



Mark Stoddard assembles made-to-order guitar cables in his North Carolina custom shop.

Lava Cable's Custom Strategy

Founded by Army Major Mark Stoddard, the newest entrant in the cable market competes with a unique battle plan

Across the street from the airfield in Kandahar, Afghanistan, there was an all-night coffee shop where the U.S. soldiers who'd brought their guitars on deployment got together for jam sessions on Wednesday evenings. Major Mark Stoddard, however, brought more than his guitar: He brought everything he needed to assemble guitar cables. A 24-year Army veteran and lifelong music lover, Stoddard had managed to combine his two passions at least once before as "Best Guitarist" in a 1995 all-Army battle of the bands. In 2004 he built his first guitar cable and fell in love with the tone it brought out in his Mesa Boogie Mark IV. Only weeks after he'd brought his product to the commercial market as Lava Cable, he was deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom—so he took his assembly kit with him and made cables for the other soldiers in his spare time. Four years later, those cables are still the only Lava Cable products not technically made in the USA.

Once dubbed the "guru of guitar cables" by a dealer, Stoddard now operates a multi-brand custom cable shop out of Fayetteville, North Carolina, and ships his Lava-branded products to dealers and customers around the world. "I think I bring some unique things to the table," he says. "I offer an American-made product. I offer a product that is made to order every time. And I offer a great-sounding product, designed by someone who has physically played, han-

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dled, and experimented with the majority of the world's guitar cable designs. I've done my research. That's the difference."

The custom shop started on the smallest possible scale. On returning from Afghanistan in 2005 Stoddard began assembling his made-to-order products using Canare cable and Neutrik plugs, but market competition kept his prices and profits low. The better part of a year went by before he had the inspiration to break into multiple brands across a spectrum of price points and designs. He started contacting cable manufacturers, some of whom immediately agreed to sell him cable in bulk, while others initially turned him down but later came aboard as Stoddard's reputation in the industry began to grow. He now stocks about 85% of the world's cable designs. With brands including van den Hul, Vovox, Evidence Audio, Zaolla, Kimber Kable, Cardas Audio, and Mogami, his cables run the gamut from mid-grade to "entry-level high-end" to top-of-the-line.

"From solid-core to stranded to silver to copper to alloy-silver-copper—you name it, I've got it," says Stoddard. "By offering a huge selection of brands, I found my niche in the marketplace. The basic concept with my custom shop is, you can look at all these great cables and choose the ones that best suit your rig. I'm selling guitar cables in a way that no one's really sold them before."

Stoddard has since taken his combined observations from the world of guitar cables and applied them to his own Lava-branded products. "What I've tried to do with my own cables is mix all those different qualities into cables that work well in all situations and that are affordably priced," he says. His flagship product, the Lava Clear Connect cable, has earned a reputation for its "clear, open sound" and solder-free assembly that improves signal transfer by eliminating two-metal transitions in the signal path. "This isn't snake oil," says Stoddard. "You can plug it in and hear the difference in the nature of the circuit. I've had dealers tell me they'd compared my cable to every other cable in their store and mine, although reasonably priced, sounded better than any of the



Lava Cable's Lava Flow pedal.

others."

Stoddard has followed up the Clear Connect with his new Blue Demon mid-grade cable, along with his "Lava Flow" pedal and Lava solder-free pedal board with innovative full ground connection design. As demand has mounted—he now sells about 1,000 cables per month—he sought the manufacturing services of Michigan-based G&H Industries, which does the final assembly of his products and ships them to his dealers across the U.S., as well as to Japan, Thailand, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. "What I'm doing, as a small company, is leveraging another company's services to help me grow," Stoddard says. "If I didn't use them, given the fact that I'm still in the Army, there'd be no way that I could do it. By using them as my assembly house, I can provide a great-quality America-branded product, deliver it to dealers fresh every time, and still continue with my custom shop work."

Although his four-person custom shop staff is now stretched to the point that "there's never been a month when we had fewer than 50 orders in the queue," he still makes a point of following up every custom order with a personal email. "The most important thing I've learned in this business is that customer service is absolutely key," says Stoddard, who holds a degree in mass communications from the University of Utah. "If a customer calls, I will always try to take the time to answer their questions, regardless of what I'm doing. I've

had numerous customers go to my website and get one of the cheaper cables, but they'll be drooling over one of the more expensive ones. Three or four months later they'll remember the great customer service and come back for more."

Speaking as a guitar player, Stoddard notes that guitarists often put all their time and energy into selecting and guitar and an amp without much consideration for the cable in between. "There are some cables that are very widespread that have a very low reliability," he says. Guitarists, he recommends, should look for a low-capacitance cable (about 20-30 pF) that uses high-purity conductor metals and quality solder—or, as in the case of the Clear Connect cable, a solder-free connection that eliminates the issue altogether.

"These different design characteristics will all produce a different sound," says Stoddard. "We guitar players, by and large, are hypersensitive to the sound of our gear. So when we introduce something new into that chain, we're either going to go, 'Ooh, I like that' or 'No, I don't like that.' I have customers tell me all the time, 'Mark, my rig has never sounded this good.'"

Stoddard plans, when he retires from the Army in approximately 3-1/2 years, to take the custom shop full-time while keeping the company small. He has visions of becoming a "semi-full-line" accessories company as he adds his own guitar straps and other guitar-related accessories to his product line. By year's end, he hopes to expand his current network of 20 dealers to between 50 and 100.

"Right now I think a good part of my company growth is getting the word out to dealers," he says. "Part of the struggle I face is that there's a lot of competition out there for the cable dollar, and there are a lot of brand names that have been out there for a while, but word is creeping into the stores and I'm starting to get some brand recognition. So I know it's going to be an uphill battle, but I think I can do it."

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