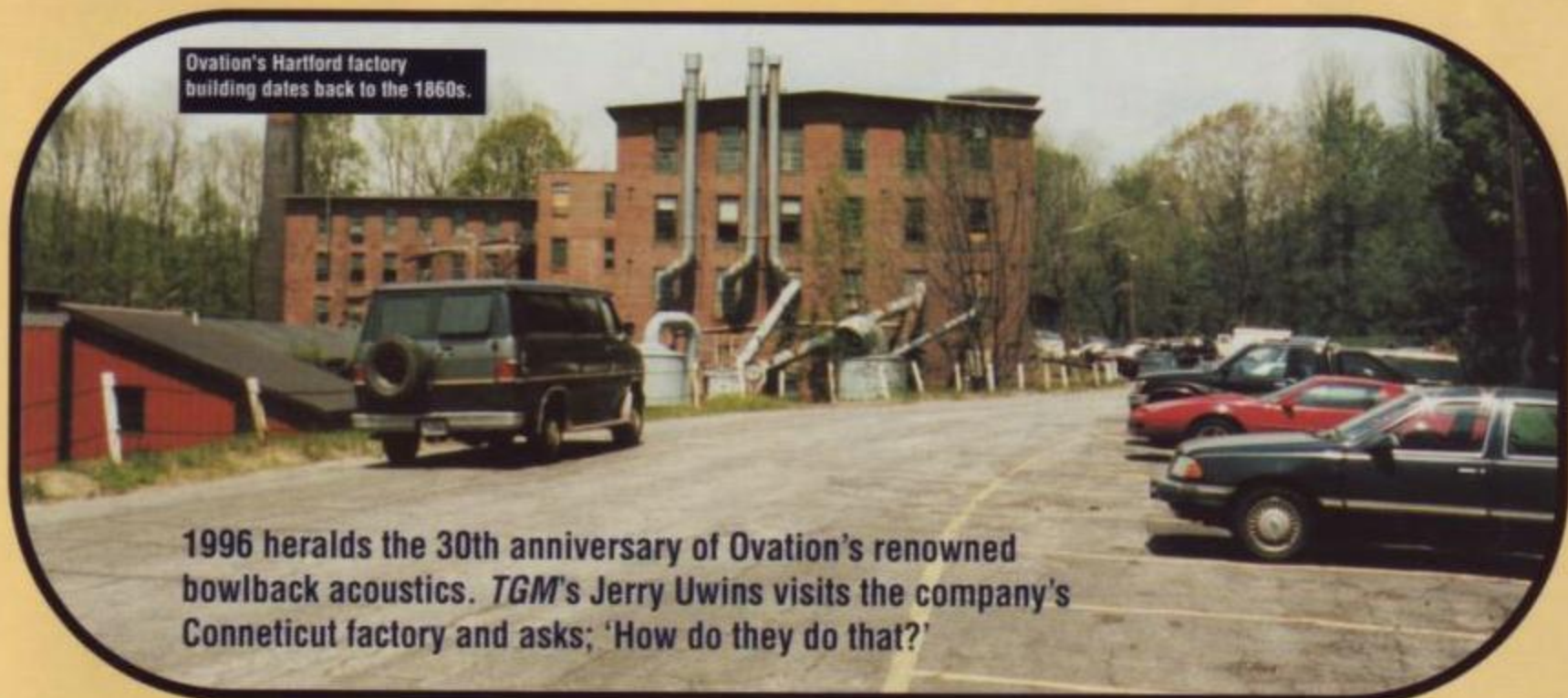


In this *TGM's Tailpieces* Jerry Uwins files a special report from Ovation's HQ while Dave Burrluck squeezes in the rest of the gear news...

# Upstanding Ovation

Ovation's Hartford factory building dates back to the 1860s.



1996 heralds the 30th anniversary of Ovation's renowned bowlback acoustics. *TGM's* Jerry Uwins visits the company's Connecticut factory and asks: 'How do they do that?'

