

DALE KREVENS

Vice President, Tech 21 USA Inc.

By Brian Berk

Clifton, N.J.-based Tech 21 has now been an MI mainstay for 30 years. Dale Krevens has been with the company the entire time. She recalls how and why it all got started, why the company is called Tech 21 and even talks about Bernie Williams, the great MI ambassador who uses its products. Any interview with Krevens is a fun and interesting read. This is no exception.

The Music & Sound Retailer: Let's start with your career and how you've gotten to the place you are today.

Dale Krevens: Originally, I was in marketing and advertising. I met [Tech 21 founder] Andrew [Barta], and he started to tell me about this thing he invented. I said, "What is it?" I didn't get it. I said, "How could you possibly do that? It makes no sense. How could you make a small little pedal that sounds like a cranked-up Marshall?" I grew up around music. It's always been a part of my life. My brother is a guitar player, so I knew what a 100-watt amp sounded like. I hung out at band practice. I always listened to guys talking about gear. Somehow, through osmosis, I managed to retain all this information enough to understand it.

Andrew brought a "black box" to my apartment and plugged it into my stereo. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I said, "That's ridiculous. That's amazing. That's incredible. Wow, what are you going to do with it?" He said he planned to sell the technology. He went to all the large manufacturers and spent two years trying to sell it. Nobody was buying. They didn't understand it. So, I said, "Hey, the writing is on the wall. You have to do it yourself." He said, "I don't want to do it." I said, "Yes you do." He talked to a few other people and finally said, "Alright, I will give it a shot." That's how Tech 21 started. I helped by naming the SansAmp. I had a creative team at my disposal at the agency where I was working that helped design the ads, which I placed through the agency. I wrote all the copy. I wrote the owner's manual. In fact, I still write all the owner's manuals. Eventually, I left the agency to work with Andrew full time. I figured [Tech 21] would be fun for a few years. I never imagined it would go on this long. And now, here we are, 30 years later! It's crazy!



The Retailer: Where did the name Tech 21 come from?

Krevens: We were batting a few names back and forth and said it should be something tech or tech something. Andrew said, "How about Tech 21?" I said, "I like it, but what's the 21 for?" He said, "21st Century." It just worked.

We must have had a list of 300 names for the SansAmp, and none of them were working for me. I said I want 'amp' in the name, and it was important to me because that's what distinguished it from every other pedal and gave some indication what it was about. It was a brand-new thing no one ever did before. It was literally an amp in a box, but I didn't want to call it an amp in a box. I was just trying to come up with something clever [that] made sense. SansAmp popped into my head out of nowhere, 'sans' meaning without in French, but I sat on it for three days. I wanted to make sure I liked it. I told Andrew SansAmp and he said, "I like it!" There is such a good synergy in the way we work together and how we think.

The Retailer: Can you think of any bad names you had for the company or product?

Krevens: No. We used to sit in my apartment, and Andrew would pace back and forth shouting out names. I don't know what happened to the list [of names we had]. I have looked through papers, hoping one day I would find the list. But I haven't been able to find it. We did have some crazy names though. It's a stream of consciousness. You throw out names to see what sticks. You just know it when the right name hits you.

The Retailer: Can you tell us about some of the products you offer?

Krevens: The SansAmp technology is in al-

most everything we make. Our latest product is the Fly Rig series. It is doing exceptionally well. We are really happy about it. It is literally a fly rig because it has the SansAmp in it. It is not just a multi-effects unit. There are tons of those on the market. You have the amp and the necessary effects. You can just take that with you. You don't have to worry about flying, baggage check, security and all the other stuff. It's the perfect rig to travel with. We also have lots of different varieties. There is a bass version, acoustic version and three for guitar: Richie Kotzen signature RK5, Paul Landers signature PL1 and now an updated version of the original Fly Rig 5.

The Retailer: What are some of the keys to your success during this 30-year period? What will it take to keep being successful?

Krevens: Andrew has no shortage of ideas, which amazes me to this day. He still runs into my office and says, "I have an idea." I tell him, "We haven't finished the last three or four ideas you had, and you are on to the next thing." (Laughs) He never stops thinking. His brain is going 24/7. He gets really excited about these ideas. The key is doing things that are different and unique. It's an important factor. Andrew likes to do things that haven't been done before. Andrew is a visionary. He sees things that other people don't.

The other key is, the SansAmp technology is all analog. Andrew is a stickler for staying with analog. He loves it. He says it sounds better. And it really does, especially to us "older folks" who have grown up on vinyl. You can hear the difference. And you can feel the difference. Your ears are analog, and all sounds in nature are analog. And as Andrew says, it has infinite resolution, which it does. Digital just doesn't sound as warm. Analog sounds more organic and natural.

