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# BLUEGRASS

MARCH UNLIMITED 2005

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# SAGA

## BLUEGRASS-DRIVEN



Don't try to tell Richard Keldsen that all the bluegrass instruments flooding into the United States from Asia's Pacific Rim countries are made by soulless corporations and poorly skilled workers with no idea how the instruments they make should sound, look, or play.

Keldsen, who started the bluegrass-driven Fifth String music store in Berkeley, Cal., that frequently attracted such Bay Area bluegrass stars as David Grisman, Peter Rowan, Jerry Garcia, and Tony Rice (who actually worked for him as a guitar instructor), is the heart and soul of a multinational, multi-cultural organization that creates top-quality mandolins, resonator guitars, flattop guitars, and banjos, as well as basses and fiddles, under the corporate name of Saga Musical Instruments. With established names like Kentucky mandolins and Gold Star banjos, and rising new brands like Blueridge guitars and even a high-quality line of Gypsy jazz guitars under the Gitane marque, Saga has established itself as an industry benchmark in producing well-made, good-sounding stringed instruments at very attractive prices. For many bluegrassers unable to afford a top-of-the-line American-made

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By David McCarty

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instrument, Saga's commitment to quality and attention to even the small details means they can still play a great guitar, mandolin, or banjo for hundreds or even thousands of dollars less.

Founded more than thirty years ago when Keldsen wanted to sell a simple, easy-to-assemble banjo kit out of his small retail music store, Saga has grown from what was essentially a one-man operation with no experience working with Asian manufacturers, to a large, sophisticated corporation coordinating the design, manufacture, importation, and marketing of thousands of instruments and untold numbers of bluegrass instrument parts every year into the U.S. market.

Occupying over 50,000 sq. ft. of warehouse, office, and instrument setup

and adjustment space in industrial south San Francisco, not far from the city's busy international airport, Saga has come a long, long way from the days in the 1970s when Keldsen operated the business out of his 900 sq. ft. retail music store.

"Those were heady times," he says of the popular store that helped introduce many Bay Area musicians to serious bluegrass instruments. "You could walk in on any afternoon and see Jerry Garcia sitting in the back over a guitar or see Peter Rowan walking in. Tony Rice was a guitar teacher there, and I was in a band with David Grisman for a while. We were right next to Paul's Saloon."

That watering hole hosted many local and national touring bands, including J.D. Crowe and the New South and many more. And with many of those bands coming back from or going to Japan with tales of the burgeoning bluegrass scene there, Keldsen was inspired to look to that Asian nation when he discovered that the U.S. parts for a banjo kit would have cost more than the completed instrument.

With no business contacts in Asia and only his personal experience working for the Peace Corps in the region as a

confidence-builder, he started by contacting the Japanese consulate and requesting a list of musical instrument manufacturers he could contact. After sending letters to all forty names to explain his banjo kit idea, only one responded.

"But it was from the perfect one, [Tom] Hosokawa," he recalls. "So I went to Japan and met with him and gave him this harebrained idea. I had no track record and could barely afford the plane ticket, but he said let's do it."

Hosokawa had contacts throughout the country's various instrument-manufacturing companies, and quickly arranged for parts and eventually entire banjos to be made under the Saga Japan banner. Keldsen vividly remembers taking his first rudimentary five-string banjo kit to the annual NAMM convention of musical equipment and getting more orders than he expected for such a new product.

The business grew quickly in Japan, as Saga developed an extensive line of bluegrass instrument parts, accessories like capos and picks, and other items in

Tahara, led to the introduction of the Kentucky mandolin line. "We were buying some mandolins from him and selling them at Fifth String, and within about three months he suggested that we buy his shop. I was stunned, but within about three months we had done that," he says. "He was the first to make a modern F-5-style mandolin in Japan, and so we started making really high-end Kentucky Master Model mandolins." Eventually, Kentucky even collaborated on a special Dawg model with David Grisman, an instrument that now is a true collectable among mandolin aficionados.

Business was good, but in the 1980s, world economic trends started to change. Before long, mass-producing stringed

before being shipped to their dealers. "We want every instrument that leaves here to be as close as possible to the standards we have for every instrument," he states.

With all the company's success, you'd think it might be hard to single out a particular success story. But Keldsen quickly points out the immediate impression made by Saga's new Blueridge guitars as an example.

