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Last month, Epi representative Will Jones caught up with Epiphone President, Jim "Epi" Rosenberg to talk about where Epiphone is today and where it's going. Here's what he had to say...

**EPI:** How long have you been with Epiphone?

**JIM:** I started about 12 years ago. Before that, I worked with E-mu Systems. So in total, I've been involved in the musical instrument business for about 22 years.

**EPI:** And you play guitar.

**JIM:** Yes... as do a lot of people at Epiphone. Like many, I wanted to do it for a living. During high school and college, I played primarily singer/songwriter gigs. I still work at it and play out a bit. I try to play as much as possible. I love doing it plus I think it helps me to maintain a customer's perspective.

**EPI:** There's certainly a lot to talk about with Epiphone but if you had to pick just one thing, what would that be?

**JIM:** That's a tough question to answer because you're right... there are so many great things happening right now - from the introduction of the new Masterbilt acoustics to the growth of the Elitist line. So it's really hard to say but I guess if there was one thing it would have to be "Quality".

**EPI:** Why quality?

**JIM:** I know it's a bold statement to make, but I honestly don't think there is anyone making more consistently great guitars than Epiphone is today. Currently, our return rate is less than one-half of one percent. And with a lifetime warranty on all our guitars, that's saying something. Everyone at Epiphone has worked very hard to achieve that. We're all very proud.

**EPI:** Wow! That's pretty impressive. How have you done that?

**JIM:** It really has been a combination of parts, process and people. On the parts side, we recognize that to make a better instrument we have to use the very best materials. So over the years, we have systematically improved each component - from pickups to toggle switches to wood. For example - our pickups. We use Japanese-made enamel coated wire and Alnico Classic magnets. We double vacuum wax every one. Today you'll find that all our pickups are 100% designed in the USA or made in the USA by Gibson or EMG.

For process, there are few if any companies today with more combined guitar design and building experience than Epiphone and Gibson. By investing in and incorporating the same time-tested methods, tools, techniques and equipment into our Asian production, we can ensure a consistently great guitar at an affordable price. In truth, it costs no more to make a bad guitar than it does to make a great guitar. You just have to know the difference and then, know how to get there.

And finally, in the people area we have invested a huge amount of resources improving the quality and quantity of our staff. Today, we have over 40 full-time people in the US and Asia doing nothing but making sure that each guitar is as close to perfect as you can get. Not just cosmetically, but more importantly how it feels, how it plays and how it sounds.

**EPI:** I understand Epiphone has even opened its own factory in China. Can you



tell us a little bit about that?

**JIM:** Sure. And I think it's a great follow-up to the topic of quality. Ten to fifteen years ago, many Epiphone guitars were made at the same factories where many other guitars were and are currently made. In this case, it's difficult, if not impossible, to have a substantially better instrument than your competition when the parts, process and people to make them are the same. Therefore, in order to produce a superior instrument, we needed to open our own factory. So in October 2002, we opened Qingdao Gibson - our own factory near Qingdao, China dedicated to making Epiphone and only Epiphone guitars. To my knowledge, we are the only U.S. guitar company with their own factory in Asia. That's a significant difference.

**EPI:** I thought all Epiphones were made by Samick. (smiling)

**JIM:** I think that's what a lot of people still think. But that never was the case. Fifteen years ago, a lot of, but certainly not all, Epiphone guitars as well as other brands, were made at the Samick factory in Korea. Today, they don't make any guitars for us. In fact, they closed the Samick guitar factory in Korea a few years ago.

**EPI:** I understand you just returned from China. How's the new factory doing?

**JIM:** Great! Even though it's less than 2 years old, the guitars look fantastic. I mean it. It's amazing what can be done when you invest in the right equipment, use quality materials, establish the right processes and have the best people in place.

**EPI:** Speaking of people, were many people from Epiphone or Gibson involved in setting up the factory?

**JIM:** Oh absolutely! For example, Mike Voltz who has worked at Gibson for over 18 years as a luthier, moved over to the Epiphone Division a couple years ago. He was intimately involved in facility layout, equipment design, training and the establishment of quality control. He practically lived at the factory for 2 years and the results are apparent. He's just one example of the effectiveness of combining Epiphone and Gibson expertise and experience with Asian production efficiencies to make great instruments at price points the average working musician can afford.