**T**his year sees the 30th anniversary of aerospace engineer Charles Kaman – who, at 76, still heads the giant Kaman Corporation – building the first Ovation bowlback acoustic, the Balladeer. 1996 also happens to mark the appointment of John Hornby Skewes as Ovation's UK distributor (following the closure of Kaman UK) so it seemed a timely occasion to visit Connecticut to find out what's happening chez Ovation.

The inclination is to assume that a range of instruments with hi-tech connotations – particularly the composite-top Adamases – will be made in a space-age plant. Not so: Ovation's factory in New Hartford dates

from the 1860s, with a restrictive multi-storey, many-roomed layout that makes any real attempt at flow-line production virtually impossible. Factory management refer to the situation as 'organised chaos' and a move to a new, purpose-built facility within the next couple of years is planned.

The age and heritage of the building tends to be reflected in the continuation of many hand-worked processes, though computer-controlled technology is gradually being introduced to streamline production. CNC machinery was first installed a few years ago for fingerboard inlay cutting, and a further machine has been added that shapes the rough band-sawn neck blanks (with the K-bar truss rod system already

installed) to a finished profile in a three-cycle process. Accommodating four necks at a time, this takes approximately 15 minutes, replacing something like 30 time-consuming manual and copy-lathe shaping steps.

Other examples of technology aiding efficiency are air-clamping machines gradually replacing the hand taping and gluing of body bindings, and a high-frequency microwave system that cures the tops' centre glue join in roughly one minute, instead of hours under natural drying.

A stroll round any guitar factory usually reveals one or two fascinating facts, and Ovation is no exception. People tend to assume that the bowls' textured finish is part of the moulding (which, incidentally, changed in the late '70s from fibreglass mat to fibreglass-filled polyester resin). In fact this texture is spray-on paint, in two passes – large speckles first, then small speckles. R&D manager Don Johnson said they did try using textured moulds at one time, but the various sanding and scraping processes during body manufacture demanded that they had to end up spraying them anyway, for cosmetic reasons.

And did you know that the bowls' non-slip knee section – sprayed on through a stencil – is paint mixed with ground-up walnut shells? Betcha didn't.

On the subject of the bowls (produced by a specialist moulding company in Ohio),



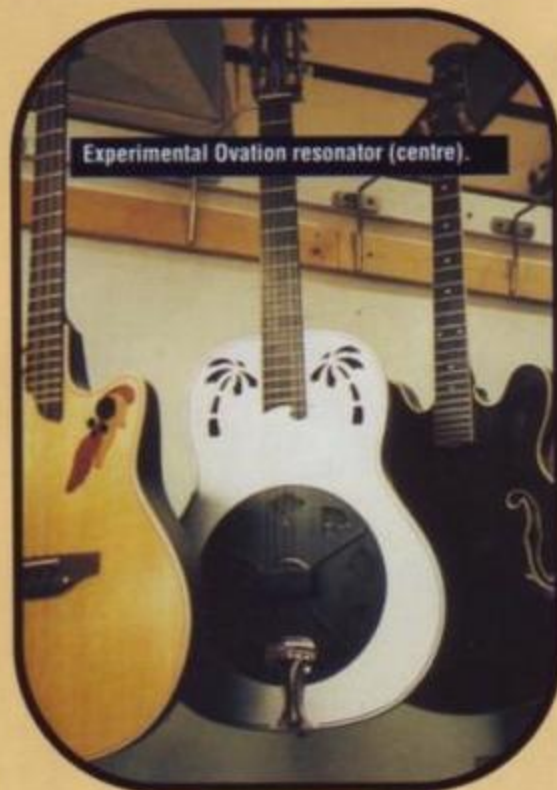
CNC machine shapes necks – from rough-sawn blanks to finished profiling in 15 minutes.

