release books with DVDs inserted inside? "MI dealers that sell instruments tell us they do better with sheet music books attached to the DVDs," said McCormick. "So it's based on the demand."

But Music Star will always produce the DVDs. Simply stated, some end-users have an easier time learning from videos compared to books. And the feedback has been positive, said McCormick. "Some of the people who purchase our products are fans of the musician [conducting the lesson on the DVD]," said McCormick. "And a lot of them are discovering the musicians for the first time. These people say, 'Wow, this musician is really good' and they become fans of the musician's music as well."

Speaking of feedback, we live in a day when people want answers immediately. So what if end-users have questions about what they learned on the DVDs? "We get feedback through our



Twisted Sister's Eddie Ojeda.



Patrick McCormick and Tony Williams.



Web site, where we even have an 'online tuner' and 'metronome' for guitars and basses," said McCormick. "That allows customers to adjust their speed while practicing. We also have backing tracks they can download for free and play along with. In addition, we receive e-mails and pass those along to the artist. Oftentimes, the artists respond and provide answers."

Not Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place

With a series of DVDs and books called Icons of Rock, what happens if your customers aren't rock fans? "Our first passion is rock and metal music," said McCormick. "But we're getting into bluegrass and country music in the future."

As for the future, Music Star has plenty more releases due out in 2008. So how do McCormick and Williams brainstorm the ideas for all of the new DVDs and books? "Getting away in the car is a great thing for me," McCormick said. "Tony and I often drive from our location in the San Francisco Bay Area to Los Angeles for different video shoots and promos we are working on."

Taking that approximate six-hour drive can give anyone a lot of time to think. "It's perfect because we talk about where the business is at, where we are heading, and what's the next thing," said McCormick. "We come up with a lot of ideas and are always excited to get back to the office and implement them."

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CURTAIN CALL

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Rubano: These stores were very mom and pop. I knew the owners and they were very small. They didn't have a massive selection of instruments. But that doesn't mean it wasn't a quality place or that music and quality weren't important things there. And I think with the rise of the larger chain stores all over the place, it's interesting. I think probably things become way more available to people, but I also think that communal aspect is gone from stores like that. I don't think the larger chain music stores necessarily...I don't know if they do or not, but as far as I know I don't think there are lessons being taught at those places. I don't think they're educational hubs. Some of them might be, but to my knowledge they are not. And I feel like that was part of it. You'd sit in the waiting room with the same four or five kids every week who all played different instruments, or sometimes all played the same instrument. And there was sort of this idea that you were all working on something separate but together. I'm not sure if that sort of community vibe is in those bigger stores, but it's kind of hard for me to say because I'll occasionally go into a place like that if I need something. Whether I find it or not in the first five or 10 minutes, I'm running for the hills because 16 people all playing guitar at the same time, and out of tune, different songs, at different experience levels, sounds like what hell might be like. Saturday afternoon in a guitar store is my ideal of a really not good time (laughs).

M&SR: Do you get much of a chance to shop at the little mom and pop stores these days?

Rubano: When we're on tour, that's what we head out looking for in particular. Particularly Fred [Mascherino, former lead guitarist] would be way more interested in going into a store like that than a big chain store. And I think that's certainly where you find some real gems sometimes. It's always just a more personal thing.


M&SR: What's in your current rig?

Rubano: Right now, where I'm sitting, I can see my Martin acoustic guitar that I bought a little bit more than a year ago, that I love to death and I play every day. I can see my 1972 Fender Jazz bass, which is my favorite bass but one that stays home a lot because I don't want to put it through the crunch of touring. And I can see my custom-made six-string Michael Tobias bass that I have. I also just recently acquired an upright bass; an acoustic bass. I've been playing a lot of that lately. These are just in my bedroom (laughs). But as far as my touring rig, I have a great relationship and a great setup of Aguilar bass gear that I feel like is second to none. From the first time I played it, it was just a hands-down, no-brainer decision that it was the best-sounding stuff. And then I took it on the road and it's been nothing but super solid for me. I really love that stuff.

M&SR: What is your next gear purchase going to be?

