

REPLAY GUITAR EXCHANGE

Specializing in new and used guitars, rookie retailer has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in Tampa



Replay Guitar Exchange in Tampa, FL, typically has about 1,000 instruments on hand, including electric and acoustic guitars, electric basses, ukuleles, mandolins, and banjos.

VETERAN STORE OWNERS WHO HAVE ridden out booms and busts over the decades recognize that the last few years might not have been the most encouraging to rookies aspiring to take the field. But in 2015 some good fortune and an even better plan gave “computer programmer, real estate investor, philanthropist, and metal-head” Kyle Bailey an auspicious start as a specialty retailer. Just a year out of the gate, Replay Guitar Exchange is on its way to becoming Tampa, Florida’s go-to shop for guitarists.

Bailey played guitar in garage bands and gigged “a bit” near

where he grew up in Washington D.C. But when he relocated to Florida for college and ended up settling there, he fell out of the habit of playing. It wasn’t until his ten-year-old son became interested in guitar and he began bonding with him over strumming patterns and power chords that he also rediscovered his own love of the instrument.

Just as this epiphany revived Bailey’s long-shelved dream “to open a guitar shop someday,” he learned that a small local music store was shuttering. Bailey offered to buy the dealer’s modest inventory, which proved just big enough to get him started.





The Replay Guitar Exchange staff: (front, l-r) Matt Swenson, Spencer Feldman, Skyer Alexandre, Cliff Feldman, Jim Blaisdell (no longer with Replay), Shawn Wainwright; (back, l-r) Jim Brady, Tony Purnell, Brad Lehmann, Dave Haley, Kyle Bailey, Kent Sonenberg, Josh Haley.

His luck continued when he met veteran retailer Kent Sonenberg, previously the owner of Legends Guitars in Tampa and, before that, a sales manager at onetime regional powerhouse Thoroughbred Music. Helped significantly by Sonenberg's industry connections, which stretched back decades, Bailey was able to assemble a dream team staff with polished qualifications in operations, sales, and various web functions, not to mention an invaluable repository of specialized product knowledge. As yet another bonus to the fledgling business, in addition to their considerable expertise, each brought his own clientele.

"Having the right people and vibe is key," Bailey stresses, adding that an important part of Replay's vibe is determined by the attitude of the staff toward their customers. Paying non-commissioned salaries keeps employees focused on keeping their customers happy, he explains, not just closing the sale at hand.

Replay Guitar Exchange is located in Tampa's Britton Plaza, a landmark open-air shopping center with popular anchor stores and an eight-screen movie complex. Bailey hired an architect to help

him realize his vision of a dream guitar store. The 6,000-square-foot building features a spacious main showroom with high ceilings to accommodate three rows of guitars, plus separate soundproofed rooms for basses and amplifiers, an instrument repair room, and studios for lessons on guitar, bass, keyboards, drums, and voice. An offsite warehouse is roughly a ten-minute drive from the store.

1,000 INSTRUMENTS ON DISPLAY

Electric guitar sales are rising, Bailey reports, and since its inception Replay has been known for having the area's best selection of electrics. The store typically has about 1,000 instruments on hand, including electric and acoustic guitars, electric basses, ukuleles, mandolins, and banjos. It also stocks a broad range of amplifiers, effect pedals, and accessories, as well as a selection of pro audio gear such as microphones, mixers, interfaces, and desktop studio gear.

The store's lesson program currently serves about 70 students per week, but Bailey is committed to expanding it. "I love to see young people come into the

store," he says, "and I love the idea that we're making music more important to them so that they'll keep playing their whole lives. We have to support that next generation." The in-store repair shop generates modest revenue, but it also serves as an implicit sales tool, reassuring prospective buyers that they can get their instrument expertly adjusted or repaired if needed.

Replay welcomes everyone from pros and weekend warriors to hobbyists and beginner students, but the store has come to be known as Tampa's pro shop for guitarists. Bailey explains, "We tend to attract pro customers; not necessarily stars, but gigging musicians. When they get talking with our sales staff, they find that we're gigging too. Our guys aren't kids; they're mature adults, working musicians, and they really know the gear. Customers who are serious about music and their instrument appreciate that."

