

www.musictrades.com

The Music Trades

OCTOBER 2008

PUBLISHED CONTINUOUSLY SINCE 1890

\$3.00

The GUITAR MARKET

Martin Guitar's Remarkable **175-Year** Story

+

Micro Retailers The New Face Of **COMPETITION**

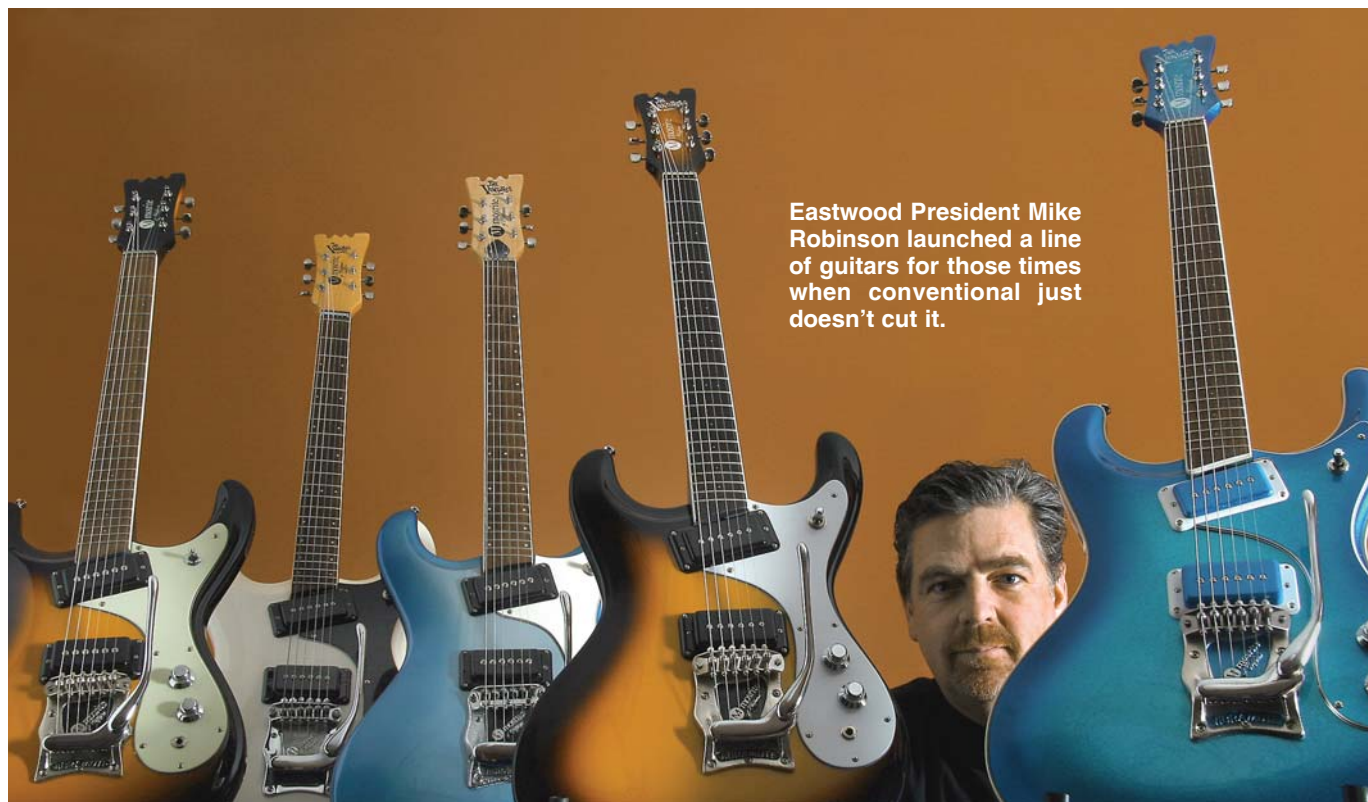
[**GUITAR HERO** Helping Or Hurting The Guitar Business?]

Where Will Best Buy Be Opening Next?

Eastwood Guitars
Hot "New Retro" Axes

Will Make You **MONEY!**





Eastwood President Mike Robinson launched a line of guitars for those times when conventional just doesn't cut it.

Capturing The “Kooky Guitar” Market

Eastwood Guitars creates playable replicas of forgotten instruments from National, Valco, and Mosrite, serving those who want “something different.”
Founder Mike Robinson says, “Some get it, some just don’t.”

“When you walk down the street, you see that 5% of the people dress completely differently from everybody else,” observes Eastwood Guitars President Mike Robinson. “It’s no different in the guitar world.”

Ironic for the rebellious electric guitar, manufacturers’ conformity to the Fender and Gibson forms has relegated more eccentric models to the fringes of the guitar world. It was the fringe models that appealed to Robinson. He wasn’t the first to specialize in what might

be termed the kooky guitar market, but he was the first to harness it with the power of the internet. His website, www.myrareguitars.com, launched in 1997 as the earliest major online trading post for proudly bizarre Japanese and European vintage guitars, along with oddball American legends from the days of Airline, National, and Supro. Casting his net out over cyberspace, he drew like-minded enthusiasts from every corner of the guitar-playing world. When in 2001 he began making reproductions of his favorite “radical” guitars under the Eastwood name, he

already had an international following.

Once the owner of a computer-aided design company in California, Robinson is a lifelong amateur musician and collector who took an interest in guitars as a matter of art and fashion. “I love the old Japanese guitars from the 1960s,” says Robinson. “They’re the craziest-looking things: more knobs and switches than anybody would ever need.” One of Robinson’s first tasks in replicating the old models, however, would be improving on the shoddy construction of the originals. In a testimonial posted on the Eastwood Guitars

website, David Bowie guitarist and kooky guitar aficionado Earl Slick sums up, “They look good, but they suck.”

