

FROM THE TOP

INTERVIEWED BY ALEX HARRELL

BRENDEN COHEN | D'ANGELICO GUITARS

HOW DO YOU START YOUR DAY?

I travel like crazy and bounce back and forth between New York City and California. I usually wake up early, tend to my e-mails, make phone calls and then go to the gym or yoga. I often work in a meditation, then I head to the office. At some point, I also walk my dog, Knight, or we'll go for a run on the beach. He comes to work with me no matter where I am. He's the office dog. Knight now has a sister, too! A Mexican mutt named Juanita. She looks like CatDog and is a complete maniac.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WITH D'ANGELICO?

I've been with D'Angelico since its reformation, which was in 2011. Prior to this I was in finance and insurance but became involved in the music industry through a passion for music and guitar culture.

TELL ME ABOUT THE REFORMATION.

GHS acquired the brand some time after D'Aquisto stopped making the guitars, and we acquired the brand name from GHS. So, we had acquired this great brand name and knew we had a huge opportunity to bring back the legacy, so we started making small quantities of instruments to test the market.

When we saw a notably large demand for them, that's what spurred us to start making larger quantities and go full force into bringing the brand back. People really responded well to the designs — especially the original D'Angelico aesthetics that we incorporated in new ways. Those designs remain integral to our brand.

WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE YOU'VE TAKEN OVER?

Everything! When I first took over, it was myself and a few others trying to develop a few products to try to revive the brand name. Since then, we've built a tremendously talented staff, built out an entire new product line, and are working on strengthening every facet of the brand constantly.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES?

The challenges have been numerous, and they're always surprising. Having our brand represented in big-box retailers was our first huge hurdle, and then boosting sales in those retailers was the next challenge. Now we're selling very well and only going up. We're focusing on product design and forecasting. Every big step has been a learning experience, and luckily we have a dedicated staff that has pushed through every storm.

AND THE BIGGEST SURPRISES?

The biggest surprise is how much we've grown in just a few years. We knew we had a special opportunity with the brand name and that we were going to push it as hard as it could go in order to grow it when it was young. To go from bringing six guitars to the NAMM show in 2011 to building out a room that rivals the biggest companies in the industry just six years later is something that no one could have predicted.

PROUDEST MOMENTS SO FAR?

There have been so many. Breaking our quarterly and yearly sales records year after year; building our NAMM booth larger and larger every year; designing products that we are genuinely proud of; watching some of the world's biggest artists play our guitars; raising millions of dollars for charities through a number of partnerships. The entire experience has been invigorating.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR MANAGEMENT STYLE?

I value decisiveness in myself and others. A very important value of mine is to lead with what I consider my own expertise, but I also listen to the expertise of my employees. Since the very beginning, I've sought to build a team of only the most enthusiastic, encouraging and knowledgeable staff. So far that has worked out tremendously well.

AND YOUR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

I do a little bit of everything. I'm involved heavily in marketing, brand partnerships, accounting, sales and product design — I'm very hands-on. My expertise and the majority of my time is devoted to steering the company in the right direction on a high level, but that manifests as doing many different things on a daily level.

WHAT DO YOU DO FOR FUN?

Lots! I golf, travel, snowboard, make guitars, spend time with my girlfriend, my dog, and I actually have a lot of fun at my office — we built the showroom to be a real candy shop, and our staff are an entertaining bunch.

THE SHOWROOM IS OUTRAGEOUSLY COOL.

Our space in New York City is not only our showroom, but our brand headquarters as well. It opened in 2011, when we acquired the brand, and the location worked well because Chelsea is a great neighborhood — easily accessible by train, central to both upper and lower



THE DETAILS

BRENDEN COHEN, PRESIDENT & CEO

HQ: New York City

Founded: 1932

Employees: 40

Best-selling Product: Premier Series DC

Fun Fact: Knight and Juanita are both rescue animals — something Cohen cares deeply about.

