

RUDY PENSA

THE POWER OF PATIENCE

BY ALEX HARRELL | PHOTOS BY SASCHA MAZZUCCO



Rudy's Music went from a cramped store on the second floor of a competitor's shop to a 5,000-square-foot palace known for selling luxurious guitars to the likes of Lou Reed, Paul McCartney and AC/DC. It didn't happen over night. Owner Rudy Pensa's dogged disposition, fueled by a seemingly endless bank of patience, has kept his New York City business alive and thriving for nearly half a century

It's the summer of 1974 and Rudy Pensa, a 24-year-old from Argentina, arrives at John F. Kennedy International Airport. He'd been pinching pennies for months from his job as a performing musician. And now it's about to pay off. Pensa hops in a cab to visit the holiest place he's been reading and fantasizing about since his teenage years — Manhattan's Music Row.

He turns the corner to West 48th Street and 7th Avenue, and audibly gasps at the 14-plus music stores lining the block; he'd never seen so many guitars. He pauses to stare before making his way to Alex Music, a celebrated shrine opened by a fellow Argentinean-Italian named Alex Carozza, and asks for a job.

When Carozza asks, "Well, what do you do?" Pensa responds, "I'd do anything to be here."

And the rest is retail history.

Pensa moved to Manhattan and began working at Alex Music. A few years later in 1978, he fulfilled his American dream and opened his own

guitar shop with his then-girlfriend, now wife, Fran, on the second floor of the same building that housed Alex Music. The store was called The Music Stop before evolving into Rudy's Music Stop. And now, it's famously known as Rudy's Music; just Rudy's among the regulars.

"When you think about it, I was there for 42 years," said Pensa, who is now 68 years old and New York City's most prestigious purveyor of guitars. "And the world is big. I stayed 42 years on half a block."

But why he stayed for four decades wasn't because of celebrity customers like Post Malone, Bruno Mars and Dave Grohl. It wasn't the city. It wasn't even the country. "If 48th Street were in Pakistan, I would've gone to Pakistan," he said. "It was the guitars; I had to be around all those instruments."

Even so, he wasn't always welcome to be around said instruments. Pensa visited Manny's Music in the 1970s — when New York City's unprecedented fiscal crisis was the catalyst for rising



mon-sat 10am-7pm
sun 12pm-6pm

**'IT TOOK ME
A LONG TIME TO
UNDERSTAND THAT
NOT EVERYBODY
IS IN NEW YORK
CITY. BUT THAT'S
THE BEAUTY OF
THE INTERNET.'**





crime rates — and recalled being treated less like a paying customer and more like a criminal. To play a bass Pensa was interested in purchasing, he had to prove he had the means to buy it. In a dangerous city, Pensa wasn't comfortable pulling out wads of cash from his money belt. Pensa said the owner of Manny's Music told him no money, no bass.

But this experience motivated Pensa more than it offended him.

"I remember I said to the guy, 'Wow. If you treat everybody like that, I'm going to open my own shop.'" Which is precisely what he did.

After Alex Music had moved across the street, Rudy's Music expanded into the first and third floors of the building as the business grew and space became available. It was Pensa's "little jewel" that quickly — even aggressively — became 48th Street's little jewel, too.

This was partially due to Pensa's patience, his charming personality that seduces sales with ease, his specific taste and adoration for guitars. But Pensa said it also happened because Carozza bad-mouthed the store,

which drove customers to check him out.

When Carozza found out Pensa was opening his own shop, naturally, he wasn't thrilled. But despite their brief falling out, the two remain good friends today.

"I was never upset with [Carozza] because he gave me my first opportunity in this country; I understand he got upset," Pensa chuckled. "I'm Italian too, we get a little crazy."

'CARTIER OF 48TH STREET'

Pensa's attitude of forgiveness and family-first, fueled by a seemingly endless bank of patience that's protected by some seriously thick skin, has kept his business alive and well. Perseverance is precisely how Rudy's Music became 48th Street's "jewel amongst junk."