“That’s why it makes sense to make replicas that sound modern,” says Robinson, whose huge personal collection of 1960s originals supplies the models for his reproductions. The model for each new reproduction is sent to Eastwood’s factory in Korea, where a prototype replica is made and upgraded to modern technical standards. Improvements are made to the finish, fretwork, and neck of the guitar, while modern standardized tunomatic bridges and humbuckers are installed. “The availability of standard componentry is a major benefit,” says Robinson. “What we have now is far superior to what was available back then.” Eastwood also incorporates changes inspired by the hundreds of suggestions Robinson receives from customers to myrareguitars.com. The end result? “My Eastwood Airline is kooky, but you can actually play it!” says Earl Slick. “What a concept!”

Eastwood found inspiration for a number of its reproductions upon acquiring the old Airline brand in 2004. Manufactured under the Valco umbrella along with the National and Supro labels, Airline Guitars were sold through Montgomery Ward from the late ’50s through the ’60s. Eastwood went on to replicate icons of guitar weirdness like the Tuxedo, the Coronado, and the 2P DLX. Among its most recognizable reproductions was the Airline Map, loosely based on the old National Newport model and named for its resemblance to an outline of the United States. Sometimes associated with the surf bands of the ’60s, it was popularized more recently by Jack White of the White Stripes. Eastwood replicated the model in not only the black, white, and red originally available on the Newport, but in a sea-foam green that speaks of ’50s convertibles parked in drive-ins.

“That model fit right in with our branding scheme, and we had to have it in that crazy sea-foam green color



Eastwood Guitars’ Airline 2PDLX7 (left) and AirlineMap, a throwback in vintage sea-foam green.

because it’s just kind of ‘Art Deco,’” says Robinson. “People either like that Art Deco style or they don’t—and I do.”

The Music Trades asked Robinson if he ever worried his wacky reproductions wouldn’t catch on among a guitar-playing populace wedded to the

Fender-style/Gibson-style dichotomy. “The answer is no,” he says, “because I had the good fortune of having My Rare Guitars really testing the market for five years before I started Eastwood. My Rare Guitars essentially rounded up the like-minded people on a worldwide basis. I publish a monthly

THE GUITAR MARKET

newsletter filled with information and stories and technical data about these kinds of vintage guitars. We've got more than 20,000 people worldwide who subscribe to the newsletter, and they're all the kind of people who want a weird, wacky guitar."

Perhaps a third of Eastwood's customer base is old enough to remember the originals their reproductions are based on. The rest are "just individual-minded people," says Robinson. "It's a whole wave of people, and it's not a specific age group either. They don't want to be like everybody else, so they're not using Fender, Gibson, or Gretsch. They want to have a sense of individuality, and that's why they love the cool, kooky-looking guitars."

Ontario, Canada-based Eastwood has built a network of about 120 independent retailers worldwide, some of them used and vintage shops whose clientele tends to dovetail with Eastwood's customer base. But Eastwood's dealers range from mom-and-pop shops to major retailers like Chicago Music Exchange, which also sells high-end Fenders and Gibsons of the distinctly un-kooky variety. "It's a broad cross section, but the common theme among all of them is that they 'get it,'" says Robinson. "When you talk to people about these kinds of guitars, they either get it or they don't. If they don't get it, they'll never be successful selling it."

The company does less than 3% of its business in Canada and another 40% in the U.S. The balance of its guitars are sold in the U.K, Germany, and around the world. "That's really the trick to taking on a unique market like this," says Robinson. "You have to go international with it to find all the like-minded people. If I tried to operate this business just in Canada, it would never work."

The scattered nature of Eastwood's customer base presents a challenge even as its dealer network continues to grow steadily. Because there are 200- and 300-mile gaps between dealers even in some parts of the U.S., the company has built up its e-commerce site to fill the void. Sales rose over the past two years as Eastwood tricked out its site with audio samples and streaming guitar demos. Customers are encouraged to post their own demos on YouTube—all this in an effort to build confidence in buying online for customers without a local dealer.

"Would you buy a guitar online?" Robinson asks, rhetorically. "The reality is that there are some people who will buy on the internet but most will just never buy online. They have to physically pick it up and try it. Our website will get people to a point where all their questions have been answered and they're ready to buy something. From there they can check

the dealer list and go to a shop or buy through our website. Our plan is to continue to grow the dealer base and eventually sell 100% through dealers.

"As a result of our expenditures on the website," he adds, "sales have grown steadily at 40% year over year, with sales through our dealers growing faster than our online revenues. The more exposure we can get online, the more customers are going to their local shops and asking them to become Eastwood dealers."

Now in its eighth year of operation, Eastwood is on the verge of releasing its replica of the super-pointy, 1966-vintage Wurlitzer Gemini guitar. Next year will bring a new series of gold top Airline models for the 50th anniversary of the brand. For every hundred guitars he'd like to replicate, Robinson is only able to produce four or five—either because of legal issues or the cost of recreating custom injection-molded parts—but that doesn't stop his customers from asking for more. "I get hundreds of requests every month, but there are only so many that are actually possible," says Robinson. "Still, this tells us that as long as there are people who don't want to be like everybody else, there will be customers who want a kooky guitar."

www.eastwoodguitars.com



Eastwood's TwinTone model electric guitar.