"They've been such a huge hit, I don't even know where to start," he admits. "It's pretty unbelievable for us to be able to produce guitars of that quality from China, which has no tradition of guitarmaking. You don't expect it. Without that tradition, you wonder how it's possible."

What made it possible, he explains, is the company's longstanding association with a family-owned Taiwanese instrument company. "The son of the guy we started working with was this crazy guy who was just meticulous and passionate about doing this as well as he can do it," Keldsen explains. "So we started working with him about six years ago to start a guitar line, and things happened really quickly."



**Richard Keldsen in Frankfurt**

instruments in Japan became virtually as expensive as in the United States, Keldsen explains, leading to a move first to Korean and then Chinese production facilities to keep costs competitive.

"I was the first American guy nuts enough to go to mainland China and start importing instruments," he explains. "We started importing violins at that time. Over the last 24 years, we've been the largest importer of violins from China to the U.S. We've imported thousands and thousands of them." Now, Saga also uses Chinese production facilities for many of its instrument lines to keep costs down. Moving to a production facility in northern China, he adds, had other advantages. "The climate there is ideal for instrument making; it's real dry," Keldsen explains, "and it's very close to our raw materials sources in Manchuria."

But not all work is done overseas, he adds. Saga's U.S. facility inspects instruments as they arrive and does critical setup work to ensure that they meet the company's standards for playability



**Saga set-up**

demand by bluegrass musicians in the States. With his company's expertise in banjos, he soon hooked up with some of the top banjo players in Japan and started a line of high-quality banjos (called Gold Star) that today have become valuable collector's items prized by top players like Tom Adams.

A similar association with a small mandolin-making operation, run by Ryohei

The other key ingredient, he adds, was when Greg Rich, formerly of Gibson and the defunct Rich & Taylor banjo company, came aboard first as a consultant to Saga and then as a full-time employee. Rich's keen eye for detail and encyclopedic knowledge of American stringed instruments made him the perfect guy to oversee the introduction of a new line of high-end Blueridge guitars meticulously modeled after examples of fine vintage flattop guitars taken to China for careful inspection and measurement before production began. "We went after the details like madmen," Keldsen says of the process of recreating the sound, look, and feel of some of the greatest bluegrass guitars ever made. "It made a major impact on the guitar industry."

What's most interesting about the process, he adds, is that in effect, Blueridge has created an ironic role reversal between Asian and American guitar makers. In the past, guitarists used to decry Asian instruments as cookie-cutter guitars, while their American counterparts were carefully hand-crafted by skilled craftsmen.

With Blueridge, Keldsen points out, it's now the Asian guitar that is being made mostly by hand, while the majority of American-made guitars are assembled from parts manufactured on computer-controlled lathes and other industrial processing machines. "We actually have a documentary filmmaker who is so interested in this reversal that he wants to do a film for PBS on Blueridge," Keldsen revealed.

Looking to the future, Keldsen says the company is expanding its existing lines and adding new models. "We haven't even scratched the surface," he reports. New Gold Star banjos, including all the original models; a new slope-shouldered dreadnought Blueridge guitar, based on a vintage guitar he's owned for years; improved versions of their Regal resonator guitars; a 25th anniversary Master Model Kentucky mandolin; their first signature model Gypsy jazz guitar, honoring John Jorgenson; and more, will all sustain the company's growth, he notes.

And for company founder Richard Keldsen, the chance to combine his intense love of bluegrass music and the instruments it's played on with the opportunity to make a living has been the ultimate reward. "I've been doing this

since 1973, and it's a passion. Not a day goes by that I don't come in here ready to wrestle with alligators. There are eight or nine guys here who pick really well, and we play every day," he says, adding, "I'm really lucky to be able to take everything I'm interested in and put it into a business. When I drive to work, I'm really looking forward to my day. And at night, it's hard to drag me out of here."

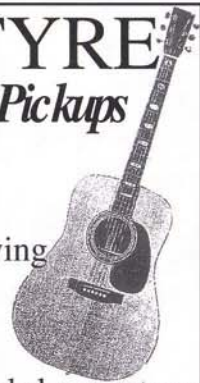


*David McCarty, a staff writer for Bluegrass Unlimited, is just as passionate about writing about bluegrass and other forms of music.*

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