Ovation say that shallow-bowl models significantly outsell the deep variety in the States, but that their 'new' mid-depth profile – actually first used on an early '80s Glen Campbell Country Artist, and currently formed by the delightfully simple expedient of sanding down the sides of a deep bowl – is becoming increasingly popular and offered on a growing number of models.

One of these is the cutaway Folklore (£1209), debuted a couple of years ago but not hitherto available in the UK. This introduces a wider 45mm but shallow-profiled neck in a slot-headstock, steel-string format, with a heel joint that is a glued dovetail rather than Ovation's more usual K-bar bolt/glued fingerboard-top arrangement.

This kind of neck may also feature on the mid-depth '97 Collectors, which for the first time will use a compact parlour-style body which should eventually feature on some standard production models

Prototypes of these were spotted in the R&D department, and they weren't the only project instruments to catch the eye. A bowlback resonator, for example, a graphite-top mandolin – the latter a putative development of Ovation's standard bowlback mandolin which has sold well in the USA (outstripping factory forecasts eight-fold, we're told) and is now available in



Experimental Ovation resonator (centre).



Two '97 Collectors parlour prototypes. One on left has wider, shallow-section neck.

assistance – measure how tops vibrate at any given frequency. Head of research Bill Hudak said that by experimenting with top bracing and materials, the aim is to work towards 'microtuning' every guitar design to an optimally-performing sample reference. He also referred to a 'radical new way of

that's in the context of the company claiming that one-third of all American-made electro-acoustics sold in the USA are Ovations) – all now carry the upgraded Op-24+ preamp. The Applause series brings full-size '...by Ovation' bowlbacks to a new low price point with the new Summits, starting with passives at £199 and shallow and deep actives from £249.

The Summits started life a couple of years ago as the experimental Prelude, which had a synthetic glass-fibre reinforced neck and photo-finish top, but the guitars have returned to a conventional wood-cum-lyrarchord bowl construction.

The Far East may, in the not too distant future, also be the source of more affordable versions of the thinline (carved wood-back) Viper electro, which has been joined by 12-string and bass versions but which are only being made to custom order.

Calling Web surfers: you can now hit Kaman Music on the Internet. Lots of info apparently, plus plans for a live Net broadcast and 'Ovation Cyberacoustic Jam'. Call: [www.KamanMusic.com](http://www.KamanMusic.com).

Contact: JHS ☎ 0113-286-5381.

Jerry Uwins



7) Adamas composite top ready for shaping. A thin birch centre laminate flanked by epoxy-impregnated veneers of textured graphite 'tape' give a thickness one-third that of conventional all-wood tops, combining lateral flexibility with lengthways stiffness.

the UK at £999, together with a mandocello at £1599. We may also see an 8-string ukulele: a custom run was done just for Hawaii but has subsequently attracted much wider interest.

Back at corporate HQ in Bloomfield, Connecticut, it's evident that electronics and acoustic research are priorities for future development. In the former – the latest in the series of ongoing preamp upgrades and fitted to the 96 Collectors – is the stereo Hex-FX system offering string-split routing, autopan and a couple of chorusy effects settings. In the latter? Well, much of this – doubtless involving the greater use of non-wood materials – is under wraps, but what is open territory is the company's striving for the best possible consistency, volume and timbre of sound – drawing on the high-grade performance of the composite-top Adamas instruments and involving research into top vibrations.

The centrepiece of this is a vibration test rig which carries sample tops and which, through sprinkling dust on them and running them through a frequency curve, can – visually and by computer analysis and laser



A bowl getting its speckle paint finish.

attaching necks', not to mention a more affordable Adamas Series III and the top-secret-sounding Adamas Q project...

A thumbnail outline of some Ovation US activities, but what about models sourced from Korea? Well, the Celebrities (from £399) and Elite-style Celebrity Deluxes (from £469) – which between them apparently outsell US Ovations over there by three to one (and



The top-vibration test rig – helping identify that optimum sound.