

TAKING WING

With an eye on the past and a vision for the future, entrepreneur Gary Kramer stages a comeback in El Segundo with a revolutionary ergonomic guitar

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SARA FARR- RAVE!

Nestled in an El Segundo warehouse, the world headquarters of Gary Kramer Guitars hardly seems the setting for a guitar maker whose designs have been synonymous with some of the biggest names in rock 'n' roll.

But that era seems like a lifetime and several lawsuits ago for Kramer, who's now the owner of Marina Packing, a company that specializes in shipping the kind of high-end

furniture seen in magazines such as *Architectural Digest*.

"When I got out of the guitar business in 1978 or 1979, I thought my run was over," Kramer said. "It had been fun while it lasted, but I was moving on."

Kramer, who grew up in Inglewood and now lives in Mar Vista, stumbled into the guitar business in the early 1970s through his friendship with Travis Bean. A salesman by trade, Kramer quickly saw the value of Bean's radical,

The flame-top Delta Wing guitar from Gary Kramer Guitars debuted at a music industry trade show in Anaheim earlier this year. The guitar is designed to balance on a player's thigh.

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aluminum-necked guitar design.

The Travis Bean guitar line debuted in the early 1970s at NAMM, the annual trade show for the music industry. Kramer said the response was overwhelming.

"We took about \$75,000 to \$100,000 worth of orders," he recalled. "It was because we were new; we had something different. Before Travis Bean, the market was just about all Fender and Gibson. It wasn't as diverse as it is today."

The partners began buying equipment and hiring employees to fulfill the orders, and Kramer took on the responsibility of selling the instrument to retailers, including the venerable Gracin's & Towne in New York City.

Despite widespread enthusiasm throughout the industry, Bean began devoting more time to his career as a musician, Kramer said. When Bean converted part of the production facility into a studio, Kramer realized he would need to look for another opportunity.

Complicating matters was the fact that Bean owned the design patents.

"I had to enter the market with something new," Kramer said.

Kramer set about developing a design that combined the aluminum neck of a Travis Bean with wood insets -- allowing the guitar to retain the sustain that Travis Beans were famous for while making the instrument substantially lighter, a boon for stage players.

"It was a way to get back into the marketplace," Kramer recalled.

Kramer approached Gracin's & Towne owner Bernie Gracin with his idea. Gracin in turn introduced him to his partner, Dennis Berardi.

Berardi was enthusiastic about the design, and brought in Peter LaPlaca, who worked for Norland Music (the parent company of Gibson). With the help of businessman Henry Vaccaro, who fronted the seed money for what became BKL International, Kramer developed a prototype, which the partners debuted at the 1976 NAMM show, held in Chicago.

With its radical, "tuning-fork" style headstock and sophisticated engineering, the Kramer

Guitar was an instant hit. With a little bit of marketing savvy, including a 20-foot tall spinning headstock to draw visitors to their booth, orders poured in.

What happened next was like a bad rerun of Kramer's falling out with Travis Bean.

Anxious to return to the West Coast, Kramer struck a deal whereby he would serve as BKL's artist relations representative in return for a percentage of the royalties and sales. Enthusiastic, he packed his bags and headed back to Marina del Rey.

But once again, the patents for the design hadn't been in his name, and his association with the company dissolved. The rights to the Kramer name were the property of Vaccaro, and Kramer was left with about "\$5,000 and five or six guitars" and not much else, he recalled.

"At that time, I hired a lawyer, but that cost more money, and I decided to get out of the business," Kramer said.

Throughout the 1980s, Kramer said he kept up with the brand, following its success and popularity among the biggest names in rock 'n' roll, including Eddie Van Halen, Richie Sambora and Mick Mars. Kramer Guitars started incorporating high-end technology, including the Floyd Rose tremolo and Seymour Duncan pickups -- and even outsold Gibson and Fender in 1985 and 1986, according to the Gibson Web site.

But the company was spending so heavily on artist relationships -- including a bizarre association with Russian band Gorky Park -- that it eventually had to shutter the brand in 1991. In 1995, Gibson bought the rights to the name and has started "re-issuing" some of the brand's guitars and basses.

