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MUSIC & SOUND

Retailer

STATING AN OPTIMISTIC CASE

Despite difficult times, accessories,
bags and cases manufacturers
continue to show strength

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SHIFTED, QUARANTINE CREATIVITY HAS
BOOSTED THE PRO-AUDIO MARKET

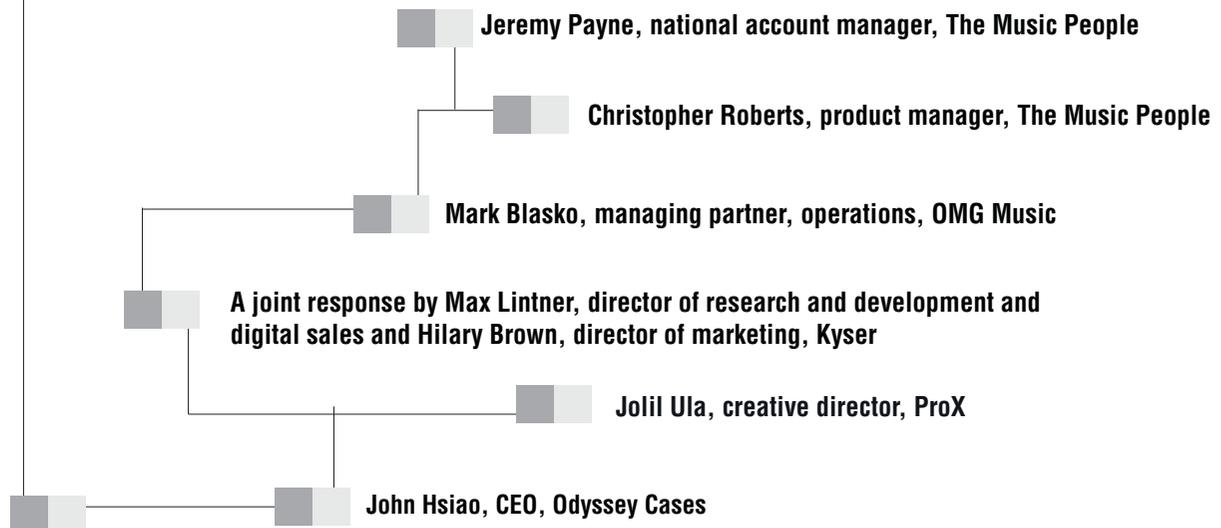
STATING AN OPTIMISTIC CASE

Despite difficult times, accessories, bags and cases manufacturers continue to show strength

By Brian Berk

Often, the sales of accessories/bags and cases are affected directly by the products they improve, such as guitars and percussion products. This was of course the case in 2020. However, while sales dropped for many during the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic, shortly after the lockdowns were lifted, products like guitars sold effectively thanks to play-at-home musicians. So did manufacturers of accessories, bags and cases ride that wave? Are they seeing sales improvement even as the coronavirus pandemic continues? And what does the future hold for this all-important MI segment?

Answering these questions and more are our panel of experts:



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First, let's start with if our panelists have seen a change in sales due to COVID-19. Are accessories/bags/cases sales dependent on traveling musicians, or have stay-at-home musicians picked up the slack?

"We absolutely have seen changes in sales due to COVID-19," responded Payne. "Initially, when the pandemic hit, like most businesses, our customers were forced to close down. Couple that with a public that was afraid of the unknown, and business slowed down substantially. However, since the late spring and early summer, business has really picked up. First, online retailers emerged with huge spikes in growth (with many brick-and-mortar retailers still being closed or limited in how they could do business). Brick-and-mortar has staged an impressive comeback, and things, more or less, are leveling off or growing in different areas. Accessories are an area that remained strong. While some folks might not be able to justify purchasing a new instrument right now, accessories are a nice way to bring life and excitement back into playing." He added, "We do see trends that indicate people are making music at home more than ever, which is important on so many levels. With that said, our friends and family in live music performance and production are hurting, and there's no replacing that revenue and importance with other segments of the market."

"Just like everyone else, we too have suffered some loss in sales," noted Ula. "It has been a tough time for everyone, but we are grateful to receive orders from nationwide dealers. We've seen a tremendous surge in on-line shoppers from some of our major distributors, thankfully. Most of these sales come from DJs doing livestreams or [who are] luckily enough to be in a state that allows them to play in front of a live audience."

"After the initial shutdown, we have seen quite an uptick across most categories. It started with consumables, such as strings and picks, but quickly migrated over to other accessories, like

guitar straps and cases," answered Blasko. "While travel and touring for musicians is currently limited, you now have a huge group of hobbyists that have been introduced to or rediscovered the guitar to pass the time while at home."

