

RBI | BY ALEX HARRELL

GROWING THE LEGACY

Rhythm Band Instruments — more commonly known as RBI — has been a leader in early elementary music education for nearly 60 years.

Remember when your fifth-grade music teacher would pull out a tub of instruments and everyone would run around the classroom, banging triangles and blowing recorders? That was, most likely, supplied by RBI, a Fort Worth, Texas-based manufacturer/distributor which is the largest distributor of recorders in the market.

“Creating these custom packs and little instrument tubs became our greatest strength,” said Lane Davy, RBI’s executive vice president of sales and marketing. “Interestingly, what we didn’t know at the time was that we were building our brand; I like to say Rhythm Band was part of the big three in elementary school — recess, lunch and music.”

Since 2009, RBI has slowly but surely been entering a more traditional MI distribution realm with the 2009 acquisition of Boomwhackers, the 2015 partnership with JHS to distribute Vintage and Fret-King guitars, and most recently, the January purchase of Toca from DW.

“To find a significant amount of growth, we needed to reach beyond the education space,” Davy said. “In a very short time, RBI has gone from doing the same thing it’s done for decades to expanding pretty aggressively into the traditional MI space.”

And even though elementary schools have no real use for electric guitars or congas, RBI doesn’t plan on abandoning its rich history of early music education product offerings.



Rick Taylor and Lane Davy

RBI keeps its roots in youth music education while continuing to grow into traditional MI distribution

KEEPING DOORS OPEN

The business doesn’t necessarily have to decide between the two, anyway.

“Rhythm Band is a real legacy company in the elementary music products category, but its association with a couple of other MI companies kept the door open for us to get involved with the distribution of other brands and products in the MI market,” said President Brad Kirkpatrick. “The progression into MI distribution was natural, mainly because of the people involved such as myself and relationships

I had from back in the day; it solidified our purpose, if you will. Allowing us to work in what could be considered very different markets, but at the end of the day, it’s still music distribution,” he continued. “People don’t look at it that way, but I do because I’ve worked both sides and it works for me and our team.”

It also doesn’t hurt that Kirkpatrick has an extensive background in the guitar industry. Before joining RBI in 2003, he was involved in MI distribution and had been “itching to get back into the

guitar industry,” according to Rick Taylor, product manager, artist relations at RBI. “When the opportunity became available to distribute Vintage and Fret-King guitars, [RBI] jumped on it.”

Since the distribution deal with JHS, RBI has doubled the size of its team, will be moving into a bigger facility, and has plans to expand into guitar accessories manufactured in-house. Plus, having a solid foothold in this realm let RBI sell some of the elementary education music products to MI dealers because of its larger product offering.

“That’s the beauty for us; the Toca products and some of the JHS products, like the ukuleles, fit very nicely with the early childhood and elementary music products that we’re [offering],” Davy said. “We’ve found that it’s a tremendous, critical mass that we’re reaching, regarding strength and size and scale. There’s a lot of great benefits to both sides from sharing distribution and new markets that we can reach into, and it’s been a really good move for us.”

GROWTH POTENTIAL

And this won’t be the last move for RBI. The Toca acquisition created an opportunity for RBI to showcase other products to new dealers as well as with dealers already carrying the brand.

“We’ve always looked at things like, whether it’s any of the products we sell — our own or distributed brand — as being for the customers ultimately,” Kirkpatrick said. “We’re always looking for new brands, whether it’s through acquisition or distribution. I really see us growing; I don’t think we can help but grow.” **MI**