

The Musical “Candy Store” That Appeals To A Broad Demographic

Guitar enthusiast Cory Lake and his museum curator wife Stephanie have transformed Minneapolis-based American Guitar & Band into an elegant showplace designed to serve the entire spectrum of musicians

Reps tell Cory and Stephanie Lake they might be the only people who ever started a music store with a business plan. They say it wasn't as methodical as it might appear. "I think because of our backgrounds it was actually very organic," says Stephanie. Cory is the guitar guru who started the original American Guitar Boutique in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the year 2000. Three years later he married Stephanie, a museum curator with a background in fashion and design, and together they opened the new American Guitar & Band in August 2007. It's fair to say that without their combined talents, there wouldn't be a store quite like it.

Outside, the store's sign virtually jumps off the landscape of Maple Grove, Minnesota, which, by a quirk of local law, dis-

allows all billboards. Inside, it captures the history of popular music in Minnesota. The store's collection of memorabilia includes the old front door cash register from First Avenue, the Minneapolis club made famous as the live recording site for Prince's 1983 album *Purple Rain*. In the classrooms, backstage photos of Elvis Presley hang alongside intense shots of conductors of the Minnesota Orchestra at work.

The main showroom, stocked with band rentals, reasonably-priced guitars and amps, accessories, and "fun gear," is actually a prelude to the room at the center of the store. This one-of-a-kind boutique showcase once constituted all of the old American Guitar Boutique and made a name for Cory Lake in the industry. Packed with high end instruments from the Fender and Gibson custom shops, Taylor, Breedlove, and Marshall, as





Lighting, product placement, and fixtures at American Guitar & Band are designed to showcase the inherent elegance of a wide range of music products. (Photo by Peter Crouser.)

well as boutique brands like Suhr, G&L, Gadow, Dr. Z, Valve Train, and Don Grosh, Cory's store was the first to seek out the best in small, innovative, sometimes off-beat brands and stock them all under one roof. "It's like putting a whole bunch of high performance sports cars in one place—a Ferrari, a Lamborghini, a Porsche, a Bentley—and being able to try them all out at the same time," says Cory.

It started 15 years ago when Cory and his father, Cliff, set out to find the guitar of their dreams. They expected to spend five figures, so it came as a surprise when their search ended with a \$2,000 Tacoma, then a lesser-known brand. "We were just blown away by it, and kind of wandered out of the store going, 'What happened?'" says Cory. "Why was it that this guitar, nothing like what we set out to get, just won us over?"

They began to wonder how many other hidden gems existed that they'd never heard of. Cliff got online and found about 300 boutique guitar and amplifier builders in operation. They began asking whether anyone had ever put a substantial number of those brands in one store—and no one had. "They just weren't very 'shoppable' at that time," says Stephanie. "There wasn't any place to try out a huge range of boutique instruments and learn about the new designs coming out—the latest, innovative gear produced by these smaller, more adventurous builders."

Cory and Cliff narrowed their focus to a range of hands-on guitar makers with "a certain continuity of construction and manufacture." Some of these boutique lines were in effect spin-off companies from major brands, often launched by builders who established themselves at large firms but found their



American Guitar & Band has a prime location as the anchor tenant in a strip mall off Highway 94 in Maple Grove, MN.

designs were best suited to smaller-scale or limited edition production.

Within six months American Guitar Boutique was known throughout the country, and within a year it achieved international recognition. With a huge inventory available via an e-commerce website, the store did business around the world. “We really carved out a niche for ourselves,” says Cory. “We did amazing business.”

The shop had been open for about three years when Cory and Stephanie connected. As high school classmates, the two had had “huge crushes on each other,” but didn’t see each other for 12 years after graduation. Stephanie was working as a curator in New York and Los Angeles when she was called to curate an exhibit in Minneapolis and decided to look up her old friend Cory. Two months later, they were married. Stephanie still had a curatorial contract in Los Angeles, so she and Cory split their time between Minneapolis and L.A. for 2 1/2 years before moving back to the Twin Cities full time.

