

As you are reading this you probably have heard the news that another iconic American made guitar brand has bit the dust. *FMIC (Fender Musical Instrument Corporation)* has closed the doors on the New Hartford, Connecticut facility that has made *Ovation* and *Adamas Guitars* for nearly fifty years. Another end of an era and an, oh too common occurrence, in the current economic climate of the United States.

Ovation started as a pet project for Charlie Kaman, an innovator in the helicopter aviation field. He wanted to buy the *Martin* guitar brand and when it was not for sale he decided to build a better mousetrap. So *Ovation* was born. Charlie's vision was to make a guitar that sounded as good as a D45 with alternative materials and make it consistent, so consistent in fact that, if you had a guitar you liked and that said guitar was destroyed you could have the factory build you one with the same resonant frequency of the top. That was how the *Adamas* line was born.

I remember my first drive up to Greenwoods Road sometime in the mid-nineties. I approached this 18th century factory on a river in rural Connecticut, thinking that it had the vibe of an old world craftsman. As I entered the door the smell of binary resin nearly knocked me out and I wondered how anyone could work in this environment on a daily basis. The workers did not seem to mind, they went along performing their tasks, using the long staircases to get from one area to the next. There was one elevator, but that was shared and mostly loads of guitars or materials traveled on it.

What amazed me most was the amount of hand work on these guitars. They truly were artisan built. The use of the *lyrichord* back made you think that some how raw materials were put on a conveyor belt and a guitar was spit out at the end of the line. Not the case. There were more hand operations in this factory than at *Martin*. Amazing as it may sound, it was a fact. That day was the first of nearly 20 years of trips to that same factory. The first day, I forged friendships that I still hold dear today.

Change is the only constant that we can rely on. Changes came to that old brick factory in New Hartford. *Hamer* was purchased and brought in from Chicago and that started an era of expert world class electric guitar building. The *Hamer* guys were younger and energetic and seemed to have a different view that changed the vibe of the factory. Frank Untermyr was brought in from *Hamer* to oversee the day to day operations of the entire factory and he made many physical changes to the workspaces. The old factory feel was starting to change and a more modern, well lit, brighter, cleaner work space came into being. Jol Dantzig was brought in to run *Hamer*, and some felt that the guitars coming out of the New Hartford factory were amongst their best.

More employees, more brands, more machinery, more changes. The factory appeared to always be in flux to me. Every visit I seemed to witness something new, something different, some good, some bad, some making logical sense, other yet defying logic. Well, that's what a vibrant company does.

It was also on one of my early visits that I made a connection with Bill Kaman who was the CEO at the time. After a long interview and a few brief encounters at *Namm* we kept in touch and have remained close friends to this day. Bill, as the face of *Ovation*, "got it". He is a guitarist and was in the musical instrument industry all of his life. Bill lives and breathes guitars and his passion was transferred down to all those who worked on the factory floor. Proudly I call Bill Kaman my friend. I have not spoken to one employee that did not have praise for Bill Kaman.

The *Kaman* family divested their interest in the company and soon *KMC (Kaman Music Corporation)* was born. Combined with the economic downturn of the early two thousands, the company often seemed adrift without a rudder. *Hammers* continued to be built with astounding attention to detail and quality and *Ovations* were modernized to compete with current market trends. Things were on course, a rocky course, but on course.

In an easy to understand version, the helicopter company wanted to divest from the musical instrument company, the *Kaman* family divested their interest and the company

was put up for sale. As I understand, Bill Kaman made an offer to buy it, along with *Yamaha*, but ultimately it was sold to *Fender*. In the deal *Fender* got all the distribution of *KMC* along with *Gretsch* drums, *Latin* percussion, *Sabian* cymbals, *Ovation* and *Adamas* guitars, *Hamer* guitars, *Genz Benz* amplifiers, and *Takamine* guitar distribution.

Hamer was the first to fall. They closed shop two years ago, only honoring the custom orders that were in place, which were built on Saturday and in the spare time of the former *Hamer* employees. *Fender* then made the decision to close *Tacoma* and to bring the production of *Guild* guitars to New Hartford. This meant security in the jobs for some of the *Hamer* and *Ovation* employees, but with making a new product. During the switch to *Guild* production, *Ovation* USA production was sent overseas, except for the *Adamas* line and the celebrity endorsed guitars and a limited run from time to time.

Guild flourished and the guitars built were of stellar quality. In my opinion there have never been better guitars built with the *Guild* brand name. The closing of the factory is not only a blow to those that built the guitars, but to the actual brand itself. The future is unknown. Although the press release is that *Guild* will be transferred to an existing facility, my guess is when the USA built instruments are gone, they will be just another former USA brand built overseas.

The closing of the factory not only put the final nails in an iconic USA guitar company, but is something that has been going on now for the past 5 decades. Americans are losing their heritage and their grasp on the world market. Although *Ovation* guitar popularity had waned in the USA, it remains still hugely popular in Europe and Asia. These markets respect the craftsmanship of American made products and hold them in high regard.

So, I have been to *Hamer Fan Club* events, *Ovation* fan club events and *Let's Meet Guild* events at this factory. I have seen it morph and change many times. To come to grips with its demise is a finality that I am still trying to comprehend. Many of the folks I met on my very first trip to the factory nearly twenty years ago are still working there and now are faced with being unemployed. John, Sherwood, Howard, Mark, Mike, Willy and Darren have all become friends and people that I could count on to not only make sure the guitars I ordered were built correctly, but could offer ideas and help facilitate the process. I have never had a relationship like that with any other company and most likely I will never have it again.

So corporations may be nameless entities fixated on the bottom line, but the people that work for them are not. They are the backbone of the structure, the people that keep the gears oiled and make sure, the machine runs smoothly. These are the folks that are hurt the most. The workers have families, homes and a pride in their work. The American Craftsman seems to be a dying breed and this is the saddest fatality of all these corporate closings. American built guitars are highly regarded worldwide, it is sad that this is of little regard in the United States.

As this goes to print, the service center is still in flux. Apparently some want the *Ovation* service department to remain and others want *Ovation USA* to go all together. Time will reveal the final outcome, but the best representation is that as of May 30, 2014 USA *Ovation* production has ceased. Yes this is the end of an era. Most guitar players, pro and semi pro, have used an *Ovation* for recording or live work in the past 40 years. Their innovation and presence are legendary. It would be a shame if the market is flooded with cheap imports and the brand seen as only a beginners level guitar.

Alex Pepiak plays his *Adamas* on stage nearly every week and shows no sign of ever giving it up. You can contact him at or alpep@lostartvintage.com.