Lintner and Brown said they have seen an increase in online

sales. "Like everyone, we didn't know what to expect back in March when lockdowns started happening," they said. "But we immediately noticed an uptick in sales through all online platforms. It seems stay-at-home musicians have taken up the slack. Or, it's quite likely the fact that people staying home is

leading to more people starting to play an instrument or starting to play their instruments more than they have in the past. More time trapped indoors equals more free time equals more time for playing an instrument."

"We have definitely seen adjustments in our sales trends since the pandemic, both within



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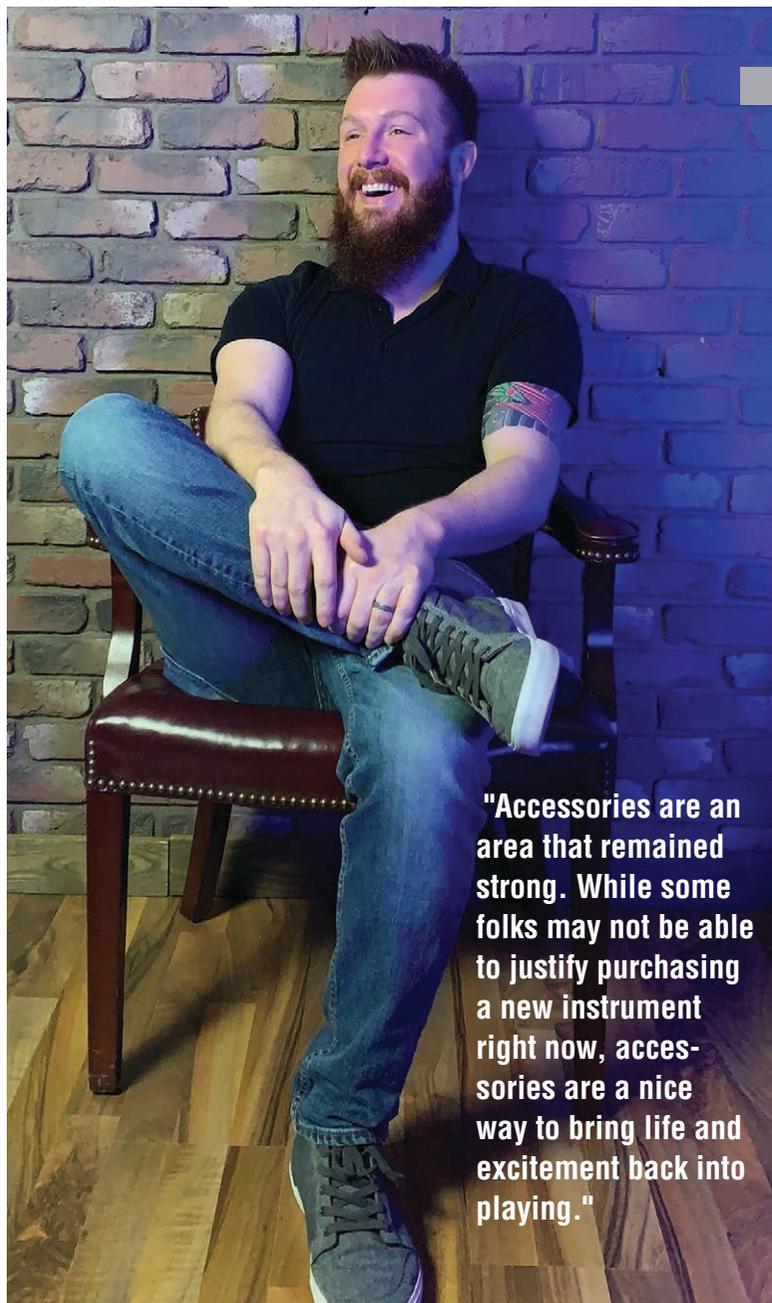
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Jeremy Payne, national account manager, The Music People

"Accessories are an area that remained strong. While some folks may not be able to justify purchasing a new instrument right now, accessories are a nice way to bring life and excitement back into playing."

the MI industry and outside," said Hsiao. "Because Odyssey is so diversified in our product offering, and we're built here in the USA, we have been able to stay nimble during these times. All musicians, producers and DJs need to protect their equipment, so we have continued to see a good mix of artists purchasing our products. The mobile musicians seem to be finding creative ways to perform, while the bedroom musicians seem to be homing in and perfecting their craft. It's a really interesting time."