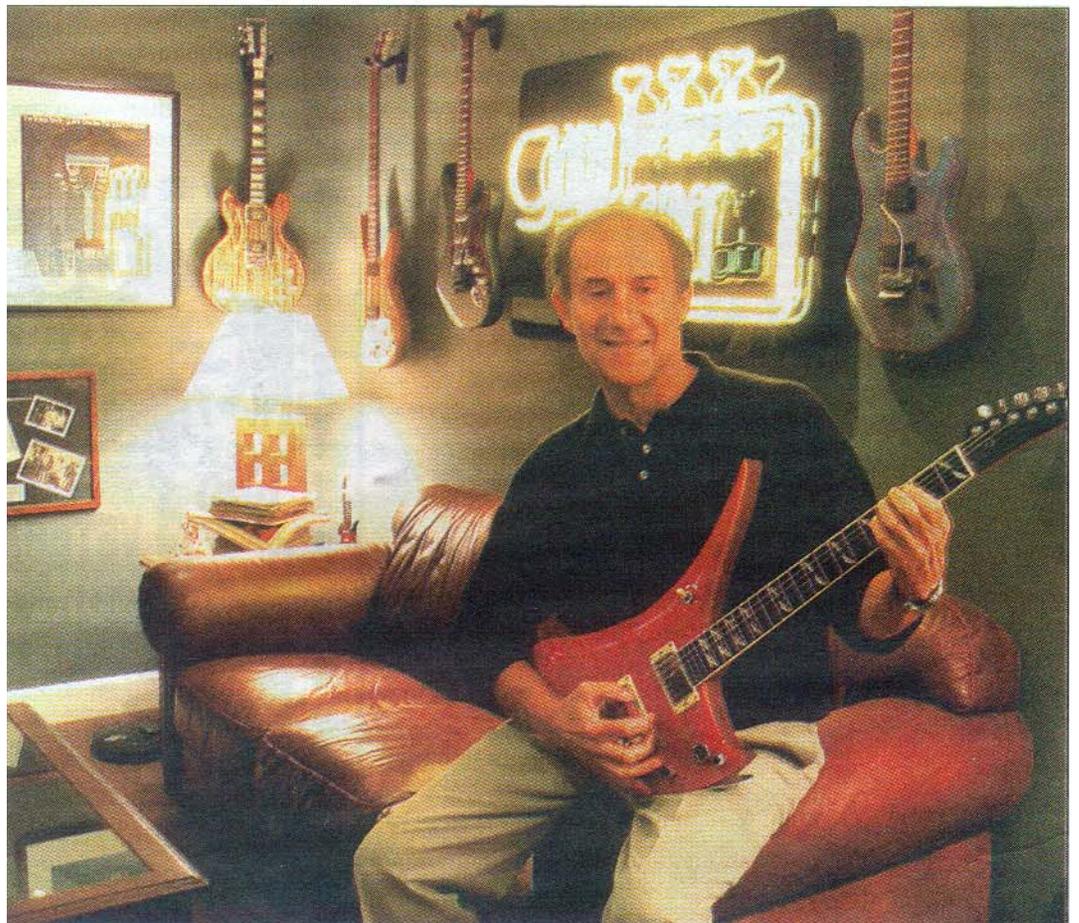
At the same time Kramer Guitars was struggling, Gary Kramer was cashing in on Southern California's booming real estate market. He traveled Europe, came home and began a lucrative shipping business, part of which he spun off in 1991 and part of which -- Marina Packing -- he kept. He thought the guitar business was well behind him when his secretary approached him one day in 2005 with news of a "Kramer Guitars Expo" in Nashville.

"Most of these people had



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-GARY KRAMER,
WHO BEGAN MAKING GUITARS
IN THE 1970S



Gary Kramer shows off a Delta Wing in his El Segundo headquarters. His office features various models from the years of the guitar business, as well as such memorabilia as his first order from the Rolling Stones.

GUITARS • Kramer puts ergonomics into the making of music

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thought Gary Kramer had died or disappeared," he said. "So I e-mailed the organizers and they invited me to the expo. It wasn't anything huge; only maybe 35 people were there. Still, I was asked to autograph guitars and I realized how much of a following they (Kramer Guitars) still have. I realized that it was time for another change."

And Gary Kramer Guitars was born.

"My reason for getting back into the business was simple," Kramer said. "There wasn't anything fresh or new in the market. I had already made my mark twice before in this business, and I knew I could do it again. Since guitar making became a business of just copying another recognizable guitar shape, it was time for somebody to take a stand."

Working with Leo Scala, a Russian luthier he met at Marina Music in Los Angeles, Kramer developed a new generation of guitars that blend the latest in technology and materials with cutting-edge design.

Alex Sioris, the owner of Marina Music, isn't surprised Kramer got back into the market.

"His success comes from blending innovation, technology and smart ideas," Sioris said. "He thinks before he designs and takes into consideration all the factors that make an instrument good or bad."

One of Kramer's newest models, the Delta Wing, debuted at this year's NAMM show in Anaheim.

The Delta Wing's radical shape is based on ergonomics. It's designed to balance perfectly on a player's thigh, with its neck tilted at a higher angle than traditional guitars.

When a guitarist stands, the weight shifts to the center of the body, making for easier reach. The neck is also shaped so that a player's hand naturally closes around it, rather than having to bend the wrist at an awkward angle.

Initial response was favorable; the boutique guitar line received enough orders during NAMM to keep it busy throughout the year, Kramer said.

However, Kramer doesn't often get to enjoy his own creations.

"I have horrible dexterity," he said with a smile.