In addition to a healthy variety of smaller clubs and performance venues, Tampa is home to an arena and amphitheater that attract national acts. Many touring guitarists visit the store and occasionally do meet-and-greets or



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clinic/performance on the Replay Stage in the store's main showroom. Artists who recently stopped by include Jason Hook of Five Finger Death Punch, David Ellefson of Megadeth, and Tosin Abasi of Animals as Leaders.

Sometimes in conjunction with these celebrity appearances, manufacturer and distributor reps visit the store as well. Accompanying Tobasi, for example, Fishman Business Development Manager Kevin White presented the artist's signature Fluence pickup set. Bailey notes, "Kevin brought some swag, introduced Tosin, and everybody had a great time."

As the store's profile has grown, more suppliers have stepped up to sponsor live performance events. Replay has already hosted the Taylor Road Show, the Martin Guitar Event (twice), the Gibson Acoustic Event, the Boss Pedal Day, etc. The vendor picks up most of the expenses, and Replay's salesmen "do our best to promote and sell their products."

These events are complemented by a vibrant presence on Facebook, where Replay has amassed a significant following.

A dedicated marketing manager coordinates the store's social media marketing efforts.

OVERBOARD FOR SERVICE

Until recently, Replay shipped only within the continental U.S., offering free shipping "because we have to—it's expected, and all of our major competitors do." However, it recently began partnering with a firm that manages shipments to Canada, calculating all the duties, taxes, and currency exchange values as well as the shipping costs, ensuring that the transaction goes through smoothly. Most orders placed by 2 P.M. are shipped



Guitars everywhere you look!

the same day.

Replay's online business is growing, but the majority of its sales are still conducted face-to-face in the store. Bailey explains that his team is still fine-tuning the website, "tinkering with which Google AdWords we're going to buy, which paid placements and promotions we're going to do..." Currently, most of Replay's online business involves used gear. "If customers are looking for a brand-new American-made Strat," he observes, "there are many places they can find it online. But if they're looking for a reasonably priced used one in a particular color, their choices are cut down quite a bit. So that's where we put our best foot forward, with our used gear. We really try to delight them and go overboard with service so that when they start looking for a new instrument, they're sure to think of us."

Used instruments displayed in the store are play-tested, tweaked, and thoroughly cleaned before they're hung, typically alongside new ones. In many cases, says Bailey, customers can't tell whether an

instrument is new or used until they look at its price tag.

Overall, about 40% of the store's sales are of used gear, and Bailey says he'd "love for it to be higher. Margins are better, and it's harder for customers to 'shop' a used product, because our competitors aren't likely to have exactly the same item." Further, the store can generate "a bit of urgency" with an item that can't just be re-ordered by, for example, "putting it on Facebook and saying, 'look what just came in.' A lot of times, it's gone within just a few days, so customers think, 'if I like it, I'd better go in and buy it.'"

With every instrument purchased, Replay includes a T-shirt, Replay-branded strings, and picks. A handwritten thank-you note accompanies the packing list on shipped orders. Every used instrument must be set up, examined closely to ensure proper valuation, and cleaned prior to sale and shipment. Regarding new instruments, the staff



Brazilian jazz/worldbeat guitarist Badi Assad is one of the many artists who have been featured on Replay's main showroom stage.

briefly debated whether to inspect new-from-the-factory instruments before shipping them to customers, wondering if they might prefer opening a factory-sealed box. But it occurred to Bailey that "every once in a while, an instrument will get damaged in shipping, or there will be a mistake on the order; it could

even be the wrong guitar." Ultimately, they resolved to open every box at the warehouse/distribution center, inspect each instrument, set it up for comfortable play, and test its electronics.

How far will Replay go to satisfy its customers? Bailey recalls a customer who needed a pair of inserts for his p.a. speakers by the end of the week. The salesperson committed to the order before discovering that the part was available only from the supplier's California warehouse, and the customer's deadline would require Replay to pay for expedited air freight. The shipping ended up costing the store \$40 to receive the \$5 parts on time. "I don't think that customer knew the lengths we went to to please him," says Bailey, "but we had that part waiting for him on Friday, as promised—and we ate the loss. Next time we'll research it a little more carefully, but we didn't want to disappoint him."

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