



DR Strings' Mark Dronge, flanked by his daughters Annika and Camilla.

DR STRINGS— Continuing A Family Tradition

A COMPARATIVE NEWCOMER IN THE STRING BUSINESS, DR REPRESENTS FOUR GENERATIONS OF GUITAR INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ATLANTIC

LAUNCHED IN 1989, DR Strings is a relative newcomer to the string market, yet the Emerson, New Jersey-based company boasts an illustrious pedigree that is the culmination of four generations of guitar industry experience. Company founder Mark Dronge, grew up in the industry, working at Guild Guitars, the company his father Al launched in 1952. Mark's wife, Gun Elisabet Levin, has an equally storied background: Her family founded the Levin Guitar Company of Sweden, once one of Europe's largest guitar makers. Today their daughters, Annika and Camilla, continue this family tradition working at DR.

A reverence for tradition is reflected in DR's unorthodox approach to string production. While string manufacturing has evolved over the past two decades with the use of automated winding processes to improve consistency and productivity, DR has maintained an "old school"



Strictly old school, at DR operators hand-tension the string wrap wire instead of using a computer-controlled machine. "It's what makes us different, and it's why we exist," says DR Strings founder Mark Dronge.

approach, relying on the same production methods used 50 years ago. At its factory, there are no computer controlled machines anywhere in sight. Instead, winding machines are manned by skilled winders who hand-feed the wrap for every string. It's a slower and more expensive way to make strings, as reflected by DR Strings' 20% price premium. Yet Mark argues that this "handmade" approach yields a product with a distinct musical character.

Given the highly subjective nature of "tone," he readily concedes that any statement about the comparative merits of different strings is more "opinion than fact." But he nevertheless makes the case for the merits of DR's unusual manufacturing process. Sting, Marcus Miller, Bootsy Collins, Stanley Clarke, Derek Trucks, and numerous other notable artists, based on their endorsements, apparently agree with his logic. "Steel, contrary to what a lot of people think, is not 100% consistent," Mark explains. "It's a little like wood in that it has grain and can vary in tensile strength from one coil to the next. Computer controlled machines don't adjust for these variations, but I believe our winders do." He also contends that the

hand process may result in a slightly higher winding tension. This blend of the human touch and a possibly tighter wind is what defines the DR string line. Mark declares, "If our strings really weren't different, we would have no reason to exist."

DR's initial products, the Hi-Beam bass string and Tite-Fit electrics, reintroduced this hand-wound process to the market. Although retailers were receptive, early endorsements by Marcus Miller and Jeff Healey provided the credibility to rapidly gain shelf space and consumer acceptance. Since then, DR has steadily expanded its product offering with a wide range of acoustic and electric string models. "We probably have too many models now," says Mark. "But we're a niche company pursuing

niche markets, and we've found opportunity making strings that either no one else does, or does quite the way we do."

The DR Pure Blues line of strings typifies the company's niche marketing approach. Featuring pure nickel wrap wire on a round core wire (the overwhelming majority of today's guitar strings use hexagonal core wire) the Pure Blues are pretty much a copy of the strings sold in the '50s. "Guitarists love vintage guitars," says Mark. "So we decided to create a vintage

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string.” Although the strings aren’t a top seller, they have an extremely enthusiastic cadre of users including Derek Trucks of the Allman Brothers Band, Johnny Winter, and Grace Potter.

The DR factory may rely on traditional methods, but that hasn’t stopped the company from experimenting with cutting-edge designs. Four years ago it introduced colored strings, available in a variety of striking “day glo” colors. Today, these visually arresting strings generate a sizable percentage of total revenue. “They look great on stage,” says Mark. The DDT (for Drop Down Tuning) string line features a proprietary design that keeps them in tune even in the lowest tunings. Most recently, Tom Klukosky, who heads production and R&D, developed the patent-pending K3 Dragon Skin coated strings for acoustic, electric, and bass guitars. (The K3 designation stands for his three Klukosky kids.) The Dragon Skin coating results in a highly resonant string that Mark says “sounds even louder than some uncoated strings.”

Hand-tensioning wrap wire on a rapidly spinning core wire is a skill that can take up to six months to master. DR’s team of winders makes it look easy, but beginners struggle to apply the wrap wire evenly, or avoid breaking it. As a result, the 35 experienced winders who staff the plant are treated like family, and turnover is virtually nonexistent. This family approach also extends to the front office, which is staffed by veterans, many of whom have been with the company since its inception. Rosa Daza came to DR in 1990 as an administrative assistant and now handles export sales; Klukosky, a guitarist and physics major, has spent the past 18 years applying his unusual blend of skills to managing production and product development. Mark’s daughter Camilla assists him in general management, and his younger daughter Annika focuses on international sales.

From its inception in 1989, DR Strings sought to produce strings that evoked the feel and sound of an earlier era. Similarly, Mark and his team have attempted to create a flexible organization that harkens back to a time when the music industry was both smaller and more personal. In many ways, the DR corporate culture mirrors personalities of his guitar-making forbearers on both sides of the Atlantic.



The DR Sales team: Anthony Corona, Kim Klukosky, Rosa Daza, Tony Pinheiro, Steve Bello.

The saga of the Dronge and Levin clans in the music industry is a story of energy and talent, not to mention extraordinary resilience. Herman Carlsson, the patriarch of the Levin guitar making family, came to instrument making in a roundabout way. Born on a farm in rural Sweden, he took up wood carving to while away his free time when he wasn’t pushing a plough through potato fields. His skill caught the eye of a local teacher, who, despite Carlsson’s deafness, persuaded his parents to enroll him in carpentry school in nearby Gothenburg. In 1886, having mastered furniture and cabinet building, he joined millions of other Europeans and left to seek a better life in America.