**EPI:** That's kind of a mantra for Epiphone isn't it - "the working musician"?

**JIM:** Yes. While there are certainly people out there that collect guitars for the sake of collecting, that's not really our target customer. Our guitars are "Made to be Played". And that's a slogan that didn't come from an ad agency - which is

good (laughs). It came from real musicians who play our guitars and over the years have told us how well our instruments perform night after night, gig after gig. Seriously, at least once a week I get a letter from a guitar player saying exactly that.

**EPI:** Tell us a little bit about the new Masterbilt line.

**JIM:** The Masterbilt line in many ways is a return to the glory days of Epiphone acoustic guitar design and production. In addition to using the 1930's style "offset" headstock shape and "stickpin" inlay, they incorporate traditional, premium features such as all-solid tone woods... Sitka spruce, mahogany, rosewood and maple. Also, tapered dovetail neck joints using hot hide glue and hand-scalloped bracing. As a result, we've had professional producers, songwriters and players who were involved in our pre-release product testing sessions tell us that the new Masterbilts sound and play better than any guitar they own.

**EPI:** All-solid woods? They must be expensive.

**JIM:** Not really. They start at about \$599 street price. That even includes a hard gigbag with built-in hygrometer. When you compare that with some guitars in that price range that aren't even made out of wood, that's a pretty good deal.

**EPI:** Are all Epiphones made at the new China factory?

**JIM:** Oh no. We still build out our USA collection such as the John Lennon Casino and the John Lee Hooker Sheraton in Nashville. And our Elitist guitars are all made in Japan. We're having a hard time meeting customer demand for both so we're looking for ways to increase production on these in 2004 while maintaining their top-of-the-line quality standards.

**EPI:** How are the Zakk Wylde Les Pauls doing?

**JIM:** We're having a hard time making enough. It's not an easy guitar to make. With the bull's-eye graphics and partially unpainted maple neck, it requires more time and effort than a standard Les Paul. But I guess that's a good problem to have.

**EPI:** I hear you had a funny encounter with Zakk.

**JIM:** Yes. It was pretty funny. We wanted to get together and talk about the



guitar and maybe some ideas for future models so I went to see him at OzzFest last year. I was waiting outside his tour bus until his road manager came out and told me to go on in. So I climbed the stairs and as usual, there's this closed-curtain behind the driver's area. Not wanting to just barge in, I slowly pushed open the curtains as I peeked my head in. Just then, Zakk throws back the curtain and jumps in my face screaming. I think I jumped back so far I hit the windshield. The real funny thing is that he was video taping it. I think he does it with every unsuspecting visitor. Everyone on the bus probably sits back with a six-pack after each show and has a real good laugh watching their latest victim. Kind of Zakk's own version of reality TV.

**EPI:** There's a new Joe Perry Les Paul. How did that come about?

**JIM:** As you know, Joe has been playing Les Pauls forever and has worked with Gibson on a couple signature models. Last year, he approached us and asked us to make him an Epiphone version of his "Boneyard" Les Paul. Frankly, I think he tried our Zakk LP and was really impressed with it. Of course, we were flattered at the chance of working with a legend like Joe so we jumped on the opportunity.

**EPI:** That sounds pretty simple.

**JIM:** Yes. It really was. I think lately, many of our new signature models have started like that. Artists have always wanted to be associated with high-quality instruments. But more and more, they also want them to be accessible to working musicians. I guess maybe the word's out among the artist community that Epiphone meets both criteria. Many of them have said the same thing... "I wish there'd been a guitar this good available back when I didn't have a ton of money to spend."

**EPI:** What does the future hold for Epiphone?

**JIM:** More of the same - I hope. There really is no substitute for quality. We believe that if we make a better guitar, people will ultimately find it and buy it. Regardless of where it's made or whether or not we spend a ton on advertising. Bottom-line is... and to quote our founder, Epaminodous Stathopoulos, "great guitars do not just happen". Everyone at Epiphone is focused and will remain focused on making it happen! One guitar at a time.



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