

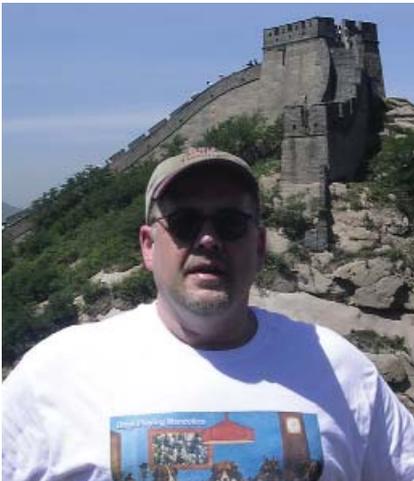
MY TURN | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

Not Your Mother's China

In June, I was one of nine privileged dealers who visited the KHS factories in Beijing, China, and Taipei, Taiwan. Bias alert: I'm a vocal and unabashed fan of KHS's Jupiter Band Instruments, having developed an increasingly deep financial — perhaps even emotional — investment in their products over the past decade and experienced unbelievably high success in return. Jupiter's instruments have brought an unprecedented stability in a tenuous industry, especially over the last five years.

Our tour started in the WuQing Industrial Park facilities in Tianjin,

about a 45-minute drive from the flurry and bustle of monumental civic road projects and construction in preparation for the 2008 Olympics. A lot of Sino national pride at stake here, but I predict the world will be astonished at the dynamic change in China's geographic and economic landscape as it continues to shrug off its perceived Third World status. Construction was moving at an exponential rate, perceptibly frantic, but deliberate in this new international "fishbowl" visibility.



Retailer Ted Eschliman journeyed to China for a tour of KHS's factories. His experience contrasted the perception of China as hub of low-quality, exploitative manufacturing

hand hammering. Jigs and seemingly crude molds were artfully crafted to produce goods at painfully consistent dimensions and specifications. Big brass bodies and bells were manhandled to a sparkling shimmer on the callous rows of buffing wheels.

And yet, nestled throughout the factories, we saw some serious, expensive CAD machinery and lasers. The staging was an incredible juxtaposi-

tion of primitive hand craftsmanship, but processed with precise and consistent computer-aided calibration.

Our two-city tour had been strategically divided by a short detour, a sightseeing adventure to China's famous Forbidden City. The irony and evidence of global economy was not lost on us; tucked into the recesses of the national treasure was a Starbucks (also a quick lunch for us at the Great Wall).

Of course, we delighted in the local Chinese culture surrounding the factory tours. Our Asian hosts took great pride in their attention and courtesy to guests, something we Americans could learn a lesson from. This sense of accommodation has reaped great reward in the explosive development and acceptability of Jupiter (and other competitive Chinese) products. That they listen has brought incremental tweaks over the years that only get better.

OLD, NEW WORLD MEET

The factories, including nearby facilities in Huang Zhuang where most of the raw manufacturing, plating and pressing occurs, demonstrated a parallel resolve, a relentless sense of responsibility. The work environment was no-nonsense and team-sensitive, yet never visibly repressive.

In the deliberate quiet, an amazing amount of work was being accomplished, eyes and hands intent, efficient and, from what we observed, extremely capable. Quiet and clean throughout the entire week's surveillance, the most palpable observation was indeed the portrait of a communal sense of order.

Similarly striking was the oxymoronic blend of Old and New World. There was much

DEBUNKING CHINA MYTHS

So what are the urban-legend dynamics of Asian manufacturing we might have expected to witness during our visit?

Urban Legend No. 1: Exploited Laborers

I won't pretend this isn't still happening elsewhere within the centuries-old, regime-repressed government

climate. But for four days, we observed contented workers, dutifully occupied with a sense of purpose, in clean working environments. If there was any evidence of the emerging Chinese middle class, it was in these factories.

Corporate philosophy emphasized employees' mental and physical health. KHS offered leisure activities, transportation, day care and kindergarten facilities in its corporate headquarters at Luzhou, not to mention discounts on instruments. It may not be Club Med, but what we saw was a far cry from current pop culture accusations of a concentration camp lifestyle.

Urban Legend No. 2, Environmental Concerns

Waste metals, plating and

lacquering chemicals, and exhaust pollution are fatal to the environment if not disposed of responsibly. KHS takes great pains in water reclamation and waste disposal. As both a metaphorical and literal testament to its commitment to earth friendliness, at the very end of the cleaning process and water recovery lay a flower garden and fishpond. The plants' and creatures' very existence visibly depends on the integrity of these processes.

Urban Legend No. 3, Instrument Quality

Undoubtedly, the 20 of us who took part in the tour had already bought into the quality of Jupiter and Mapex products, and both companies' efforts to improve and provide their dealer bases with com-

'For four days, we observed contented workers, dutifully occupied with a sense of purpose, in clean working environments.'

petitive products. That said, they are not alone in the battle for supremacy in the American market. There is plenty of competition out there from other Asian factories and

sources.

What impresses our company with KHS is the line of communication in the chain of student, parent, teacher, dealer and manufacturer. It's one thing to make a good product, quite another to make it market-appropriate — effectively tracking each important faction from maker to end-user.

The latter will be the test, but witnessing what I did in this trip of a lifetime, I have good reason to believe Jupiter Band Instruments and its KHS partners will continue to enjoy success for many years to come. **MI**

Ted Eschliman is an industry veteran of 27 years and co-owns Lincoln, Neb.-based Dietze Music. He also writes for Mel Bay Publishing, including a regular column in its online Webzine, mandolinsessions.com.

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