

The Music Trades

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An Inspiring Saga— 25 Years Of Turning Niches Into Gold

Global sourcing, innovative design, and a passion for the entire family of fretted instruments have made Richard Keldsen's Saga Musical Instruments the ultimate niche supplier.

Find factory in China. Train laborers. Replicate hot-selling product designs. Refine processes to meet lower price points. Build a guitar for every closet. Anyone who's shopped for an affordable acoustic guitar over the past decade might conclude that this uninspired formula has driven much of the mid- and entry-level markets. Like many companies, Saga Musical Instruments has achieved exceptional value through international sourcing, but clearly its product range, design choices, and manufacturing execution are cut from non-standard cloth. Time and again over its 25 years Saga has

shown uncommon prescience for "niche" instruments' appeal and, through its meticulous product designs and construction, an abiding respect and passion for the music they facilitate. Saga's leading brands include Cremona violins, Blueridge and Trinity College guitars, Gold Star banjos, Regal dobros, Kentucky mandolins, and Gitane gypsy jazz guitars.

At the 2006 summer NAMM show in Austin, Violins, Etc. Senior Sales Associate Mark Rubin examined every inch of a Saga prototype parlor guitar, played it, then examined it again. An authority on luthiery in general and parlor guitars in particular, Rubin commended Saga's use of fan bracing and



The enthusiasm of the Saga team is on display with the The Tora Bora Boys, a bluegrass band of Saga Musical employees. (l-r) David Gartland, marketing mgr.; Adrian Bagale, prod. mgr.; Don Moser, intl. sis. mgr.; and Richard Keldsen, CEO. At left, Saga's Gitane line has single-handedly expanded the market for gypsy jazz guitars.



Inveterate traveler Richard Keldsen in search of horse tails (for violin bows) in Chinese Turkestan, circa 1994... (above) and at an old Tibetan fort high in the Pamir Mountains, Baltit, Kashmir, circa 1989 (left).

other construction details that are true to the instrument's heritage. Saga President Richard Keldsen recalls becoming intrigued with the parlor guitar when Saga's product manager found a drawing of one produced in 1906. "We dubbed ours the Earthquake model," he says, "because 1906 was the year of the big San Francisco Earthquake. The guitar's already a cannon, but we're still refining the bracing and some small details of the peghead shape and bridge plate."

Keldsen's deeply informed attention to detail has long been absorbed into Saga's corporate culture. Typically, new products undergo months of testing and subtle refinements before their official public launch. The word "evolution" pops up frequently as he describes the company's approach to product design. "In making guitars," he explains, "there's always a conflict between structural strength and sound quality. If you brace the guitar too lightly or make the top too thin, you have a cannon on your hands—in both senses: It's got a big, loud sound...and it'll blow up in your face. Back in 1906 parlor guitars were designed to be played with gut strings, so they were really lightly braced. We're trying to continue the

instrument's evolution, making it strong enough to be played with light-gauge steel or silk and steel strings without exploding, yet produce the instrument's characteristic sound."

Rationalizing Saga's investment of time and energy in developing a modern parlor guitar, Keldsen cites an "undercurrent of interest" evidenced by a website and "an organization of parlor guitar fanatics. The guitars they're using were really not designed to be played with steel strings. If we can produce an instrument that performs at the level they want, we might be able to create a market."

Drawing On History

Such an aspiration might appear unreasonably optimistic were it not for Saga's single-handed expansion of the gypsy jazz guitar market. The company's Gitane line features guitars made famous by legendary swing-era musician Django Reinhardt, built by celebrated luthier Mario Maccaferri, and later modified and produced by Selmer. Before Gitane debuted in 2001, modern gypsy jazz instruments were available only through a handful of limited-production luthiers, and their prices made them accessible only to musicians fully

committed to the genre. By making gypsy jazz guitars affordable, Saga tapped into guitarists' curiosity and penchant for owning multiple instruments. "There's always been a big interest in Django Reinhardt," says Keldsen, "but to play that kind of music, you need a particular kind of instrument. Before we got into it, there was nothing under \$2,000, and if you wanted to buy an old Selmer, there was nothing under \$40,000. We thought if we could offer quality instruments that could give guitarists the required sound, there would be some kind of a market."

