



Industry Innovator: Dare to Be Different

MARK TIRABASSI • HUBBARD MUSIC STORE • HUBBARD, OHIO

By following his passion, Hubbard Music Store owner Mark Tirabassi honed in on his happiness and set his business apart.

As a boy, Mark Tirabassi was fascinated with percussion, and yearned to play like his older cousin Randy. Drumming came easy to him and by the time he was a teen, Mark was giving lessons in his parents' basement and told his high school guidance counselor that he planned to own a music store someday. Young Mark was so ambitious that he once wrote all the major music product manufacturers claiming he owned a chain of music stores and was "considering" carrying their products—a story that he would later laugh about with his suppliers.

"I had no letterhead," he recalls with a chuckle. "I think I used my mom's typewriter. Gibson got a letter; Fender got one. They all received a letter from this kid in high school."

In college, Mark majored in music while working at a local bank. By the time he was 23, his lesson program had grown so much

that he knew the time was right to dive into retail. Mark wiped out his savings account—around \$3,000—and opened Hubbard Music. "I think I had two guitars and six packs of strings, but at least it was a nucleus for teaching drum lessons."

One store led to two as Mark added a satellite location in nearby East Liverpool, Ohio. And though the second store never really took off, Mark's music career began to soar. His rock band signed with Atlantic Records and before he knew it, they were on the road touring with bands like Collective Soul. He left the stores in the capable hands of his brother, but when his record company imploded, Mark was forced to head home to "face the music."

"The one store was losing money and the other was just hanging in there," says Mark. "I think my brother said it best when he told me, 'These stores are your dream, not mine.' He was just being

a great brother and holding down the fort, but it was like, 'Here, you can have the hot potato back.' So he left the business, and I closed the other store."

And while it was a hard time for Mark, personally and professionally, he has no regrets about taking a shot at his dream. "Not at all. I'm not sad that I did that, I'm proud that I did it. Just because that ship has a few leaks in it and sank, to me [it] was not a negative in the grand scheme of things. In fact, it strengthened the business."

Around this time, Mark says there were changes occurring in his territory, with several competitors going out of business, some changing hands and a big box store moving in. But what some would see as a challenge, Mark saw as an opportunity.

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"That's when the light went on, and I knew we needed to be different from everybody else. We dove into rentals, especially backline rentals. My theory was I wanted to meet all the new young bands because those are the guys who need all the gear. But how was I going to get them to come into my store? Well, they all needed PA systems for their gigs and guitar cabinets they can afford, so we started renting out to local musicians."

Mark loved working with local bands, and once word spread, he was renting to touring bands and large sound companies putting on concerts. "We rented stuff to Tony Bennett not too long ago," Mark says proudly. "It's a pretty small grapevine. Not many people have Hammond B3s or Marshall full stacks to rent."

Mark was so fired up about the success of his backline rentals that he began writing a book about it during a cross-country flight to the NAMM Show. *Backline Basics: A Backstage Pass to the Music Industry's Hidden Expense* covers everything from how to get started and the chain of command in renting, to touring companies, to how to write a backline contract and ways to market yourself to the right people.

Mark is currently working on a little marketing of his own, speaking to trade and music business schools, posting how-to YouTube videos, and growing his lesson program by offering onsite instruction at libraries and local businesses. Mark believes that by challenging himself and daring to be different, he can continue to keep things exciting.

"I've been able to live my dream for 20 years, doing exactly what I wanted to do. I wake up wanting to go to work—it's still fun."



Hubbard Music Tutorials

- ▶ "C-System"
- ▶ "B-System"
- ▶ "Wireless"

