



## Torch bearers

Hamer has been making drop-dead gorgeous guitars for over 30 years. Having joined our exclusive five-star club with the Monaco III, we thought we'd better find out more...

Words and pics Dave Burrluck

**J**ol Dantzig comes across like an Oxbridge professor, and if those illustrious centres of learning ever considered studying the art of the modern luthier, Dantzig would probably be the first they'd call.

The history of Hamer Guitars is as chequered as, well, one of their checkerboard creations for Hamer-flag waver Rick Neilson. Back in the early seventies ex-touring musician Dantzig and Paul Hamer were running a guitar store – Northern Prairie Music in Wilmette, Illinois – selling what we now call vintage instruments to players and collectors. The store's repairman John Montgomery built a Flying V bass for Dantzig and more custom instruments followed,

leading to the formation of Hamer Guitars by Dantzig, Hamer, Montgomery and apprentice James Walker (though Dantzig and Hamer bought out their partners in 1977). Frank Untermeyer was brought into the company in 1978. Considerable success followed in the eighties before Hamer himself left in 1987 and the brand was purchased by Kaman in 1988. Initially, Kaman moved Hamer into a

lower-price, more mainstream market and some would say let Paul Reed Smith into the high-end boutique market. Dantzig took a sabbatical though was retained by Kaman to oversee, in 1996, a move to New Hartford, Connecticut that was intended to



An employ's carved, traced spruce top

re-focus the small production, high-quality of Hamer's origins.

And that's where we find Dantzig today (with the grand title of Hamer USA's plant manager & technical director), building, along with 11 staff, around three guitars a day (20-30 per cent of which are custom orders). Frank Untermeyer, meanwhile, is now Kaman's music vice-president and general manager of Ovation and Hamer and aside from the exclusive USA-made guitars the low-cost Chinese-made XT

Series provide affordable versions of many of Hamer's classic designs.

"In a lot of ways it's a return to the beginning of Hamer itself," considers Dantzig as we walk around Hamer USA's airy facility in the same nineteenth century ex-textile mill that is also the manufacturing home of Ovation and Adams, though the production processes are entirely separate.

"We began out of a need," Dantzig continues. "We came from a vintage guitar shop

where it seemed ludicrous to tour with a museum piece so the idea was to create a kind of a hybrid: a modern vintage guitar. What we're doing now is a kind of return to that – the same exclusive kind of appeal that we had in the very beginning. We're

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In the spacious New Hartford Hamer factory Jol Dantzig looks on as a custom detail for an inlay is proposed



A Newport's body binding is glued on before the top is carved



Left: Cleaning out the neck pocket on a Studio Custom



Above: Dantzig tests the neck fit on a Monaco III

always comparing ourselves with vintage guitars rather than the average production guitar. Back when we started we weren't concerned with the bottom of the pyramid, we were concerned with the very top – the collector's pieces and vintage guitars. So although we were less expensive than a vintage guitar, at the time we were 50 per cent more expensive than a production guitar and I think that really grabbed a lot



The full width 'dovetail' of a Hamer neck



Hand-shaping a Hamer neck after fretting



The spraying process takes 14 days



Like most high-end companies each fret is hand-pressed into the 'board'



A bevy of Hamers on the finish drying rail



Hand sanding the finish before buffing

of people's attention. Who are these guys? Were do they get the balls to come out with a guitar that's so expensive? It got a lot of people's attention and, of course, the sound and the playability were there so it was really popular with professionals."

Hamer doesn't, and never did, make copies or reproductions of classic vintage pieces. "We're about trying to solve musician's problems, looking at the questions musicians ask. For example, as a Strat player you might have a certain feel and a certain timbre and responsiveness but you'd like to take it a little further, make it a little fuller sounding. Or maybe you just want a different look. I think that what we're looking at is combining elements of different instruments in a tasteful way to create something new that answers a question or solves a problem for a musician. A 12-string Hamer bass is an example of that. I think the Hamer DuoTone was an example of that: how do I get a guitar to sound like an acoustic guitar and an electric guitar, either separately or at the same time? It answers a real need for musicians onstage and in the studio."

"But at the same time we're also creating art. I think this is where emotion and intellect collide and create something larger than the sum of its parts. It has an intrinsic value as a collectible and as an expression of the guitar making art – that's an exclusive thing that people like to have from a guitar in this price range."

Dantzig mentions the word 'art' – a factor

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increasingly over-looked in our industry nowadays, in favour of colour, shape and price. "But that says a lot to me: there is a better way to build guitars. We have our vintage values but we're not going to make the same mistakes."

**Do you think people are suspicious of that these days because certain heritage companies, for example, still turn out less-than-good guitars 'built in the old way'?**

**You guys have always strived to do it better.** "I think that we strive to make the guitar a practical instrument and structurally we improve on a lot of things other makers do, but we only see this as half of the equation. The other half is to make something exclusive: something that has an intrinsic value because of what it is. I think our personality is such that we look at all these points and take them to the maximum – that's what you're buying. It's a philosophy, a way of life."

"Everything at Hamer is overbuilt, it's over-engineered. If there's an easy way to do it we look for the hard way, the long way around and that's what you're getting. It isn't a guitar that's built in eight man-hours; it's built in five times that. If there's an easy way, we just won't go there, it's not in our nature. That's the expression of who we are... and when you buy it, it's an expression of who you are. It's not the only way to build a guitar, but it's the way we do it."