The Retailer: How well is the market doing for amplifiers, effects and pedals right now?

Krevens: The pedal market is very healthy. There are thousands and thousands of pedals out there. It is good and bad. You have to fight for visibility. Luckily, we have an established reputation. That's the most important thing you can have in business. It is such a crowded marketplace, but wow, [pedals] sell. It's crazy. In terms of rigs, people are downsizing.

That's why our Fly Rigs are doing really well. People don't want to carry around these big, heavy amps anymore. The funny thing is they are scaling down their amps, but their pedal boards are getting bigger and bigger.

I don't see this industry ever going away. The acoustic market is really big now. You have all these singer/songwriters thanks to

reality shows. Big stars inspire younger players. That's really good. I'm happy to see that. Video games might be waning a bit — I'm not sure, I was never a big video game player, nor was my daughter — but I know they were insanely popular. A lot of people used to be into "Guitar Hero." I don't know how well that is doing now. I do know there are constantly more people taking up instruments and playing and I think it will always be like that.

The Retailer: Except for "Fortnite," where a kid won \$3 million.

Krevens: Well, you can play poker and win \$3 million too. The difference is, if you play a video game and get to a point that you get really good at it, what's next? There is no next. You have nothing to show for all the time and effort you put into it. When you play an instrument, you have to keep playing it, keep practicing it and better your craft. There is an inexplicable emotion and passion you get from listening to music and from making music. There's so much personal satisfaction that you get with improvement. You can always strive to get better and better, no matter how old you are and how long you have been playing. As NAMM used to say, "Music Makes You Smarter."

The Retailer: Things have been good economically recently, but we have perhaps seen some alleged "cracks." Would that in any way affect your business?

Krevens: We are not seeing any cracks. We are very fortunate that whatever is affecting people out there is not hugely impacting us.

The Retailer: Getting back to your company, on your website, you have a large library of videos of both interviews and product demos on your site. What is the idea behind this, and has it helped both retailers to sell your products and consumers when playing them? Have you seen tangible results from it?

Krevens: I can't say there are specific tangible results. But we have a lot of views on those videos. People go to YouTube to learn everything today. YouTube is the modern day encyclopedia. People watch a lot of videos and comment on them. It's actually quite helpful to get feedback directly from the market, be it positive or negative, so we know what they're thinking. Videos are extremely important in terms of showcasing your gear, whatever you are selling. It's not just the music industry. It is true everywhere.

The Retailer: Instead of calling famous musicians who use your products artists, you call them your "Hall of Fame." How did that idea come about?

Krevens: To me, it seemed like an obvious thing to do. I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it. I thought this is the Hall of Fame, because it is the famous people who are using our products. I think it makes people pay more attention when they're considering products that are used by artists they look up to.

The Retailer: One of your Hall of Famers is Bernie Williams, perhaps the greatest ambassador MI has today.

Krevens: We adore Bernie. He is so fantastic. I don't remember how we met Bernie, but it was quite a few years ago. We just hit it off. He started using the Roto Choir and then got the Richie Kotzen signature Fly Rig. He is a sweetheart and such a great player. When you are a great player and nice, all the better. He is also such a humble guy who does a lot of charity work, including music education in schools and the NAMM Advocacy Fly-In. I could go on all day about Bernie.

The Retailer: MI retailers are clearly very important to your business model. What is your approach when making sure you have a great relationship?

Krevens: Relationships are critical to our business. Whether with a supplier, retailer, artist or distributor, it's all about the relationship. We communicate with them all the time to determine what's working and what's not working. We always ask if they need help. Also, when we sign up a new retailer, we don't make them buy \$50,000 worth of products. And we don't require them to take "slow movers" along with the package. Our buy-in is not that big, and if they want to order something we think will not sell quickly, we will say, "How about you get this instead?" We want them to be successful. We are very happy we have such long-term relationships. There are retailers we have been doing business with since day one. In fact, Sam Ash was our first music store, and we still do really well with them and have a great relationship. We want everyone to be happy. If they are not happy, how does it benefit us?

The Retailer: It is definitely too early, but can you reveal any details about what your plans might be for The NAMM Show?

Krevens: We always have new products at NAMM. We have a couple of new products we are hoping to release before NAMM. With any luck, one might even be out when this issue reaches the readers. I can say we will have a signature pedal come out with an artist at a major band we haven't worked with before, which is very exciting. That should be out before NAMM. We will have another big product, which I can't talk about. (Laughs) I can't even drop a hint. We will have a couple of other new things that will make their debuts at NAMM as well.

Andrew gets really excited about every new product. It's really fun to watch. It makes me smile every time.