True to its founder's nature, Saga thoroughly researched the historic gypsy jazz instruments and "spent a lot of time sweating the details" before introducing the first Gitanes. "Many of the original Selmer Djangos are in awful condition," he explains. "Selmer didn't make many of them, and it never worked out some of the design flaws. We studied the originals, but we also continued their evolutionary process and—it's almost heresy to say it—improved them."

Surpassing even Keldsen's expectations, the Gitane line didn't just tap the gypsy jazz guitar market; it drove it, creating legions of new fans of the genre—and customers for Saga and its

dealers. Responding to Saga's success, several other manufacturers have since introduced their own gypsy jazz guitar lines, but Gitane benefits from being the first in its class, from Saga's reputation for design excellence and quality, and from endorsements by top artists such as John Jorgenson, Lulo Reinhardt, and Stephane Wrembel. Clearly their affiliation with Gitane guitars is a testament to their sound, construction quality, and historic "integrity," but, according to Marketing Manager David Gartland, it's also a nod to Saga's advancement of the art form. "Most of the artists we work with care about the people at the end of the chain. By making products that everyone can afford, we're encouraging people to develop an appreciation for the instruments these great artists play and the music they love."

Keldsen explains that many guitarists get involved in bluegrass and gypsy jazz because they're interested in the technical aspects and complexity of those styles. He confides that, like John Jorgenson, he too "got swept up in" gypsy jazz, and that his love for the style was his primary impetus for launching the Gitane line. "Being in this part of the business represents a real responsibility," he says. "Whether you're making a guitar that sells for \$3,000 or \$300, if that guitar can't bring someone into the fold, so to speak, you're not doing your job."



We don't go into real low end of the market, but when we make an entry-level instrument, even if it doesn't have all of the tonal aspects of a \$3,000 instrument, we make certain that it's going to play like one, with a good neck shape and action. It's going to serve a function; it's not something that just looks like a familiar instrument but ultimately discourages the player. Then when you get into the middle- and upper-range instruments, your responsibilities are even greater. At that point you're trying to draw out that elusive aspect of the instrument that makes it sound incredible."

Deliverance By Retail

Not all Saga instruments are as esoteric as its parlor guitar and Gitanes. Its Trinity College fingerstyle guitars, with their "very organic qualities," are intended to "help to bridge the gap between fine import instruments and boutique works of art." The Blueridge line's dreadnoughts, 000s, and Carter Stanley Signature models feature prewar forward X-pattern brace-

Saga's Trinity College guitar line is aimed at the folk, bluegrass, and Americana roots music markets.

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ing. The fact that even Saga's more traditionally styled guitars lean toward folk, bluegrass, and Americana roots music is no coincidence. More than four decades ago Keldsen was "swept up" in bluegrass. He took up the banjo at 17 and played in numerous bluegrass bands throughout his four years at Michigan State University, taking just one six-month break to work in a post office in Germany. Following his graduation in 1967 he enrolled in the Peace Corps and spent three years teaching math in the Philippines. (Aside from music, Keldsen's other passion is travel.) Upon returning to his native Michigan he resumed his "misspent youth as a bluegrass musician," starting another bluegrass band, teaching banjo lessons in his mother's basement, and, in 1971, opening his own music store. Retail proved to be a seminal step.

"When I opened the store it became imperative for me to be knowledgeable about the details of the instruments I was selling," he says. "When a customer comes in, part of your job is to be able to explain the differences between

Once the movie *Deliverance* was released, "instead of being a social pariah, **it was cool to be a banjo player** and to have banjos in our store."

the \$150 mandolin and the \$7,000 mandolin you're selling. Back then there wasn't much printed information on bluegrass instruments, so I talked to experts like [Gruhn Guitars'] George Gruhn and Stan Werbin at Elderly Instruments. I lived and breathed acoustic stringed instruments for about ten years."

In 1973 Keldsen relocated to California. His timing proved impeccable ("very lucky"), since the hit movie *Deliverance* was released a few months

before he opened The Fifth String, a small banjo-centric acoustic instrument store, in San Francisco. "Suddenly," he recalls, "instead of being a social pariah, it was cool to be a banjo player and to have banjos in our store." The store's unique focus helped him sell banjos "all day long," but initially its guitar sales languished. Eventually, though, displaying full product lines and a broad assortment of instruments turned the tide. "In time we ended up with a better selection than anyone else," he recalls, "and by then we had a lot of product knowledge. When you have those things and you're sufficiently focused, it becomes difficult for even big stores to compete with you." The Fifth String's location and reputation attracted top musicians and collectors nearly every day, and Keldsen continued to learn from them the finest details of "what made good instruments good and great instruments great."