It was around that time that they began exploring a possible expansion. Crowded into 2,000 square feet on two stories, “we just outgrew the old store,” says Cory. Moreover, budget cuts had prompted schools in their St. Paul neighborhood to pare

down their music programs, limiting the student base for the store’s lesson program. When the opportunity arose to build in the wealthy Minneapolis suburb of Maple Grove, they took it.

Home to a large number of young families, the community’s band and orchestra programs number approximately 5,000 students. The nearly 6,000-square-foot American Guitar & Band became the anchor tenant in a strip mall visible from Highway 94, which runs through the Twin Cities to the college town of St. Cloud.

“With his first shop Cory set out to change the face of music retail, but this was an opportunity to build a dream music store from the ground up,” says Stephanie. “When we started the building process, we surveyed

all of the clients—teachers, students, parents, professional musicians, collectors—everyone we could think of. We just asked, ‘What is your dream music store?’ and that became our template for this shop. A lot of research went into it, and the reputation that Cory established in the first seven years of business made it a fantastic transition.”

Expanding on the concept of the first boutique, the Lakes set out to make the new store “the Neiman Marcus of music retailers.” “I grew up in Texas,” says Stephanie, “where Neiman’s is such an iconic presence with a tradition of service and catering

“The music stores that I’d been in were definitely a boys’ club. I felt that for female musicians and for parents and little kids, that’s not very much fun.”

to the individual. Not everything in the store is extremely expensive, but it's the best you can get at every price point. That's our model."

American Guitar & Band maintained its boutique core but added mainstream guitars and amps from Fender, Gibson, Ibanez, Marshall, and Vox, as well percussion, accessories, and band instrument rentals. With student-level instruments in stock, plus ten lesson rooms equipped with state-of-the-art software, a lessons program that had never exceeded 100 students in St. Paul grew to more than 300 students in eight months. "We want everyone who walks in to feel like a kid in a candy store," says Stephanie, "whether it's a touring musician, a collector, or a new music student."

There's hardly a detail in the store that doesn't have Stephanie's curatorial touch on it. Custom-cut carpeting in the main showroom and drum room absorbs the sound of simultaneous instrument demos, while ceiling tiles are measured to the precise thickness to do the same. At the front of the store, two humidors keep acoustic guitars at appropriate

moisture levels, while a separate room showcases the store's collection of basses, and the mahogany-lined, in-store boutique houses the most valuable instruments. In the high-end rooms, cork

"We just asked our customers, 'What is your dream music store?' and that was our template for building this shop."

flooring both reflects and absorbs the sound by optimal degrees. Visually, the store captures "a toned-down Hollywood Regency aesthetic." Arrangements with the Minnesota Historical Society and other organizations have brought in a collection of music memorabilia as well as an in-house research library. All in all, the presentation is "so polished, people can't believe it's a mom-and-pop shop."

"That's what happens when you marry a curator," says Stephanie. "When dealing with objects, I can't help but think about

light and temperature and sound, because that's what you consider in a gallery. Music retail was not at all my field, and the few music stores that I'd been in were really abrasive and definitely a boys' club. For female musicians, spouses that are roped into a shopping trip, parents, and little kids, that's not very much fun. My goal in designing the store was to create an elegant backdrop that would be respectful and welcoming at the same time."

At the rear of the store, a lounge features complimentary cups of the store's Rockstar Roast coffee as well as gossip and fashion magazines for parents waiting out their children's lessons. Truffle, the store pug, is a hit with the kids, as are the Disney movies Cory and Stephanie play on the plasma TV when they see young children waiting for older siblings in the lounge. Other times they turn the plasma over to Guitar Hero, invariably drawing players of varying age, talent, and competitive spirit.

