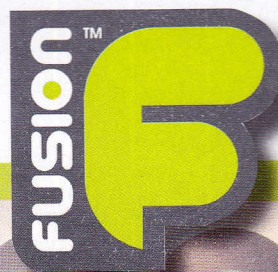


The Women Of



By Brian Berk

We're well into our third year of our Formidable Females column. Every time, we've featured an individual woman on this page. Well, for this month only, that's going to change. Why? Because British-based Fusion Bags was founded by four women. An entirely woman-owned MI company is rare in this industry, to say the least. Fusion comprises Amanda Wheatley, Wendy Caldwell, Nicole Szekeres, and Theli Renwick. The two-year-old company manufactures gig bags for guitars, ukuleles, cellos, keyboards, brass and woodwind instruments, and DJ equipment. In the early 1990s, Wheatley was a trumpet player who felt there were few choices in the gig bag market. She decided to design a bag for her instrument that was practical, easy to carry, and had a sporty look. In 1993, Wheatley drew the first ideas for brass and woodwind bags on paper. At the time, she was running a design consultancy with Caldwell for well-known sports and leisure brands.

Lack of MI experience was a challenge for Wheatley and Caldwell, however. Breaking into the industry would be difficult. "We had the designs," said Caldwell. "We knew a manufacturer, but we felt we did not possess all of the skills needed to bring our own range of bags into the music industry. We felt we were at the bottom of this massive hill and had no idea how to climb it."

Good fortune came for what would be called Fusion Bags, though. An MI manufacturer saw the potential of Wheatley's designs. Doors were opened. A relationship was built.

But the puzzle wasn't complete. Fusion Bags clearly had two design experts, so the new products would keep coming. However, Fusion badly needed a logistics manager and, of course, someone to sell and market the product.

So Wheatley and Caldwell met with Szekeres, a sales/marketing whiz, and Renwick, an experienced logistics manager. Szekeres had been a long-time friend of Wheatley and Caldwell. Meanwhile, Renwick was employed by a company that was a client of Wheatley and Caldwell's design agency. Unfortunately, Renwick's position became redundant, and she was invited to join the new company.

Fifteen years after Wheatley's first pen-and-paper designs, Fusion Bags was ready to manufacture its first products. Between March and September 2008, four series of gig bags were designed and manufactured. The products were first launched at 2008's Music China show in Shanghai. "The personal sacrifice was immense," said Szekeres. "We ate, slept, and drank Fusion for months, barely having time to sleep. I remember our focus was on providing an excellent product and bringing a concept of fashion into the gig bag world."

During Music China, the Fusion women anxiously waited for customers to visit their booth.

Would people visit the tiny booth? Would the show be a success? Would all of the long, sleepless nights be fruitful? All are fair questions. The first time exhibiting at a trade show has to be nerve-racking for anyone.

Music China was fruitful for the formidable foursome. Fusion signed on six distributors. Buoyed by the success, Fusion decided to give the Winter NAMM and Musikmesse shows a shot. Those were also good decisions. By April 2009 (when the Musikmesse show ended), Fusion Bags were being sold in 12 different countries. Definitely not too shabby after only three trade show booth appearances. "When I think about what has been achieved in such a short period of time, it overwhelms me," said Renwick.

Fusion's F1 series is its top-of-the-line gig bag. The hybrid bag features backpack straps and several large pockets. It comes in four vibrant styles and, therefore, is intended for a liberal musician.

The F2 series is available in colors that are more subdued and is intended for a more conserva-

tive player. The F3 and F4 series are entry-level products aimed at student purchasers.

To say Wheatley had to wait a long time to get Fusion Bags to the market would be a massive understatement. We are in April 2010, after all. Fifteen years can be an eternity for a product developer to wait. A long time for anyone to wait, for that matter. Fusion Bags clearly has accomplished an awful lot in just two years. But was it all worth it? "From the very beginning, I knew I would have my own range of gig bags," Wheatley said. "It may have taken longer than I would have wanted, but I never gave up on my dream."

Fusion Bags exhibited at NAMM again in January. The company just signed on with a U.S. distributor. AsFab Music Company will be distributing the product. In fact, Fusion Bags sent its first product shipment to California-based AsFab as you are reading this story. For more information on AsFab, visit www.asfabmusic.com or contact Nick Pyzow at nick@asfabmusic.com.