"I have a saying in the shop: damn the accountants, because good accounting makes for bad guitar building. So we drive the bean counters crazy by doing things like letting the necks dry for two months on a rack before you put the plane profile on it, to make sure it twists before you put the fingerboard radius on it and not after. It's insanity. To take 14 days to put the finish on when you could do it in three just to gain two per cent more gloss and two per cent less shrinkage – it's an accountant's nightmare but it's heaven for a guitar player because all those little percentages add up. That's what people pay for. That's what art is all about, it's about making a statement and the statement is: dollars be damned, we're just going to make this guitar the way we're going to make it."

To illustrate his point, Dantzig gestures to the rack of necks that won't be touched until he's happy that they won't move.

"The cool thing about what's happening at Hamer since it's been a Kaman company is the wealth of true knowledge and true research that's at our fingertips. We're not talking about a luthier who's built 200 guitars in his career and is tapping the wood and listening with his ear – there's a



The final stage of finishing. No robots!



Necks and bodies await completion



Final assembly on a Hamer Vector Korina



Wiring up the Newport's electrics before they're fitted

where we started, that's who we had our direct connection with, and that's the style we had our first successes with. It just feels comfortable for us. Right now, of course, there are some truly great makers – it really is the Golden Age of the guitar. The fifties were great but I think this is even better. What Hamer is all about... it's more like we're caretakers of a lineage, trying to defend it with our will."



For such a small company Hamer makes around 30 standard models – here are the truss rod covers!

lot to be said for that and we do that but it's like that neck twisting and how long do you wait? Well, we know to the tenth of one degree the exact twisting schedule that a neck goes through over a period of two months because we've tested dozens of necks in the shop environment and a controlled environment actually using a digital clinometer (which indicates the amount of twist), so we have hard data to look at that either supports or debunks our seat-of-the-pants luthier ideas. That's the beauty of being involved with Ovation and Kaman: they've really gone down that technological path like an aerospace engineer would. It can be a sobering thing. I think there are a few things that luthiers out there would be surprised to know – because they're just guessing at it. Here, we're not guessing, we have the back up."

#### Could you give us an example?

"We used to season our wood for years because it's a wives' tale that 'barn wood' that's been leaning up against a barn wall for 100 years is the best to use or whatever. What we've learnt here is that there's a curve as to how much gain you get – a point of diminishing returns – and what that's allowed us to do is to become more efficient while still remaining true to our overbuilding philosophy. I mean it's one thing to wait two months for your neck – it's another to wait two years! After a certain amount of time you're just wasting your time and money and your customer's."

The core Hamer line has always been inspired by classic Gibson guitars of the past. Your current USA catalogue seems to

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#### have gone back to that. Were you a real Gibson guy back in the day?

"Well, the actual fact was that we started as a vintage guitar dealer – we were steeped in the Gibson and Fender tradition, even the banjos and mandolins and that sort of thing. Then we progressed to restorers and repairers: you'd find a guitar that was trashed and you'd want to rebuild it so you could sell it. That necessitated our having to find suppliers and back then it was Gibson itself, binding material, lacquer and shaders, and we wanted to buy an increasing amount of stuff from Gibson. They became curious as to what we were doing. They sent a rep down to see what we were up to and we were invited by Gibson to go and train there for two weeks and we then became their first warranty service-centre outside of the factory. The guys in the old Kalamazoo shop trained me. Some of our early machinery came out of the Kalamazoo plant when they moved to Nashville. So it's a natural progression though we love all guitars, old and new."

"At home I have every imaginable style of guitar. I love Fenders, Gretschs, Rickenbackers... I'm a big fan of people like Tom Anderson but you can see our roots are truly in Gibson. Also, today, there are so many people building Fender-style guitars that it just seems natural – that's

In recent years there's been an emphasis on hollow and semi-hollow guitars: the Newport, the Monaco and the Improv. Why? "Frank Untermeyer, probably more than me, has really strong designs on building what we call a 'constructed guitar', a jazz guitar – the epitome of the luthier's art. You want to mature and you want to grow with your art. Around the late nineties I guess we realised Hamer was known for a certain type of players and music: hard rock, blues rock and even heavier metal styles and to leap into the fray with a jazz guitar at that point, well, it might have gotten lost in the shuffle or laughed off. We held back from the pure jazz thing and created something that was a little closer to what we'd been making, more of a rockabilly guitar – the Newport's codename was 'Swingability' when we were building it. Then we added humbuckers and a jazz tailpiece for the Newport Pro Custom. Then we moved into the Monaco series and finally to the Improv: a matter of walking before we ran."

#### Would we be right in saying you've grown up: you're making mature guitars. I mean I can't see you doing a pink Chaparral with a Sustainer and Floyd Rose these days?

"Basically you're right," laughs Dantzig. "Every now and then we do something crazy, to make sure we have a pulse."

All too soon, we're summoned – Guitarist's flight home beckons and we've barely scratched the surface of Hamer's craft. Until then, if you appreciate the finer points of the electric guitar, we'd strongly suggest you track down your nearest Hamer dealer. ■