As a follow-up to the first question, we asked our panelists if they have had to change their product mix because of different end users buying their products.

"No. Every guitar player, regardless of style or proficiency level, needs a capo, thankfully," responded Lintner and Brown. "Conversely, we have had to reevaluate our marketing mix. We've experienced an organizational paradigm shift in terms of how we best serve our players and artists. Emotions are running high, people are feeling displaced, and many musicians, retailers and music venues are without livelihoods. It's our duty to cultivate and create new opportunities, and reciprocate the same support, along with service, that these businesses and artists have granted us since the very beginning."

"No, we have not necessarily had to change our product offerings," relayed Hsiao. "Instead, Odyssey has continued to follow the trends, between artists' needs and new hardware releases, and released new cases and bags to support, or reintroduced existing products."

Noted Blasko, "Not as much changing the mix as it is bumping the levels of inventory across the board to meet demand."

"Our DJ line of cases has always been sought after for its tough protection, versatility and build quality," said Ula. "Our live production cases, trussing, and most of our event-based products have gone down in sales for a while due to COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. But with the country reopening, we're slowly starting to see events come back and sales to follow."

And answered Payne, "We have refocused our mix a little bit. We haven't stopped carrying any specific products, but we have shifted inventory dollars around a bit to stock heavier on items that can help folks make music at home and less on live performance to some degree. That said, it is really surprising how well some of the gear that is traditionally thought of as live performance gear is selling. People who want to make music are finding creative ways to perform, and they still need the gear to do it."

Product Positioning

One thing the pandemic has not done is halt creativity. We asked our panelists what the current best-selling products are.

"Rotosound Strings and D'Andrea picks/accessories, as they are consumables," stated Blasko. "Also, both companies have been able to keep us well stocked when there are a lot of supply-chain issues affecting other manufacturers. We also cannot seem to make Lock-It Straps fast enough since we purchased the company last year. There was pent-up demand, and the pandemic has done nothing to change that."

"Most of our cases are in demand globally, including our Flip-Ready Hydraulic-lift cases, which are built by a company in Poland we're in partnership with," relayed Ula. "The ProX Flip-Ready case is a very versatile plug-and-play-style leave-in audio mixing console and DJ controller/mixer case. Just roll it into a gig, and with a single flick of the wrist, it retracts from a

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Mark Blasko, managing partner, operations, OMG Music

"After the initial shutdown, we have seen quite an uptick across most categories. It started with consumables, such as strings and picks, but quickly migrated over to other accessories, like guitar straps and cases."



with our dealers to insure we are always aware of their changing needs and adjusting accordingly."

New Marketing Methods

But what about new products? How will our panelists market these new launches without The NAMM Show in January?

"We will be having a virtual product launch that will be similar to the successful TMP Jamboree that we hosted in lieu of Summer NAMM 2020,"

vertical storage position into a playable position with almost no physical effort."

"Our best sellers include our XCG-4 Guitar Stand, KS7190 Keyboard Stand and MS7701 Microphone Stand," said Payne. "These are all bread-and-butter accessories that are needed by just about any musician. The quality price point makes them hard to beat." He added, "Some other emerging products that have really increased in popularity during the pandemic include the MBS5000 Broadcast Boom Arm, AS800 Large Diaphragm Condenser Mic Package, and all pop blocker and desktop mic stand models. These items are all used in work-from-home and/or content-creation applications that clearly have seen a spike due to stay-at-home orders around the world."

Said Hsiao, "Odyssey's current top products are cases and bags for Pioneer DJ, Rane and Denon hardware, from controllers to mixers. During this time, Pioneer DJ continues to release new products, and so the demand to protect them is high. We are fortunate to be able to quickly support our partners with new cases and bags as they hit the market."

And Lintner and Brown responded, "Quick-Change Capos in black, sunburst, rosewood and maple. They work well, they're guaranteed for life, and they're beautiful."

However, despite fantastic products on the market, some retailers have noted COVID-19 has caused backorders to be a problem. We asked our respondents how they have tackled this potential problem.

"Our team has been working diligently with our factories to adapt to the times and plan ahead to ensure that we don't miss a beat," answered Payne. "We have more product coming in than ever before; it's just a matter of catching up to the increased demand. We're happy to say that while there inevitably are stock outages, they're short-lived with the large quantity and frequency of shipments we have coming in."

"Most of our products are not MI-based. We did receive mostly DJ case orders during this time," said Ula.

"We are 100-percent made in the USA and regularly maintain three months' worth of inventory," relayed Lintner and Brown. "This really helped us continue shipping orders while Texas shut down non-essential businesses. Our manufacturing facility was closed, but we were able to keep our distribution center open during the tough months of March through June."

