

KALA'S U-BASS LINE

By Dan Ferrisi

One of the nice things about the music products industry is that its members are deeply passionate about what they do. Although we are hardly unperturbed by the turbulent waters of a roiling global marketplace, music-making is something that—unlike expensive sports cars and giant flat-screen LCD TVs—people simply aren't willing to give up just because the economy has taken a bite out of their bottom line. When you speak to music products retailers, though, you often hear the same refrain: When times are tough, as they have been for about five years now, less expensive products—particularly those that players equate with a carefree and happy vibe—fly off the shelves. The *Retailer* recently spoke to Rick Carlson, Director of Sales and Marketing, Kala Brand Music, to get the scoop on a product family that seems perfectly suited to our times: the U-Bass line.

For the uninitiated, the U-Bass is an extremely portable 21-inch scale bass instrument that can closely emulate the sound of an upright bass or achieve the full spectrum of electric bass tones. The mastermind behind the product is Owen Holt of Road Toad Music in San Jose CA. "Mike Upton, President of Kala Brand Music, met Owen at a luthiers festival on the Big Island in 2007, where Owen showed him this little 21-inch scale custom bass with rubber strings that he was developing," Carlson said. "The idea was to create a very portable short-scale bass with a huge bass sound. Being a bass player himself, Mike was absolutely floored by the deep tone of this little bass when he plugged it in." Shortly afterward, Holt and Kala established an agreement to develop a line of basses that Kala would introduce to the MI market. The deal sealed, the first U-Bass showed at Winter NAMM in 2009, and then launched in Nashville that summer.

Since U-Bass' debut, the line has grown aggressively. The first U-Bass



U.S.A. Solid Body



Solid Spruce Top

was an acoustic electric All Solid Mahogany model; the company added a fretless version shortly after. The Acoustic Electric Series evolved in early 2010 to include the Solid Spruce Top fretted and fretless, boasting mahogany back and sides. Also that year, the All Solid Acacia model, similar in construction to the All Solid Mahogany's specifications, debuted. One day, Hutch Hutchinson (bassist for Bonnie Raitt) was at the Kala office and noticed a prototype Solid Spruce Top cutaway model with louvered sound holes. "He fell in love with it on the spot, so we were convinced we had a winner," Carlson explained. "We brought it out as the HH model." The Exotic Mahogany model, notable for its figured wood appearance, entered the marketplace last year. Kala's newest bass in this series is the Rumbler. "All of our 2013 models come with custom pickups and EQ with built-in tuners," Carlson added.

In 2011, Kala moved into manufacturing solid-body U-Basses in the U.S. and, that spring, introduced the California Series solid-body four-string fretted bass. The company followed up with the five-string model in January of last year. The U.S.A. solid bodies are available in fretted and fretless, and four different colors. To round things out, Kala in late 2011 introduced the S-U-B solid-body series, which is its imported line of affordable solid-body U-Basses.

According to Carlson, the most important feature of U-Bass centers on the strings' ability to generate room-rattling low frequencies on a short scale. Joining the original polyurethane black strings, Kala now offers five different varieties, including one wound round set. "Our custom-designed pickup systems and Hipshot tuners are also important design factors," Carlson added. On the U.S.A. solid bodies, Kala installs a custom L.R. Baggs Element Under Saddle Pickup and a Mi-Si Align battery-free Active Preamp System. The

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All Solid Mahogany



The Rumbler

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UNDER THE HOOD

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company's All Solid Mahogany and Acacia models come with a hard foam case; a custom padded gig bag with embroidered logo is included with all other models. All the basses undergo thorough setup and testing processes in Kala's custom shop prior to shipping.

At this point, you may be wondering whom the ideal U-Bass customer is. Well, according to Carlson, the real question might be whom isn't it for! "The U-Bass is for everyone who plays or would like to play bass," he stated. "For professionals, it is an important new tool or voice in their arsenal. Upright players have embraced it as an instrument they can fly and gig with. It is also great for the hobbyist or home studio enthusiast who doesn't have a lot of space, as well as beginning bass players, including kids, because the strings are easy on the fingers." The list of endorsers is impressive: Bakithi Kumalo (Paul Simon); Tal Wilkenfeld (Jeff Beck); John Driskell Hopkins (Zac Brown); Hutch Hutchinson (Bonnie Raitt); Abraham Laboriel; and numerous others. Equally impressive is the awards consideration U-Bass has earned, just a couple of which are Summer NAMM "Best in Show" honors and a Music & Sound Award nod.

When you're dealing with

a product that, like U-Bass, is unique, there can be something of an "understanding hump" to overcome. "Many of our early dealers were bass-oriented shops or stores with a strong bass department," Carlson explained. At first, it was a bit of a novelty to many dealers, who thought of it as a ukulele bass. "Now," Carlson enthused, "four years later, it has been broadly embraced as a bona fide bass instrument by mainstream dealers, and it's become an important brand for them and Kala. We've done our best to make it very visible in the media and to educate our dealers about the instrument." And on that score, mission accomplished!

The dealer base now covers a broad spectrum, including ukulele dealers, bass shops, mom-and-pop music retailers and Top 100 dealers. Kala's also sponsored in-store clinics featuring Bakithi Kumalo and other U-Bass artists, thus helping to spread the word. Kala even received invitations to organize U-Bass days at Musician's Institute (Hollywood CA) and Berklee College (Boston MA). "We knew that, once we got the U-Bass into bass players' hands, it would generate a buzz within the bass community," Carlson declared. Without question, Kala's prescience was spot-on.

Kala's recently begun shipping the Rumbler. It lists for \$399 MSRP.