Pensa realized early on that to compete with the other stores on the strip, he needed to separate Rudy's Music from the pack. His store needed to stand out as not only another option but as an entirely different experience. So, as a long-time lover of the finer things, Pensa decided Rudy's Music would become "the Cartier of 48th Street"

and sell high-end, luxurious guitars made by both smaller companies as well as established labels. The shop carried brands ranging from Reverend and PRS to Froggy Bottom and Santa Cruz to Nik Huber and Huss & Dalton.

"Pensa always considered Rudy's Music a very full-service guitar store," said Gordon French, manager of Rudy's Music. "We want to sell you your first guitar, your first high-end guitar, your first vintage guitar, and so on. We've always tried to keep an eclectic mix of stuff with a curated feel."

On the same block frequented by The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix, Pensa's team of a dozen or so served countless customers daily, including emerging artists from South America and Argentina who were seeking out the boutique brands found only at Rudy's Music.

"When I opened the shop, things were going very well, and I was doing well," Pensa said. "There were people with a lot of money who wanted to buy really good things I had that the other guys didn't."

But that all changed after the Great Recession.



Left: Rudy Pensa sitting on his store's steps and holding the Pensa MK-II Plus 7th Ave. electric guitar.
Top: The exterior of Rudy's Music in SoHo's Cast Iron Historic District

GUITARS AS ART



END OF AN ERA

"The talk on the street was that 48th was going to disappear," Pensa said. The owners of the stores on Music Row started selling their buildings. As a result, renters were forced out. The rumors motivated Pensa and his wife to look for another location. Thanks to the economic collapse, Pensa found a promising rental in SoHo that was within his price range.

The first store to go was Manny's Music in 2009. Sam Ash moved in 2012 after 50 years of operation on the street. Rod Baltimore's New York Woodwind & Brass was turned into a Dunkin' Donuts. And suddenly, only Rudy's and Alex were left on the once-coveted Midtown block. After negotiating with his landlord to break the lease early, Pensa officially closed his flagship location in August 2015. Alex Music closed the following summer.

"It was a very disappointing few years because no one was coming to 48th anymore," Pensa said. "It was a very negative feeling for everyone."

Rudy's SoHo location opened in October 2009. The two stores overlapped for six years — much longer than Pensa planned. There were logistical errors, according to French, such as renting two spaces instead of one in a notoriously expensive city. Plus, things like sending SoHo shoppers to Midtown for pedals or repairs and shipping basses and guitars

back and forth between stores. It wasn't ideal, but it wasn't a big deal either.

"Outside of the additional overhead, running both fully operating stores didn't negatively impact business," French said. "It was never an issue for us. New York is a big enough city that we had enough clientele willing to take that five-minute subway from one shop to another."

SERVICING SOHO

The SoHo shop is housed in a 5,000-square-foot building on Broome Street and has all of the warmth (and guitars) that the 48th Street store once did. Considering Rudy's carries high-end guitars and caters to a fiscally comfortable clientele, the affluent neighborhood seems like the perfect location.

"Music stores are a destination; I could be anywhere," Pensa shrugged. "SoHo is a busy shopping area, but that doesn't work for the music store. It's a lot of people who walk around and love the shop but have no intention to buy a guitar."

So even if SoHo locals aren't Rudy's Music's No. 1 customers, business hasn't slowed down. Because unlike a guitar, which can be bought in all five New York boroughs as well as online, you can't purchase the experience. Pensa has learned through the years that service can be more important than the actual product.

And one way Rudy's Music provides

Rudy's Music is housed in a \$32 million loft located in the SoHo Cast Iron Historic District, which was originally constructed in 1871. The classical style of the building's architecture lends itself to both the highbrow quality of the music store's design elements and the store's high-quality selection of guitars.

Carpenter Anibal Mistorni (of AM Guitars) built dark and rich mahogany dentil-moulded showcases that are within the walls as well as the glass cases on the second floor. Several years before relocating to SoHo, Pensa found a large piece of stained glass and held onto it in hopes of using it in the future.

Incidentally, it fit perfectly in the middle of the first floor's back wall, so Mistorni built windows around it.

