

REVEREND GUITARS | BY ANDREW GREINER

# EMBRACING THE MID-LEVEL

**Last year, Reverend refocused solely on mid-level guitars. This year, production has been up five-fold**

Just north of Detroit, in Warren, Mich., Joe Naylor and his team dream up quality mid-level guitar designs for the common man. His company, Reverend Guitars, produces vintage-influenced electrics starting at \$499 that come gig-ready right out of the box. According to Naylor, his bottom line is better than ever, his business is expanding and he credits it to a simple plan.

Reverend's success is recent.

For nine years, it actually built high-end guitars in the Michigan shop, while importing mid-level guitars. The company discontinued its American-made line in 2006, and since moving all manufacturing to South

Korea, Reverend's profits have risen steadily. According to Naylor, production has increased five-fold since January's NAMM show.

While rescuing a bottom line by moving manufacturing overseas is not a unique story, Naylor's approach to doing business may be. "We like the word 'niche' around here," he said. "It means [we have] a focused image. It means less customer confusion. Whether it's a NAMM show buyer or a guy in a guitar store, either one can quickly grasp what Reverend is all about and whether or not we're useful to [him]."

## VINTAGE MID-LINE GUITARS

Reverend's designs are a blast from the past. Naylor said he judiciously borrows elements from classic 1950s and '60s designs and melds them with modern features like a dual-action truss rod, locking tuners, graphite nut and the company's unique Bass Contour control. This feature rolls off low end and goes from a slight tightening-up of the bass all the way to re-voicing the pickup. As Naylor put it, "It'll make a humbucker sound like a single-coil but with no hum. It's been a big hit with gigging players."

For many artists, there's a comfort factor that comes from picking up a guitar with a familiar shape. Perhaps that's why Reverend's artist list includes names like Billy Corgan (Smashing Pumpkins), Ron Asheton (The Stooges), Dan Auerbach (The Black Keys) and Marc Ford (The Black Crowes), among others.

"The idea is to come up with a design that's vintage influenced,

but fresh and relevant to today's market," Naylor said. "It also has to have the Reverend look. Using features and aesthetic cues that are distinctly Reverend is, in my opinion, crucial to establishing a long-term identity."

## THE OTHER MANUFACTURING HUB

Eschewing the industry trend of outsourcing production to Chinese factories, Reverend uses a slightly more pricey manufacturer in South Korea. "We selected a factory based on quality and experience with custom designs with detailed specifications, as opposed to just re-labeled knock-offs," Naylor said.

He added that Reverend only sells to independent retailers. The company's Web site, in fact, posts an open call for more independent dealers who would like to sell its guitars.

That online presence has always been important to Reverend, Naylor said, and even more so lately. Its Web site is continuously updated. The company advertises on chat forums, and Naylor posts on several of those forums, including his own Reverend "Discussion Page." He said online marketing is cost effective, and he gets immediate results.

The Web isn't the only place that Naylor is looking to grow, however. He said the company will continue expanding its base of independent, brick-and-mortar stores. The plan is to facilitate rapid growth without compromising core values, such as quality, service and focused marketing. Oh, and making a sweet-sounding, old-school-looking piece of hardware for the common guy. **MI**