The young Herman Carlsson was one of thousands of Swedish Carlsons working in New York; to distinguish himself, he changed his name to Levin. Initially, he made a living carving suitcase handles and other small wooden parts. But when an itinerant salesman named Ben Ari said, “If you can build guitars, I can sell them,” he rose to the challenge. His first six instruments sold instantly, and within a few years, he had opened a small factory on the Upper West Side of New York (two blocks south of the Dakota apartment complex where John Lennon once lived). In 1900, he returned to Sweden, transplanting his guitar factory in Gothenburg.

Under the management of Herman’s son, Hartwig, the Levin Guitar Company expanded by adopting modern manufacturing methods. It also won numerous medals and awards throughout Europe.

By the late ’50s, Levin was riding the guitar boom to record sales. Its guitars were even top sellers in the U.S., marketed under the Goya brand name. Julie Andrews prominently played a Goya in the 1965 hit film *The Sound of Music*. Unfortunately, Levin’s success was soon undone. The combination of a downturn in the guitar market, rising labor costs, and a contractual dispute with a U.S. distributor pushed the company into bankruptcy in 1967. After several changes in ownership, the business was acquired by C.F. Martin in 1976. Martin had hoped to build Martin guitars at the Levin plant for the European market, but the plan never came to fruition, and in 1981, the plant in Gothenburg was shuttered for good.

Shortly after the Levin family left the U.S. to return to Sweden, five-year-old Alfred Dronge and his family passed through Ellis Island and settled in lower Manhattan. They had fled persecution in Poland, settled briefly in Paris, and then sought a new start in America. The young Dronge was a talented guitarist, and by his teens, was performing professionally. His musical aptitude, combined with a charismatic personality, led him to music retail, where he excelled as a salesman. In the late ’30s, he opened his own store, Sagman & Dronge. Shortly after World War II came to a close, he began importing accordions from Italy. With a knack for timing that was to define his career, he made a small fortune as the accordion business boomed.

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AN ILLUSTRIOUS HISTORY



When Mark Dronge married Elisbet Levin, two illustrious guitar-making families came together. The Levin Company of Sweden ranked as one of Europe's top guitar makers, and its products were popularized in the U.S. by Julie Andrews in the hit film *The Sound of Music*. Mark Dronge's father founded Guild Guitars, which rose to prominence in the late '50s. At left, Mark presents John Lennon with a Guild Guitar in 1964 after the Beatles' first U.S. appearance. George Harrison is in the foreground. "We all knew so little about them [the Beatles] when they first arrived, I gave the guitar to John instead of George," recalls Mark today.

mary competitors. But by 1952, the once vibrant company was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and in the middle of an acrimonious nine-month labor strike. That year, Al Dronge hired six of Epiphone's top builders, and using profits from his accordion business, set up the Guild Guitar Company in lower Manhattan. By sheer force of will, he secured the endorsements of noted artists such as Johnny Smith, crisscrossed the country selling, and drove production. In the process, Guild emerged as one of the industry's major brands. Sensing the grassroots enthusiasm for the guitar, in 1960 he took a big financial risk and moved production to a much larger factory in Hoboken, New Jersey. His timing once again was perfect, and Guild was well placed to supply the exploding demand that came with arrival of the Beatles and rock 'n' roll.

Mark Dronge got his start in the music industry at age five when his father encouraged him to bang away on drum-

sets in the display window of the Sagman & Dronge store. By the '60s, he was directing Guild's marketing, where he secured the endorsements of the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Paul Simon, The Lovin' Spoonful, and countless other top artists. By chance at the 1967 NAMM show, he met Gun Elisabet Levin, and they married in 1969. Thus, two guitar making families came together.

The rapid growth of the guitar market drew the interest of many large conglomerates. CBS purchased Fender in 1965, Baldwin Piano & Organ acquired Gretsch in 1967, and Gulf & Western purchased Unicord, the Marshall distributor, a year later. In 1968, at the peak of the market, Al Dronge sold Guild to Avnet, another aggressive conglomerate. He stayed on until his death in a plane crash in 1972, but Mark left to pursue a career in TV commercial production. "I needed a change, and wanted to learn film making," he says.

Although he enjoyed success directing

ad campaigns for major consumer brands like Coors Beer, Mark never lost his interest in the music industry and in 1983, returned when Avnet asked him to revive the flagging Guild Company. He spent three years at the helm, and dramatically increased sales with a flurry of product introductions including the highly successful Pilot bass model, named for his father who owned a twin engine Beech Baron. However, when Avnet put Guild up for sale, he couldn't secure sufficient financing, and the company was sold to a group of Nashville investors. (Guild was acquired by its current owner, Fender, in 1996). Rather than dwell on the disappointment of his failed buyout, he channeled his energies into launching DR strings.

In a reflective moment, Mark credits much of his success at DR to lessons learned from his father. "He taught me how to sell, how to evaluate opportunities, and how to look at things from the musician's point of view," he explains. In addition to his business acumen, Al Dronge was also unrelenting in his drive for quality. He said, "There will always be a demand for Cadillacs, Chevy is more vulnerable. That standard for quality is what we strive for at DR."

Today Camilla, who is married to Anthony Corona, DR's top salesman, works on a variety of special projects. Annika graduated from Yale Medical School, and then took a job dealing with patient safety issues at Astra Zeneca, a global pharmaceutical manufacturer. Despite a promising career in healthcare, she couldn't resist the pull of family tradition and six months ago began working full time at DR. "It's an opportunity I couldn't pass up," she says. The Dronge family is tight-knit, and Mark takes obvious pleasure in working daily with his two daughters, and the fact that they ensure continuity for the business. Sitting in a conference room lined with an assortment of vintage Levin and Guild guitars, he smiles and says of his ancestors, "I think they'd like what we're doing here."

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