Even simple elements, such as the store's swanky gold lacquer hanging sign and the framed guitars in the window display, immediately reveal to consumers the upscale quality of products that Rudy's Music carries.

"To me, the guitar is art, and I want to display it like that," Pensa said. "In the beginning, we had these beautiful ropes — like a museum — but that was a little bit too much; people got scared, so we took them out."

With the help of his wife, Fran, and daughter, Stephanie, Pensa gave Rudy's Music a more approachable attitude while still maintaining a polished, sophisticated aesthetic. Though Pensa misses the red velvet ropes.

For more design inspiration, turn to page 54. **MI**



Rudy's Music's cohesive, cosmopolitan aesthetic is achieved thanks to both the rich mahogany showcases with dentil-moulding built by Anibal Mistorni of AM Guitars as well as the strategic placement of accessories in the front of the store with guitars organized via hanging displays and sections such as the acoustic room.

stellar service is through its repair shop. The store began doing repairs in 1982 and Jeremy Perks, one of New York City's best repairman, joined the team in early 2001.

"There's nothing this guy can't do," Pensa said of Perks, who is the exclusive installer of the EverTune Bridge (a system designed to keep guitar strings in tune) in New York City.

This has seriously bolstered business. At least half a dozen people drop off and pick up guitars daily, according to French. Perks and the other two members of the repair team work fairly quickly and give customers one-week turnaround. In the event of an emergency, they speed up the process as much as possible.

"Having people that can not only maintain the guitars while they're in the shop but who can also do serious work on them down the line is critical," French said.

FAMILY MATTERS

Similar to Perks and French, more than half of Pensa's 12 employees have been with Rudy's Music for at least a decade.

"I know that doesn't happen in companies," Pensa laughed. A businessman once advised him to keep the staff rotating, as it keeps salaries lower than long-term workers. But for Pensa, it's not about the money.

"Are you kidding? This is a family-owned business, I consider these people my family," he said incredulously. "I go to sleep, and I'm at peace. I wouldn't be at peace otherwise."

As a result, he hasn't had to worry about training new-hires in quite some time. The

only thing his employees need to understand, Pensa said, is the philosophy of the shop: the No. 1 priority is the customers.

"I always say, you have to be cordial, have knowledge and have patience — look at me, I have tremendous patience!" he said. "I always tell my guys, 'Please, *talk* to the customer.' Some people had a bad day and come in with an attitude. When you get upset it becomes a disaster," he continued. "When you are totally calm, you did a good deed that day."

It's no coincidence that this beloved guitar shop is owned by a man whose composure remains unruffled by the most finicky customers. His disposition is, without a doubt, the foundation of his store's success.

"[Pensa] is the most gregarious person on the planet; he loves people," French said. "It's one thing to love guitars, but there are a lot of people who get burnt out in retail. And if you don't love people, you're not going to last very long."

But, as Pensa knows, personality can only take you so far. Taking risks and changing the shop's status quo when necessary are crucial to keeping that success coming.

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE

Even though Rudy's Music is known for its brick-and-mortar store, the company has been online for 20 years. But, Pensa said, "I'm still a little Italian; I'm not convinced you can buy a guitar through the mail."

At the urging of his daughter, Stephanie, and one of his managers, Dean Moody, — two Pensa-diagnosed internet addicts — Rudy's Music got on board with social media in 2013.

"We've always considered the shop to be a part of a community, and social media is a way to stay in touch with our clientele and bring that community out into the world and expand it," French explained. Instead of hiring an individual to do social media content, everyone at Rudy's Music takes turns posting on Instagram and Facebook because a community needs to have more than just one voice.

Unlike competitors who take a monological approach to marketing on social media and have a single employee posting online, the various voices behind Rudy's internet presence create a welcoming, eclectic atmosphere, not unlike the actual store.

"My daughter says, 'Daddy, you don't understand how important social media is,'" Pensa said. "Poor Stephanie; I drive her crazy. But that's what happens when you come from another world. They're in this world, and I'm forcing myself into it."