"Fortunately for Odyssey, our wide range of products have allowed us to diversity our offerings to the market, so we haven't had too many issues with backorders," stated Hsiao. "We believe in our industry and, over the past 25 years, we have seen it all, good times and bad. Since we trust in our industry to bounce back, we want to make sure we're stocked and ready to go whenever our partners, dealer network and artists need us."

And stated Blasko: "We were fortunate in that we keep a large inventory on hand and manufacture most of our own branded products in-house, so when things opened back up, we were not reliant on the supply chain. With few exceptions, we are shipping at pre-pandemic levels and have boosted our inventory in anticipation of significant holiday demand. Brett Marcus leads an outstanding team of reps that work closely

An advertisement for AMI guitars. The top right corner features the AMI logo in yellow, with "EST. 1984" below it. The main image shows a light-colored acoustic guitar leaning against a wooden stool. The guitar has a dark pickguard and a dark bridge. The background is dark with some blue lighting. At the bottom right of the guitar image, it says "Model 000M-18". Below the image, the text reads "Authorized Dealer Opportunities Available" in white. At the very bottom, the website "www.ami-guitars.com" and email "amisales84@gmail.com" are listed in white.

Model 000M-18

Authorized Dealer
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Max Lintner, director of research and development and digital sales and **Hilary Brown**, director of marketing, Kyser

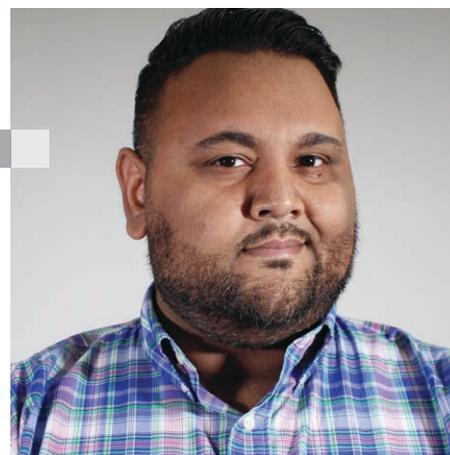
"We are 100-percent made in the USA and regularly maintain three months' worth of inventory. This really helped us continue shipping orders while Texas shut down non-essential businesses."

noted The Music People's Roberts. "Dealers will have the ability to learn about our exciting new product releases in a one-on-one video setting, as we would like to ensure that our dealers have a close to a real trade show experience as possible."

"For the past three decades, Odyssey has never missed a NAMM Show, except for after 9/11," responded Hsiao. "We know it's a staple event in our industry, however, with digital continuing to become the standard, we have been effectively growing our digital footprint over the years with our dealer, distributors and end users. Between digital media, social, direct, customer-relationship-management campaigns and direct communications with our valued network, we should be OK with brand and product visibility in 2021."

"Since I've come aboard as creative director for ProX, I've been driven to handle all of our own market-

Jolil Ula, creative director, ProX



"We're excited about our line of Flip-Ready Hydraulic Lift Cases. We've recently launched Flip-Ready cases for several other DJ controllers/mixers for Pioneer, RANE and Denon."

ing, development and branding," said Ula. "Social media is a hot spot for us to connect with end users. We have a great following of professionals we listen to when it comes to developing or improving products."

"OMG has a new YouTube channel, OMG TV, that makes it easy to see all the new product launches as well as any relevant content regarding our brands: Rotosound, D'Andrea, Henry Heller, Lock-It, etc.," stated Blasko.

And according to Lintner and Brown: "As mentioned, 2020 has proven that camaraderie and partnership are what we need to catalyze growth. We're actively trying to lean on each other as a community and get creative about content opportunities and collaborations, whether that's in the form of brand awareness or product partnerships. We're also rethinking the possibilities of the 'sales meeting.' That means not only making our ordering processes as seamless as possible, but also creating meaningful and unique experiences for our customers. No one wants to sit in back-to-back Zoom meetings. Our strategy is to make those interactions informative, engaging and distinctly Kyser. When you're not confined to a 20-foot-by-20-foot booth, it's a welcome opportunity to venture outside the box."

As a follow-up, we asked our respondents if they

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John Hsiao, CEO, Odyssey Cases

can offer a sneak peek of what products they will soon launch.

"To better serve the needs of each and every artist, we'll be experimenting more with special-edition products and limited-run product collections, with a long-term goal of tailoring the classic Kyser product assortment to suit every player and personality," said Lintner and Brown.