Manhattan, etc. We love the space. It was designed by our dear friend Tor Caracappa, who worked with John Varvatos for years, designing and opening their stores. We use the space for everything from staff meetings to research and design to content shoots.

ONE EVENT RECORDED THERE WAS BOB WEIR'S "SHOWROOM SESSION" PROMOTING HIS NEW SIGNATURE SS MODEL. ARE YOU A BIG GRATEFUL DEAD FAN?

Isn't everyone a Grateful Dead fan? I wasn't a huge Deadhead before working with Bob, but I have definitely since grown to appreciate their music, and especially their live shows. The relationship developed after meeting Bob years ago at Mountain Jam. We expressed wanting to work together, and Bob expressed the same. He had respect for the D'Angelico name and liked the idea of working on a signature model with us, making a great D'Angelico that was affordable for most people. That model has become one of our best-sellers. It's been an absolute dream to work with Bob so closely — he is an unbelievably smart guy and an amazing storyteller.

FOR THOSE JUST NOW CATCHING UP TO THE "NEW" D'ANGELICO, WHAT ARE A FEW MODELS THAT YOU RECOMMEND THEY CHECK OUT?

Well, I would suggest checking them all out because they're each different. But our DC, EXL-1 and regular SS models are some of our most popular. The DC is an outstanding double-cutaway — one of our best-sellers and one that a lot of the artists on our roster endorse. The EXL-1 is our flagship model, a 17-inch-wide archtop that is almost exactly based off of John D'Angelico's original design. And the SS is probably the most versatile guitar we offer. From straight-ahead jazz to hard rock and roll, it's just exceptionally flexible.

TELL US ABOUT D'ANGELICO'S ELECTROZINC STRINGS THAT YOU RECENTLY BROUGHT BACK.

Electrozinc Strings are brand new, but they are based off of John D'Angelico and John D'Addario's original string design. We started the project last year, in 2016, reigniting a partnership that began more than 50 years ago. Back then, the two essentially tried to design a string that was naturally loud and resonant — rich in tone and volume. They accomplished that goal by using a zinc-plated Bethanized steel wire. When the Bethlehem Steel factory closed, they couldn't

find anywhere to make the string, and so it disappeared. When Jim D'Addario, John's son, found a factory that could do the zinc plating, we decided to embark on the project together. They're truly incredible strings.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX IN REGARD TO MARKETING?

Over the past several years, we've made sure our experiential marketing is reaching new audiences. We've active at music festivals, charity events — really anywhere that we think is smart to be involved and will help grow our audience. Sponsoring the U.S. Open of Surfing was a great opportunity for us because there is an undeniable crossover between the extreme sports and music worlds. Guitar is huge in surf culture, so we knew the built-in audience would be a relevant one. The event was a tremendous success. We previewed our new ukulele and guitarlele lines, and attendees ate them up.

WHAT'S YOUR MUSICAL BACKGROUND?

I was born in Long Island and spent a lot of time in the city when I was growing up. New York City's diverse music culture, and the culture of rock music in particular, was something I was always attracted to — especially from a

business perspective. I'm learning to play guitar, but my attraction has been a cultural one.

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS?

We are constantly moving forward. In five to 10 years, I expect the D'Angelico brand name to be known by an even wider audience. We'll be developing new products, continually improving the quality of our instruments for the best price they can be, and growing our distribution network. I'm very proud of what we have accomplished in the handful of years we have been resurging, and I am sure that we will continue at the pace that we've set.

IF NOT MUSIC, WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING?

Probably something to do with snowboarding or the culinary world. Maybe own my own snowboard or lifestyle/apparel brand. At one point, when I was younger, I attended the Art Institute and was considering going into the culinary world. I would consider finance as well, just because I have a passion for business and an understanding for it. But it's a tough question because I've been so committed and engulfed in D'Angelico and the idea of making instruments. Plus, I really think this is what I should be doing. I've found I'm built for it.

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