And so far, it's been working. Since Rudy's Music's website has been updated and its social media accounts are more active, online business now accounts for 25 percent of sales.

"It took me a long time to understand that not everybody is in New York City," Pensa said. "But that's the beauty of the internet, people see the instrument from far away, and all I have to do is send it to them for 24 hours."

Which he does. Pensa has customers from all over the world pay for the shipping and handling of an instrument to test-drive it, so to speak, for a day or two before deciding to keep it or not. Most of these leases turn



The "Rudy's Bass Shop" sign, built in the 1980s, was saved from the 48th Street shop in February 2017 before it was too late, as Pensa saw on the news that the building had caught on fire.

into purchases, he said.

Having an internet-crazed manager works well for Rudy's vintage and used instrument selection, too. For example, Pensa asked Moody to find a rare guitar, and he found it (in Japan) within minutes. Pensa used to rely on individuals bringing in their old guitars and going to trade shows to find instruments, but now he's "got the whole world," he said, thanks to the internet.

Keeping the store full of vintage, used, new and traded guitars helps combat against customer's shopping online, though Pensa isn't particularly worried about losing business to the web.

"When you have a very good store like mine, you're always going to have customers," he said.

SLOW & STEADY

To say that Rudy's Music is "a very good store" is a bit of an understatement. The lower-end acoustics start around \$500 with lower mid-tier electrics ranging from \$2,000 to \$7,000. The higher-end models and rarities climb to \$200,000. The likes of Mick Jagger and John Mayer have been customers throughout the years, and U2's The Edge name-dropped Rudy's Music as a must-see store in the documentary "New York Tumble."

Pensa believes his store received its cult-following status slowly — by doing the right thing for 40 years. And of course, because of his philosophy.

"Patience. I have a tremendous

amount of patience because I understand people," he said. "Buying a guitar is an emotional thing. When you sell a guitar, it's not just selling something. The guitar is alive. It gives you happiness."

It's nearly impossible to detangle the web between Pensa's personality and Rudy's business approach. That's partially because he doesn't seem to see the difference, but mostly because there's no separating Pensa from Rudy's.

"One of the reasons Rudy's Music thrived is because of his personality," French said. "He *wants* people in the store. He wants to hear your story, he wants to tell you his story, and he wants you to find an instrument that you're going to love."

Pensa spends four-to-five days at the store each week, once selling guitars over FaceTime to George Benson, occasionally bickering with his daughter on the show floor to the amusement of customers, and perpetually playing the instruments. He has no plans to stop doing so anytime soon.

"I'll be around as long as I can work and be here," he laughed. "Someday when I can't come in anymore, the store is going to continue because everyone here loves guitars."

When asked who would take over when that unfortunate day arrives, Pensa joked, "No one; I'm going to take over," before turning more serious.

"I don't have any plans to retire," he said earnestly. "I never worked a day in my life. How can I retire?" **MI**

PENSA GUITARS



Pensa first attempted building guitars as a teenager in Argentina. A few years after he opened Rudy's Music Stop, he made the earliest "Pensa" electric guitar — the R Custom — in 1982. It was in 1985 that Pensa began collaborating with his then-employee John Suhr and the Pensa-Suhr line of guitars was born.

"When you want to make guitars, the first thing you got to do is know how to repair them," Pensa said. "Then you learn what to do and what not to do. I'm proud to say I give people the freedom to learn."

Resulting from this freedom, almost everyone who worked at Rudy's Music during this period and on the Pensa line have since become successful guitar makers, according to Pensa — including Anibal Mistorni of AM Guitars, Steve Marchione of Marchione Guitars, Larry Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Guitars, Jimmy Coppola of Allegra Coppola, Mas Hino of Mas Hino NYC, and Butch Boswell of Boswell Guitars.

"I'm very proud of them, I'm a friend of everybody," Pensa said. "People think I'm out of my mind, but I love it. I feel like they're my children and they flew away and are doing great."

The guitars themselves have also garnered attention. Pensa and Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits designed the Pensa MK1 in 1987, which quickly became one of the most sought-after custom-made guitars in the world. **MI**