In an effort to serve the banjo community's needs, Keldsen tried to develop a banjo kit, but the components cost more than a finished banjo. When he finally

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found an affordable source, the market's overwhelming response to the kits inspired him to sell the retail store so that he could concentrate on importing musical instruments.

Throughout his career Richard Keldsen has benefited from fortuitous timing and fearless initiative. 1981 was the first year that a Chinese export corporation exhibited at the Musikmesse Fair in Frankfurt. Keldsen ordered 200 violins from the company on the condition that he could go visit the factory "to inspect them"—but in reality more because he wanted to see China. Though he had already visited much of Asia, travel by Westerners into China was then rare—and therefore all the more enticing to Keldsen. The exporter arranged a visa for him, and four months later he was in Shanghai.

In the early '80s most Sino-American trade was transacted through middlemen in Hong Kong, and some of Keldsen's Asian contacts encouraged him to follow that approach. But he found that going alone, apparently as a tourist, offered subtle yet significant

benefits. "There are real cultural differences between people living in Southern China and those in the coastal regions going northward, and the people from Hong Kong weren't particularly popular. Americans were a novelty and

somewhat intriguing to them then, so going by myself worked to my advantage." Within a few years he had capitalized on that advantage, opening the American musical instrument industry's first representative office in China. That



Country artist Jim Silvers, "dawg music" virtuoso David Grisman, and Saga CEO Richard Keldsen at Paul's Saloon in San Francisco, circa 1974.



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office continues to coordinate Saga's shipments and factory quality control.

Keldsen and company spent the following years applying the knowledge he'd accumulated at The Fifth String to Saga's Asian factories, impressing upon them the importance of design and construction details, the necessity of using the right materials, and quality control. In time those principles became part of the factory's culture too.

Along with his fertile imagination, Keldsen's peripatetic soul and global

worldview have also served the company's material sourcing ends. Saga works with manufacturers to secure materials, and in many cases it actually supplies items that might not be readily available in China. For example, while exploring Uzbekistan he discovered a great source for bone nuts and saddles used on many of the company's stringed instrument lines.

In 2002 a friend who had relocated to rural Brazil discovered that the many tree stumps marring his fields were rose-

wood. "The trees had been cut down 50 or 60 years ago, so the wood in the stumps was certified 'legal,'" explains Keldsen. "That's why we've been able to put Brazilian rosewood guitars back on the market with prices that aren't way off in the solar system."

Much closer to home—in fact, near Keldsen's native northern Michigan—Saga finds a fine species of hard maple for its Kentucky brand mandolins. Keldsen points out that it's the same kind of maple used to make the classic Lloyd Loar mandolins of the early 1920s. "We found a mill in that region that cuts the wood the correct way, and then we send it to our factory in China to produce the mandolins."

How far has Keldsen gone for superior materials? When he ventured to Urumqi (uROOMchee), in Chinese Turkestan, near the Mongolian border—"arguably the most remote city on earth," according to his June 1994 travel journal—he discovered a source for top-quality horse hair for violin bows. In the same journal entry he wrote: "In the past few years, Saga has been responsible for a price roll-back in violin bow hair of as much as 75%. How have we done it? Take a look at the photo: Absent from picture are the beloved Hong Kong and German middlemen who formerly were in the picture."

Richard Keldsen has spent 25 years pursuing his two lifelong passions—travel and music—to produce instruments of outstanding quality and value. On numerous occasions this pursuit empowered him not only to prosper, but to lead the industry. Prudence might have inspired him to contemplate, "If no one else is doing it"—opening a banjo-based retail store in San Francisco; establishing the first rep office in China; designing and marketing gypsy jazz and parlor guitars—"maybe there's nothing to be gained." But if doubts entered his mind, they never slowed or diverted him. "I always started with something I was interested in—something I loved—learned everything I could learn about it, and then focused on that part of the market where no one else has chosen to go. After having done it a few times, I've gained a little confidence in my instincts."

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