

BOUTIQUE'S BEAUTIFUL 25TH

By Brian Berk

Memphis is well known for the huge role it played in the human rights movement and later its college basketball prominence. And oh yes, that other big thing in Memphis: a guy named Elvis Presley.

Saint Blues Guitar Workshop celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, but its history dates back to the civil rights days of the 1960s. Back then, Tom Keckler, known by every company employee as "TK," went to work for Mike Ladd's Guitar City. Ladd was a popular figure in town. He attended high school and played with Greg and Duane Allman. He played in The Breakers, whom the Yardbirds actually opened for in Memphis. (Not the other way around).

Ladd also performed customization work and he and TK became well known for their work. So well known in fact that Jimmy Page was one of their customers.

Mike Ladd's Guitar City was located across the street from Graceland, definitely not a bad place to be. The store built a one-of-a-kind guitar for Elvis that he played in the "Elvis, Live From Hawaii" video.

Times for Ladd and TK were great. Great clients and a thriving business. But unfortunately, Ladd was forced to face a long-term illness. He had to close the store in 1972. TK subsequently moved the custom shop to Strings & Things, a store founded by Charlie Laing and Chris Lovell, a frequent contributor to *the Music & Sound Retailer* and an executive with the IMSO independent dealer group.

In 1978, TK left Memphis to team with Tom Anderson and David Schecter to run Schecter Guitar Research. "I left because the people at Schecter offered me a really good position," said Keckler. "I thought moving out to Los Angeles would be fun. But I realized later I didn't get to enjoy the fruits of that era in Southern California."

TK rejoined Laing and Lovell in 1983, and built custom guitars for Strings & Things. The guitars were called S&T Custom

Workshop Guitars. The name was changed to St. Blues in 1984, and it was full-steam ahead for the next five years. "We had a trademark on S&T Custom," said TK. "Dealers told us they wouldn't mind buying and selling our guitars, but we had to change the name because they didn't want to make it look like they were competing with another retail store. I'd be hard



pressed to tell you how Strings & Things guys came up with the Saint Blues name (laughs)."

In 1989, due to the dollar's historic low versus the Japanese yen, Saint Blues was priced out of the market. But custom guitars continued to be built.

In 2006, along came Bryan Eagle III, who resurrected the St. Blues brand and he subsequently brought TK back.

"I bought this business in 2006 with the sole intention of delivering the best guitar we could for less than \$1,000 geared toward the independent," said Eagle. "Our mission was to reach out to the independent retailer community with a guitar that could deliver 42 points of margin to them at MAP. And we have a cool story and a rich history that includes the Memphis music background."

"Things have been good for us thus far this year," he continued, "because we've begun to see a



migration to boutique brands. It allows dealers to deliver products that are unique to them and certainly something you won't find anywhere else. That

gives the dealer an identity that helps them attract a customer base and deliver margins that allow dealers to not only stay in business, but profitable. More often than not, I've seen that when independents try to match prices of online discounters—particularly holiday pricing—they end up with a margin of between nine and 18 points. You can't sell enough accessories to be able to get that margin up to keep you in business. We want to be independent friendly and focused. We've done it really well overseas. Seventy percent of our sales are overseas. We've done especially well in Germany, the U.K., France, and Japan. Internationally, the phrase 'Memphis music' is like saying the words 'Swiss chocolates.' It gives you credibility."

"Bryan Eagle is a venture capital/marketing executive who saw and purchased our trademark," said TK. "He wasn't in the music business before. He revived the trademark and really has done a good job."

Another Brian, (although spelled with an "i") Brian Halley, the company's director of sales and marketing, joined the com-

pany in January 2007. Halley said of Eagle: "He's really good at recognizing brands. We're both big fans of music and musical instruments. We're both former players. He really gave the company more life. We saw a spot—a hole in the system—for a consistent quality guitar with high-end components for under \$1,000. That was a fun challenge for us."

Halley added that the best part about working for Saint Blues is the "freedom to do what is right. Bottom lines matter of course, but we're not constrained by a bureaucracy and a long-term giant plan that doesn't have to do with the consumer. I really enjoy not being guided by a corporate mandate, which may or may not help the individual I'm speaking to. It allows me more and more to incorporate good ideas. I like being open and honest with our customers. It sounds corny, but we're very motivated. We really do care for one dealer at a time and one guitar player at a time."

To honor the 25th anniversary, the Memphis Rock 'n' Soul Museum created an exhibit in its lobby featuring three separate displays. The exhibit runs through the rest of this year and features the early years of the company, a guitar designed for Billy Squier, and a story about how the company lost an endorsement deal with Eric Clapton. "Eric liked our guitars and was known to come into Strings & Things when he was in town," said TK. "In those days, artists made a point of going into every cool local music store in pretty much every town they played in. Clapton liked one of the prototypes of Saint Blues' Bluesmaster. An endorsement contract was being worked out. But one of the owners at the store thought the contract was all set and he started advertising about it. Eric pulled out [of the deal], but still used the guitars. In fact, I think he still has one." 