

HOUSE BRANDS/BUDGET BRANDS

The phenomenon of large production companies producing House Brand instruments dates back to the late 1800s and early 1900s. A House Brand is defined as a trademark used by distributors, wholesalers, and retailers to represent their respective company instead of the manufacturer. These brands are found (for the most part) on budget instruments, although some models are currently sought after by players and collectors on the basis of playability, tone, or relative degree of “coolness” they project.

In the 1800s, many guitar manufacturers were located in New York and Philadelphia; by the early 1900s large guitar factories were centered in Chicago. The “Big Three” that evolved out of the early 1930s were Harmony, Kay, and Valco. Valco, producer of National and Supro instruments, produced the Airline House Brand as well as bodies and resonator parts that were sold to Harmony and Kay. However, the majority of House Brand instruments found today probably originated at either Harmony or Kay. On the East Coast, Danelectro was a large builder/supplier to Sears & Roebuck under Sears’ Silvertone label (sometimes up to 85 percent of Danelectro’s output).

Prior to World War II, Harmony and Kay sold straight to wholesalers like catalog houses and large distributors. In turn, these wholesalers would send their salesmen and “reps” out on the road to generate sales – no territories, no music store chains – just straight sales. Business was fierce, and companies used their own private labels to denote “their” product. House Brands were typically used as a marketing tool for distributors, wholesalers, and/or retailers to try to eliminate consumer shopping for the best price on popular makes and models of the time. How could you shop a trademark that didn’t exist anywhere else? Tom Wheeler, in his book, *American Guitars*, quoted former Harmony president Charles A. Rubovits’ recollection that the company built fifty-seven private brands for the wholesalers – and sold over five million guitars.

An informative essay about House Brands and their place in the vintage guitar spectrum can be found in *Stellas & Stratocasters* (Vintage Guitar Books) by Willie G. Moseley, feature writer/columnist for *Vintage Guitar Magazine*. Moseley’s commentary includes a listing of thirty-eight brands and their retailers/distributors, brief anecdotes about the major American manufacturers of budget instruments (Harmony, Kay, etc.), and photos of twenty-five American-made House Brand instruments.

Since writing that article, Moseley has advised the *Blue Book of Acoustic Guitars*: “I’ve come across

a couple of other house brands in my travels; one example was a low-end, Stella-type variant with ‘Superior’ sloppily screen-printed on its headstock. It was one of those cheap, beginner’s instruments that were and still are at the nadir of American-made guitars, but so far I haven’t been able to determine anything about its brand name...not that it matters too much!”

“It’s my opinion, and I dare say the opinion of most vintage guitar enthusiasts, that a good rule of thumb concerning the collectibility of House Brands would be something along the lines of ‘If it was a budget instrument then, it’s proportionally a budget instrument now.’ Regrettably, as the interest in vintage guitars continues to grow, some individuals and/or businesses tend to assume that simply because an instrument is ‘old’ and/or ‘discontinued’ and/or ‘American-made’, that automatically makes it a ‘collector’s item’ and/or ‘valuable.’ That’s certainly not the case, especially with House Brands. It’s disheartening to walk into a pawn shop and see a Kay-made Silvertone archtop electric from the Sixties labeled as an ‘antique’ and priced at \$499, when the instrument is worth no more than \$100 in the vintage guitar market, and such incidents are apparently on the increase. And that’s unfortunate for everybody.”

The *Blue Book of Acoustic Guitars* is continuing to collect data and evaluate the collectibility and pricing on these House Brand instruments. Condition is a large factor in the pricing, as a thirty-to-forty year old guitar ordered from a catalog may have been used/abused by younger members of a household (to the detriment of the instrument). House Brand guitars may be antiques, they may be somewhat collectible, and they may be “classic pieces of Americana” (as one antique shop’s sign declared), but they should still be relatively inexpensive when compared to the rest of the vintage guitar market. We believe Mr. Moseley to be correct in his C-note assessment of this aspect of the vintage market (at average condition); other music markets that service players and students may find pricing at a slightly wider range of \$75 to \$150 depending on other factors (playability, possessing an adjustable truss rod, appearance/“coolness” factor, a solid wood top versus plywood, veneer sides, additional parts, etc.) This is the bottom line: this book should help identify the brand/original company, give a few hints as to the quality and desirability, and a price range. The rest is up to you! We will continue to survey the market for pricing trends and “hot” models – further information will be included in upcoming editions of the *Blue Book of Acoustic Guitars*.