"The more resources we provide for customers, the longer they want to stay in the store," says Cory. "And the longer

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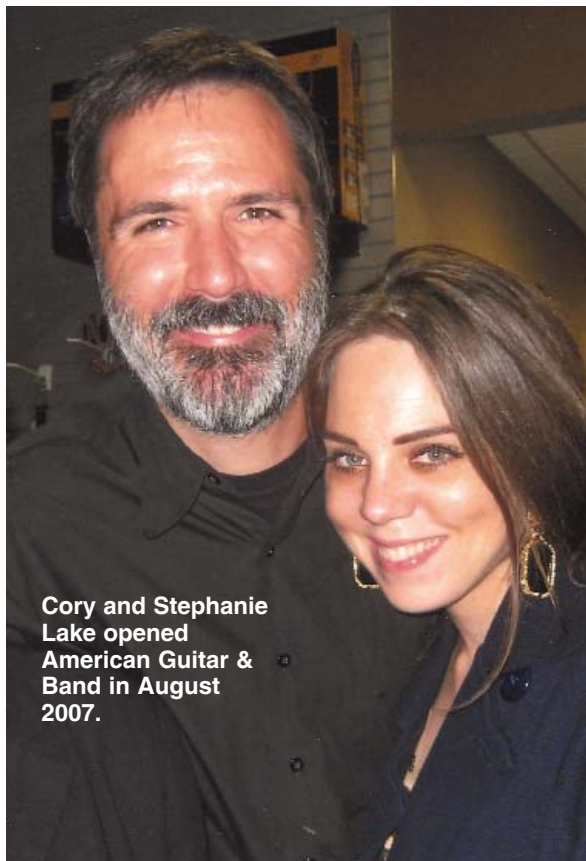
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we can keep people in the store, the easier it is to establish relationships and make sales. Along with all of the amenities, however, our most important resource here is our staff.”

Cory’s years at the head of his first store earned him the reputation to “cherry-pick” his team at American Guitar & Band. His staff combines industry veterans, “who are regional legends in the business,” with younger musicians “who have a completely different filter for the music industry.”

“For our staff, this is a career choice,” says Cory. “This isn’t something that they do on the side while trying to become rock stars. This is their career and they deserve to be treated like professionals. It’s a matter of being inclusive, paying appropriately, and defining their roles as extremely knowledgeable consultants. We rely on their judgment. Just because we don’t have a school for guitar retail doesn’t mean that these guys haven’t



Cory and Stephanie Lake opened American Guitar & Band in August 2007.

worked and studied extremely hard to get where they are today. They are interactive encyclopedias. Right now I have the best people that you can find in the Twin Cities area, and it is our job to make sure they love coming to work.”

The store’s next major project is to reestablish its e-commerce site, which was taken offline when the technology became outdated and the products listed no longer reflected the store’s full selection. A new site designed to bring thousands of products online in an updated format is scheduled to come online this summer. “I think the priority for us is to convey the integrity of our company and to be able to give the same level of service for online shoppers as we do for in-store buyers,” says Stephanie. The store currently operates an eBay storefront, mostly for consignment pieces and most often for instruments priced at more than \$1,500, “because we are constantly increasing our pres-

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At the center of American Guitar and Band is the one-of-a-kind boutique room that once constituted the Lakes' original store. (Photo by Peter Crouser.)

ence in that world," says Cory. At this writing, the store was listing four Paul Reed Smiths totaling about \$50,000 in value. The Lakes are also working with

women's accessory legend Carlos Falchi to design an exclusive line of high-end guitar straps.

The owners are also looking at cities

around the country—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Dallas—as potential sites for a new brick-and-mortar location. Minneapolis proved to be an ideal starting point, with its central location and modest shipping costs to both coasts, but just as important to the store's success, says Stephanie, has been the city's appreciation for music and culture.

"We're looking at cities that have the same level of sophistication and appreciation for the arts," she says. "It's something we'll approach with the same business plan we've applied to our first two incarnations. I think the biggest challenge will be finding individuals in these new locations who will be as involved in their local communities as we are in this one."

"As organically as this location happened, that's how the next location will happen. We've been very intuitive with the things that we've done and will continue to trust our instincts."

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