

THE GUITAR ISSUE

FOR SUCCESSFUL MUSIC RETAILERS

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A CENTURY OF PIANO RETAILING

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& reputation helped
Rice Music House
reach 100 years

THE DESIGN RENAISSANCE

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& retailers discuss
how recent guitar design
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*Rice Music House's
Jyotindra "JP" Parekh
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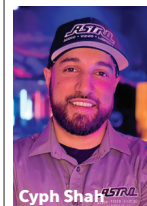
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A CENTURY OF



Robert Schaeffer and Jyotindra "JP" Parekh.

PIANO RETAILING

By Katie Kailus | Photos by Aaron Moore



Emert Rice, left, was the second-generation owner of the business until 1988.



Rice Music House circa 1951.

Rice Music House turns 100 next year. Ahead of this milestone, owner Jyotindra “JP” Parekh and vice president Robert Schaeffer discuss the business’ storied history, how it has evolved to reach the 100-year mark and how music education is key to the success of the piano market.

Rice Music House has a lot of credits to its name. It’s the oldest Steinway & Sons dealership in the Southeastern U.S. It’s also one of the 10 oldest Steinway dealers in the country. And that’s not all. Rice Music House is considered the longest continuing Hammond Organ dealer in the U.S. and — according to store owner Jyotindra “JP” Parekh and vice president Robert Schaeffer — possibly the world.

“We might be the oldest Hammond dealer globally, because they honestly didn’t start shipping overseas until after World War II,” Schaeffer explained.

That’s a lot of history for one retailer, but when you consider Rice Music House has been around for nearly a century, it makes sense.

Founded in 1924, Rice Music House officially turns 100 next year. Parekh, who is also celebrating his 20th anniversary as owner of the business and 50th anniversary in the piano industry, and Schaeffer, who’s been with Rice Music House for 30 some years, are very proud of the role their Columbia, South Carolina-based piano dealership has played in the industry.

“The business was started in 1924 by W.S. Rice as W.S. Rice Music House in Spartanburg, South Carolina. W.S. Rice worked for Baldwin Pianos and wanted to open a store of his own. In 1935, the company switched

from Baldwin to Steinway and we’ve been a Steinway dealer ever since,” Schaeffer said. “Mr. Rice had one son — Emert Rice — who was active in the industry and worked hard to protect the American manufacturer. He opened the Columbia branch in 1935 and, following his father’s death, lead the company until 1988.”

Parekh pointed out that Emert Rice had many unique practices that helped the business save money early on.

“He had his own gas station outside the store so that he could save on gas, and he would he would go up to New York to pick up Steinway Pianos at the factory so he could save on the freight,” Parekh laughed. “He was a phenomenal businessman and spokesperson for the piano industry. He had a piano rebuilding shop built. He had technicians and apprentices working upstairs. He had the largest sheet music department in the Southeast at one point. He went to Congress and argued for American piano manufacturing, and he wrote one of the first Piano Buyer’s Guides in the 1920s.”

It was under Emert’s leadership that the company changed its name to Rice Music House in 1960, and he ran the business until his death in 1988 when it was sold to longtime employees Tommy Gamble and AJ Connor. Gamble decided to retire in 2003, two years after Connor’s death,

and sold the business to Parekh who has run the company, alongside his wife Mary Samulski-Parekh, for the last 20 years. At the time, Parekh was a 30-year veteran of the industry, having held roles at Wurlitzer, Jordan Kitt’s Music and Atlanta’s Steinway Piano Galleries.

“I took over at Rice Music House in 2004, and it has really been a blessing,” Parekh said. “After I took over as owner, we continued to grow the business and acquired a Baldwin dealership in Mauldin, South Carolina, and then the 2008 recession hit. We had to make some changes, and one of those was getting out of the Greenville, South Carolina, market, so we consolidated to the Columbia market alone, and, in 2012, we moved out of the downtown location after 61 years and moved to our current location.”

PAREKH’S PERSONAL TOUCH

After taking over the business, Parekh used his three decades of experience in the piano market to grow the business further, including acquiring the Roland line of pianos. Additionally, using his experience at Jordan Kitt’s Music in Maryland, Parekh helped grow Rice Music House’s relationship with local colleges and universities.

“One of the attributes of JP’s background that he brought to Rice was improving our institutional outreach program,” Schaeffer said. “It greatly augmented it and, thanks to his previous success in this field, we were able to work with several local colleges and universities. For instance, Coastal Carolina University [in Conway, South Carolina,] became an all-Steinway school and became the very first institution in the Carolinas to have the Steinway Spirio Player Grand Piano.”

Also during Parekh’s tenure, the deal-



From left: Jyotindra "JP" Parekh, Felix Jeter, Mary Samulski-Parekh, Larry Cornish and Robert Schaeffer.

ership became a founding sponsor of the Southeastern Piano Festival, which is now in its 21st year.

"We provide the pianos for practice for the concerts and everything for the events," Parekh said. "We also joined the Hilton Head Symphony Orchestra and the Hilton Head International Piano Competition. So, we started with outreach programs and started spreading the word about Rice Music House that way and, really, focused on helping get people engaged in music and education."

