



'We don't participate in recessions'

GEORGIA CASE PROVES AS TOUGH AS ITS PRODUCTS BY JIM HODGSON

Like any animal of the jungle, musicians come in all shapes and sizes. They have their own language, their own brand of humor. They even have their own system of ranking themselves against one another, which, more often than not, hinges on factors other than playing ability.

For instance, if a guy has clean gear he's probably not gigging much. Clean gear is level one.

Cables and effects pedals develop a patina made from cheap beer, Jägermeister, and cigarette ash in no time. Nicks in an amplifier's Tolex covering seem to appear of their own accord. It's OK, though; these little wear marks are a badge of pride. In fact, some guitar manufacturers will pre-age your instrument for you before you even play a note, and why not? A little wear on your your giggin' rig looks good. That's level two.

It can go too far, though. If you're playing neighborhood bars with your friends and the plastic knobs keep getting cracked off your amplifier, you've reached the upper stratum of level two: you're playing enough to have properly aged gear, but not enough yet to afford level three.

Level three, the final level, is when you get your gear into a real road case, and if you're from around here, that road case is probably going to be from the Georgia Case Company, founded in 1988.

A million dollar order

Brian White, the 55-year-old founder, still operates Georgia Case from behind a massive granite desk surrounded by aquariums full of colorful exotic fish. "Funny story about this desk," he says. He's a storyteller, easy to listen to and easy to like.

"I went to an estate auction. I was the only one who followed the auctioneer into the room with this desk. They'd been using it as a conference table. He asked me what I thought it was worth. I said I'd give him 20 bucks for it, and he let me have it!"

Like his desk, White is formidable. He's six foot three, give or take, and sturdy. He shows me around his warehouse in a new white shirt, charcoal slacks, and cowboy boots. The boots must have been on his feet a long time. They're quiet.

"I was working for another case company, and I quit," he says. "One of my clients from that company liked me, though, and they



BRIAN WHITE'S DESK

came with me. They gave me a shot. I started this business with a million-dollar order! Hah! How many people can say that?"

Along the way, White says two of his competitors came to him and pointed out that he could use lower quality materials in his cases. They noted that they made their cases with 1/4" plywood unless their customers specifically asked for 3/8" or 1/2" ply.

"I'd never thought of it like that," White admits. "But then I figured, naw. I've only got one client. You think I want to make them mad at me?"

The more cases I make, the more I sell. I'm the only place where you can walk in with a list of cases and be on the road in two hours.

White makes cases for pianos, for guitars, for amplifiers. There is a case that fits ten guitars and has four big drawers underneath. If a roadie designed furniture, his version of an armoire might look something like this six-wheeled behemoth. There's also a custom case made for an undercover police officer. It's intended to sit behind the cop's seat as secure storage for weapons and ammo.

You can still get your custom case made out of wood, but they're also now often made out of composite materials, in nearly any color of the rainbow. "If you push that one out of an airplane, it'd bounce," White claims as I'm eyeing a composite case for a traveling espresso machine.

I nod, but I'm distracted by the twin five-foot marble lions standing a few yards away. White can tell I'm eyeing them. "Oh yeah, them," he says. "Bought 'em for my house. Wife doesn't like 'em, so here they are."

I met his wife, Toby, when she let me into the warehouse earlier in the morning. I liked her immediately too.

"I'm the important one," she confided.

We stroll over to a loading dock, where a worker is unloading



slabs of foam that will eventually protect someone's equipment. White rattles off facts and figures about what it costs to truck the foam in, where it comes from, and who else besides him needs foam. He knows his business inside and out, and even gives me a short history of a couple of his competitors.

"They're not like me," he says of one company. The men in question took over the case business from their father. I'm left with the sense that White doesn't feel they have the knack for custom case building that he does.

Let's make a deal

The Georgia Case Company has come a long way from its one-

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client start. They've made custom cases for the likes of Nine Inch Nails, Usher, and Cirque du Soleil, just to name a few, though White figures his music clients only represent about ten per cent of his business, the rest coming from trade shows and audio/visual equipment.

"I remember John Mayer and his band came in here years ago," White recalls. "They weren't making any money then, just playing around town. They had three lava lamps they used on stage that they wanted cases for. So I wrote them a quote, but they couldn't afford it. So I said, okay, I'll put my logo on there and cut the price a bit, and they went for it."

I put 500 rivets in my cases, through both legs of the angle iron. I'm the only one who uses that many. People don't believe me 'til they start counting.

Since then, White's been willing to try to work with musicians to get them what they need. For example, when Drivin' N' Cryin's gear trailer was stolen in 2010, White and Georgia Case stepped in to outfit the venerable Georgia band with new ones, free of charge. He doesn't extend this kind of courtesy to everyone, though. There's a catch: he has to like the music.

"I had this one band, one time. They almost had me talked into giving them free cases, with my logo on them, of course. So, I went out and bought their CD and listened to it. I could only take it for about fifteen seconds. I've never heard men talk that way! I told 'em to forget it."

Giving it back, paying it forward

Some of the people he's been kind to in the early days have come back to him for more custom cases.

"This guy came in here the other day, long hair, gigantic beard, and he's talking to me like he knows me," White says, his face screw-

ing up with the effort of identifying the customer. "So, I'm telling him about what we do, and he keeps mentioning how he's been here before, finally I can't take it any longer. I say 'Who are you?'"

"'Well, I'm Clay Cook!' he said. Can you believe it? I didn't recognize him at all!"

Cook, now filling multiple instrument roles in the Zac Brown Band, has formerly played with John Mayer and the Marshall Tucker Band and has had many a Georgia Case over the years. Zac's current stage manager, Bobby Carroll, confirmed that they still use Georgia Case extensively.

"I use them all the time, and I love them," said Carroll.

White has done fairly well over the years, no matter the economy. Georgia Case, according to the founder, "doesn't participate in recessions."

"Hell," he adds. "The more cases I make, the more I sell. I'm the only place where you can walk in with a list of cases and be on the road in two hours." Custom cases take longer, but White keeps a large inventory of the most commonly purchased models.

He's also proud that his Georgia Case products started at a high quality level and have stayed there. He points to a nearby case that has been backed into by some heavy machinery.

"Look at that. You can barely tell the thing's damaged. I put 500 rivets in my cases, through both legs of the angle iron. I'm the only one who uses that many rivets. People don't believe me 'til they start counting." A quick web search of White's competitors bears this claim out: way less rivets.

"I even put steel bars in some of the bigger ones. You'd never know because they're under the foam, but they're there."

So, what enabled White to grow his business from that one client to the many he now enjoys?

"Well," he says, thinking, "My brother-in-law's an accountant. Doesn't tell me too much, but one thing he did say when I started this business that always stuck with me was to stay focused on what I do and sub out all the rest."

"I think that's just about the best advice a small business could ever get," he smiles. **gm**