Rubano: I went to see a friend of mine play in New York a couple of weeks ago, and he was playing a Fender Mustang bass. It was kind of a unique sound and a different Fender bass than I've seen before. So I've had my eye on those. But lately I've been more in a practicing and writing mode than amassing equipment.

M&SR: Taking Back Sunday played this year's Live Earth concert. Is that a cause you guys are aware of? Do you play "green" instruments?

Rubano: Wow, I actually haven't heard of any of the "green" instruments. That sounds really interesting. But the opportunity to play the Live Earth show is awesome, both because of what the cause is and the sort of all-over-the-world factor. And of course to be sharing the stage with so many huge names in music. But the environmental awareness is something we've implemented into our band lately as far as our touring. It was initially brought to the band by Fred who, in his personal life, is quite conscious of those things. His home runs on green energy and he has a car that runs on vegetable oil. 

walk out with some small-dollar items as well. So a good overall practice would be to make it well known (and visible) what modular system accessories you stock, which can be placed anywhere in the store. Then place the low-cost 'impulse buy' consumables near the front door, so they are passed coming in and going out."

"Accessories should always be part of a display, whether it be on the floor or on a wall," responded Lotts. "Merchandising is one of the most important aspects of the retail process. Consumers spend no more than two seconds making up their mind and certainly merchandising is the key decisive factor...hands down. Merchandising can be accomplished in a few ways, but in-store displays should always be: **1. Branded 2. Monitored and maintained daily.**

That maintenance process should have two functions: a. Ensure the product brand matches the brand of the display (logo). Unintentional mixing of brands occurs during the consumer's decision-making process and b. The display(s) is filled to ensure the consumer has the breadth of product offered, thus ensuring the manufacturer is properly represented. Certainly beyond the routine merchandising displays, locations such as entranceways, checkout area(s), and other high-traffic areas of the store should be utilized with accessories."

"The[se] items should be placed in multiple locations, since one location equals only one chance for a sale," added Roderick. "Key placement areas should include the place where the instruments reside, the accessories area, and at checkout. Whenever possible, allow the consumer the ability to touch, read, try on, and pick up small goods. Sales will outweigh shrink. **Example:** place matching straps on guitars and have a mirror near by."

"In the case of pickups, if it is at all possible, the store should have an example in an instrument for customers to try," said Melchiorre. "Otherwise, it is a tough call because the dealer has so many brands that offer multiple products. It is impossible to make them all stand out. Without a 'test' product, I think they have to be easily seen near the checkout. Another alternative is to put a pickup or pickups near the instruments

with a sign that says something like, 'Players who bought this model/type found this pickup sounds great.'"

Said Rosenfeld: "The best place for impulse items is at the register. No matter what, everyone passes by the register. Therefore, even if the customer never made it into the guitar section of the store, on the way out they will see picks, pick holders, guitar tuners, strings, straps, cables, slides etc., which will entice the consumer to make that impulse buy on the item they weren't looking for or may have forgotten they needed."

Wenzloff concluded with this different approach. "Get the accessories out from behind the counter! Place accessories as near to associated staple products as possible. Utilize your entire store to display accessories. Ask suppliers for POP display support. Make your store layout unique. Allow your customers to see and touch 'impulse' buys. Do not let potential theft deter you from making extra 'impulse buy' income. Relocating your checkout counter near the store exit or having a package check station can help manage theft issues." 

BIRTH OF A PRODUCT

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As for marketing and promotions, McCormick said Music Star plans to give away an hour-long "sampler" DVD to dealers next month. "It will feature 10 to 20 minutes of each book we are releasing," he said. "That will allow customers to get a really good feel for what the books/DVDs have to offer."

But that leaves one question. Music Star's celebrity instructors include Rudy Sarzo, Tony Saunders, Pete Sears, Eddie Ojeda, and Eric Singer. But even though McCormick mentioned earlier that artists have expressed interest in appearing and teaching their songs on the DVDs, schedules, managers, and of course, the all-mighty buck are huge obstacles for Music Star to overcome. So how do they attract the celebrities? "If they don't have a manager, it's quite easy," said McCormick. "We're always fair to our artists and they recommend us to other artists. But when we work with management companies, it can sometimes become unrealistic [regarding their demands of us]." 