THE 'KEYS' TO LONGEVITY

With the noticeable decrease in grand piano and acoustic piano sales in the last few decades, remaining a piano-only retailer can be challenging, so hitting the 100-year milestone for Rice Music House is extra sweet. Parekh and Schaeffer attribute their dealership's longevity to a few key practices, but above all else, they credit their employees.

"Our most important asset has always been our employees," Parekh said. "Our staff has been with us for years and years. For example, our senior delivery driver, Larry Cornish, started as a teenager at the company in 1988. He was the last employee to be hired by Emert Rice. Felix Jeter, another deliver driver, has been with us since the 1990s. They've been key to our success."

Parekh added that decades-long friendships with former co-workers from Jordan Kitt's Music, including Rice Music House's accountant Ray Fugere and marketing consultant Phillip Ottenritter, have been integral to both him and the business.

"Additionally, the dedication of all of our spouses and partners who put up with our long hours and our absence from family functions and events have been

critical to reaching this 100-year mark," Parekh said. "We have to thank them for their support and their inspiration, because without that, we wouldn't be able to celebrate these milestones."

Strong vendor relations have also played an important role.

"We've been very fortunate that we've been able to maintain very friendly and solid relationships with our vendors," Parekh said. "Without their help, we can't be successful. So, relationships with vendors — and community members — have been very important."

For Schaeffer, Rice Music House's long-term slogan, "buy and save with confidence from Rice Music House," says it all.

"That has been our standard slogan for 100 years, because we're very cautious about the brands we represent," Schaeffer said. "We want them to not only represent the best quality, but also the best value for our customers. Now, whenever we go anywhere in South Carolina, the moment people hear we're from Rice Music House a crowd gathers and they start to tell us how they've been a customer of Rice for five, 10 or 30 years. People will say, 'I played my first piano recital at Rice.' It's funny because we considered whether or not we should change the company name when JP purchased the business, but no, the Rice Music House name recognition has been key to our longevity."

Rice Music House's reputation of being the local ambassadors of music has continued to drive community traffic to its showroom throughout the years.

"We've cultivated this idea that we're the ambassadors of music in our community," Parekh said. "In 2012, we started to participate in the annual Make Music

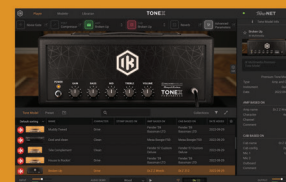
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Day celebration [a global day encouraging music-making held each June], and helped put out painted pianos for the public to play. We have been trying to increase engagement in music and trying to promote piano and music education. That's really the most important thing and what I would advise any retailer looking to increase their longevity to do."

According to Schaeffer, updating its practices and offering appointment-only options has also attributed to reaching the century mark.

"If we were still trying to do business

the way we were 25, 30 or 50 years ago, we wouldn't be here today," he said. "Rice Music House has always had the willingness to try something new, to make the investment, to take that leap of faith and that has allowed us to persevere.

"Another thing is we've always tried to remain a piano and organ retailer," Schaeffer continued. "We have not gone after the keyboard business. And we have not gone into the 'toys' business. We're still a digital piano, acoustic piano and organ dealer. That's what we intend to be. We're not trying to get into the stage piano business

or keyboards and things like that. I don't think we see that in the future either."

MAKING MORE MUSIC MAKERS

Parekh and Schaeffer said they've both noticed the digital piano market cool some since the pandemic boom. Parekh added that he believes now is the time for the piano industry to work to get more people engaged with learning and playing piano.

"Everybody likes to listen to music, and we have to get them engaged in learning to make that music themselves," Parekh said. "So, right now, we're actually running TV ads where we're saying that pianos are live music at your fingertips. We have this beautiful ad where people can see live performance as piano music. Then we have another ad that we're running that focuses on learning to play. We want to work to emphasize the words 'piano' and 'learning' and 'enjoying.'"

Schaeffer agreed and added that highlighting the gravitas of the instrument to customers who are purchasing a piano can help reinforce their commitment to continue to play.

"We try to show people that the piano they're buying is a quality product that's going to be part of their home, not something that's going to become an item in their closet six months from now," Schaeffer said. "We want to show them how this piano is a great way to start their adventure. And that the Steinway in our showroom is where that journey will ultimately end. That's the pinnacle. We want to work with them very closely and show them the lifetime benefit of music. So, that's part of how we look at the future of the industry. In the 1970s, the showrooms were full with verticals. Today, you find more grands and digital pianos, which have taken over the vertical piano market. So, we're glad to have the Roland and Kawai lines here to help with that. And then the entire family of Steinway products from the Essex line to the Boston line to the Steinway line itself just make a logical step up for our clientele."

Parekh said in order to help its customers along that journey, Rice Music House offers full trade allowance towards a Steinway on any piano previously purchased through Rice Music.

"Basically, anybody can buy any piano from Rice Music House, and for 15 years, we'll give them back everything towards the purchase of a new Steinway piano from us," Parekh explained. "It's the full Steinway promise, and we hope it engages more customers to continue to play." **MI**



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