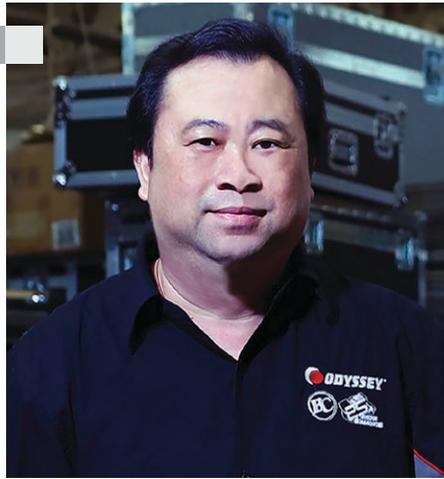
"We are very excited about bringing Twisted Wood Ukuleles to the U.S. They are a Canadian lifestyle brand that is sold alongside Martin Guitars up north. It's a beautiful instrument line that will create exciting opportunities for our dealers," stated Blasko. "We've also acquired U.S. distribution for The Rock Slide. And expect more Lock-It and Henry Heller strap designs, as making guitar straps is our bread and butter."

"We're excited about our line of Flip-Ready Hydraulic Lift Cases," relayed Ula. "At first, they were made for live audio brands like Allen & Heath, MIDAS and Behringer. We've recently launched Flip-Ready cases for several other DJ controllers/mixers for Pioneer, RANE and Denon."

"At On-Stage, we pride ourselves in keeping up with the times, as we are always identifying new areas for growth," relayed Roberts. "We are excited to enter a rapidly growing podcasting market, as we released our AS700 USB Mic, VLD360 LED Ring Light and VSM3000 Green Screen Kit during the TMP Jamboree 2020. Based on the feedback that we have received so far, we plan to expand this product line, as well as tap into some new and exciting markets in 2021."

"The team here at Odyssey is constantly developing/releasing new products, but most recently, our new Odyssey Vulcan Series of waterproof, dustproof and impact-proof cases has been highly touted," responded Hsiao. "More importantly, our business is built around supporting our brand partners, and we're proud to be able to offer custom-designed cases or bags for every new product re-

"The one area we can always count on is the strength of our industry and community to bounce back from anything, even a pandemic the world has not seen for a century."



lease, from Pioneer DJ to Denon, and beyond."

And to close this story out, we looked into the future by asking if our panelists are optimistic about the future in what will hopefully be a post-pandemic world.

"Absolutely, we are very optimistic about the MI industry post-pandemic because the community is amazingly resilient," answered Hsiao. "We have seen this over the past three decades

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at Odyssey. The ups and downs, the trends and advancements, analog to digital, adjustments and growth, etc. The one area that we can always count on is the strength of our industry and community to bounce back from any anything, even a pandemic that the world hasn't seen for a century."

"I am very optimistic. It is easy to get distracted by politics, technology, social media, etc., but the pandemic shutdown has helped

so many discover what we in the industry already know: The joy of making music is transformative," responded Blasko. "There is nothing else like it. You feel the magic, and that bell cannot be unring. And no one is better prepared to help people along their musical journey than the independent MI dealer. After all, that is why we are all in this to begin with!"

"Yes, we're optimistic about the future of MI," answered Lintner and Brown. "Guitar sales are up,

and therefore guitar accessory sales are up. We're worried about brick-and-mortar stores, though, especially mom-and-pop brick-and-mortar stores. This time has been the toughest on them, and we hope they can hold on until the post-pandemic time comes. We know there's nothing musicians want to do more than go browse a music shop and try out whatever guitar they want."

"Slowly, we are starting to branch out into the MI world

due to the popular demand for at-home musicians and recording artists," relayed Ula. "We have much in production and planned for future trade show events. We'll just have to wait and see if they come back in 2021."

And Payne concluded on a bright note: "Absolutely! Music is not going anywhere any time soon, and we live in a world that is able to adapt and overcome adversity. One silver lining to come out of this pandemic is that many people either discovered or reconnected with their relationship of making music. If there are more music-makers out there, we think the world is a more creative, intelligent and kind place. It just so happens we're in the musical instruments industry, and the fact that there is a boom in the number of people making music will help strengthen our industry as a whole." 

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COMING

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- A Believe in Music Week Preview from NAMM President and CEO Joe Lamond
- The Music & Sound Awards, Manufacturer Division, Nominees are Announced
- Five Minutes With: Paul Tapper, CEO, NUGEN Audio
- MI Spy Travels to Northern New Jersey
- Shine a Light: High Strung Violins & Guitars
- New Columns from Dan Vedda and Allen McBroom

And We Have Much More to End the Year!