

RICHARD KELDSEN, SAGA MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

“I’ve always had this wanderlust, and I look at business as partially an excuse to travel the world,” says Richard Keldsen, founder of Saga Musical Instruments. Having trekked throughout Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and rural South America, Richard has been to more obscure places than just about anyone else in the music industry. The trips have helped sate his wanderlust, but they’ve also enabled him to creatively source the high-value line of Saga guitars, mandolins, banjos, violins, and cellos. A trip to remote Mongolia yielded a source for superb horsehair for bows. In Uzbekistan he linked up with a craftsman who now supplies him with beautifully polished bone saddles and nuts for guitars. “If you keep your eyes open and you’re persistent, it’s amazing what you can find,” he says.

As a lone Johnny Cash fan surrounded by hardcore rock and rollers, Richard remembers being something of a social pariah growing up in Escanaba in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. His social status sunk even lower when his musical tastes shifted towards bluegrass. “The first time I heard Earl Flatt and Lester Scruggs on the radio, I went nuts,” he recalls. “I called the radio station to find out who these guys were and immediately went out and bought some of their records.” The records led to the purchase of a banjo, which prompted him to persuade some friends to take up guitar, which ultimately led to the creation of a bluegrass band. “The winters are long and cold in the Upper Peninsula, and there isn’t much to do, so I decided to learn the banjo.”

Throughout his four years at Michigan State, Richard played continuously in various bluegrass bands, with the exception of a six-month period spent in Germany working for the German Post Office. After graduating in 1967 with a

degree in Humanities, he enrolled in the Peace Corps and spent three years teaching math in Luzon in the Philippines.

Without a clear idea of what he wanted to do, finding a career path was a process of elimination. Initially he looked on the Peace Corps as a stepping-stone for entering the Diplomatic Corps, but after visiting the U.S.



Richard Keldsen, president of Saga Musical Instruments, with one of his mandolins.

Embassy in the Philippines, he had a quick change of heart. “It was worse than working for the Post Office,” he says.

When his Peace Corp stint ended, he was still undecided on what to do, so he returned to Escanaba, where he worked part-time as a night watchman and started another bluegrass band. Playing gigs in Michigan and Wisconsin, the band developed a small but loyal following, and one fan started pestering Richard for banjo lessons. “I told him to get lost about a dozen times, but he kept asking, and I finally gave in.” The hit movie *Deliverance* had just opened, and interest in the banjo was at a fever pitch, so when Richard placed a few classified ads, he was deluged with students. Within six months he was teaching 80 students out of his mother’s basement.

In 1973 he moved to San Francisco and opened The Fifth String, a retail store

focusing on acoustic instruments. A few years later, when Larry Bowen, a friend from Michigan, moved to California, the two opened a second location in Berkeley. Saga Musical Instruments evolved out of an effort to develop a banjo kit. “I had tried to source components to offer a kit, but there was no way I could get the components for less than the price of a complete banjo,” explains

Richard. To solve the problem, he looked to Japan. After writing 30 or more letters to various consulates and companies in Japan, the Hosokawa Company offered to supply him with competitively priced banjo components. Richard initially hoped to sell a few hundred kits, but after taking orders for 2,000 in less than a year, he decided to focus all his energies on importing musical instruments. In 1981 he sold his interest in The Fifth String to Larry Bowen, who continues to run the store, and established Saga in a warehouse in South San Francisco.

In 1981 Richard was one of the first in the industry to travel to China. “When I was in the Philippines, Radio Beijing was the strongest station on the dial, and I remember their screaming propaganda about ‘Running Dogs of Capitalism’ and the ‘War-Mongering West,’” he recalls. “When the country started opening up, I couldn’t wait to go.” A few years later Saga opened an office in Shanghai, which continues to coordinate shipments and provide quality control on stringed instruments, guitars, and mandolins.

With Saga moving to an expanded office and warehouse in South San Francisco, and the arrival of a newborn son, Richard’s travels have been temporarily curtailed, but he’s not overly concerned. “I’m having a great time with business, and life in general,” he concedes. “For the first time, I don’t feel quite the same urge to roam.”