George Quinlan Sr. has spent his life serving others and is the perfect example of all that is right with our industry.

– NAMM President Joe Lamond

The Quinlans:

Don Johnson Service Award Winners 2013

George Senior & Junior Create a Legacy of Players, Inspire an Industry
If you ever thought that commerce and art weren’t compatible, know that not only can they coexist peacefully, but they flourish at the intersection of Quinlan & Quinlan.

“The Quinlan team can be held up as a model for leading one of the most successful music retail businesses in our industry,” says Tabor Stamper, president of Jupiter. “They would be successful in any industry. The good news for us is that they have chosen music and music education to apply their skills.”

“George Quinlan Sr. has spent his life serving others and is the perfect example of all that is right with our industry,” says Joe Lamond, president of NAMM. “It would probably be impossible to calculate the number of young people who had the opportunity to learn music because of his efforts, but I’d imagine it would be in the tens of thousands if not more.”

“No one is better at getting kids started on an instrument than the Quinlans,” asserts Mark Ragin of St. Louis Music. “This is very important from my perspective, because many do not use the best quality instruments for rentals. The Quinlans do, so more kids stay with the instrument. I bet they have started 150,000 to 200,000 kids [playing instruments] throughout their history.”

John Musselman of American Way Marketing agrees that the Quinlans’ success is achieved through a dedication to quality instruments, in addition to their own hard work. “They aren’t just committed to the music program, but the band director and students, and that means getting them quality products and service. They have a good road crew who are very knowledgeable and experienced, too.”

“I have had the pleasure of knowing the Quinlans for over 30 years, and I find their success in life is the ability to interact with people,” says Vince McBryde, formerly of King, Selmer, Brook Mays, and Blessing. “And their employees and their customers know and respect them.”

“They are good, honest, hardworking people with heart,” says Jim Kidder of Kidder Music. “They treat their employees well, and have a strong passion for music in schools.”

“The Quinlans are the consummate professionals,” says VanderCook School of Music president Charles Menghini. “They are a constant source of support, service, and encouragement to everyone who has the pleasure to work with or know them.”

When the two music educators George Quinlan and Tom Fabish came together in 1959 to form Quinlan & Fabish, the idea was to help Chicago area schools build music programs. That they did, never straying from their core philosophy of sticking to what they know and relentlessly getting quality instruments into the hands of students, even those who couldn’t afford them, in some cases.

Fabish would be bought out in the late 1960s and son George Quinlan Jr. would be brought in officially in 1979, and the pair’s combined business acumen and success at the cash register alone would make them worthy of the 2013 Don Johnson Award. But the Quinlans have also been fierce and tireless advocates of music making, establishing new stores, programs, and even scholarships.

Today it’s a seven-store operation spread over three upper Midwestern states. They have 125 employees, serve scores of schools, and are big boosters of VanderCook College of Music. Through the years, Quinlan & Fabish has sponsored numerous workshops, clinics, and educational events for Chicago area band and orchestra directors, students, and student teachers. Artists like Doc Severinsen, the Canadian Brass, Ed Shaughnessy, and many more have been through their stores.

All this has culminated in them receiving the fifth Don Johnson Industry Service Award, which will be presented to them at the 2013 NAMM Show in Anaheim.
“It’s humbling,” Quinlan Jr. says of receiving the DJA. “I remember the first [award presentation] and Dave Teeple got it, and I thought, ‘That’s the perfect guy for it.’ Then, through the years, I watched as other very prestigious people have been honored with the Don Johnson Award, so I was shocked when Sid [Davis, publisher] called and told me we were receiving it!”

From Day One: Focus

In 1945, George Senior came home from service in the army where he, “defeated the Nazis from a base in Alabama” (as he likes to joke). With trumpet in hand, he went to work.

He would get a B.M. and then an M.M. from DePaul University (where he would meet future wife Lorraine, who also gradu-
ated with a music degree. George taught at DePaul University and St. Xavier College, instructing many who would graduate and become outstanding band directors.

“There was this one young trumpet player who announced to me that he was going to drop out of college and play in a band,” Quinlan Senior says, recalling one of his many stories. “I sat him down and said, ‘No, you have to get your degree! Then you can play all you want, but also teach.’” Lee Loughnane didn’t heed Quinlan’s “Plan B” advice, and went on to play with the seminal rock group Chicago. “About 10 years and $10 million dollars later, he came back into my store and we had a good laugh about that!”

Quinlan the elder’s history with Dr. Fabish goes back to high school, where he was a student of his. They would both end up teaching together at the Carl Fischer store. When that company decided to get out of the retail business and focus exclusively on publishing, Quinlan, Fabish, Roy Knapp, and Robert Seezman opened a retail operation in downtown Chicago called Quartet. Knapp was known as the “Dean of Percussion” who taught Gene Krupa and Louie Bellson among others, and is considered the father of the modern Trap Set. As bills came in, the other three would pass them off to Knapp who would throw up his hands and say, “What do you want me to do with these? I don’t have any money!” In related news, Quartet was short-lived.

Quinlan and Fabish would try again, and while both were teaching at DePaul and performing professionally, they opened Quinlan & Fabish in 1959. Quinlan Sr. tells of a hectic schedule in the early days: “I’d conduct high

"The Quinlan team can be held up as a model for leading one of the most successful music retail businesses in our industry."

2002
Q&F
Montgomery, Ill. store opens in far western Chicago area

2003
Q&F merges with Paxton Music-Valparaiso, Ind. (original owner John Shaffer still works at Q&F)

2009
Q&F merges with Blessing Music-Mishawaka, Ft Wayne, Stevensville MI (original owners Paul Milliman & Doug Mills still work at Q&F)

2009
50th Anniversary – seven stores serving school music programs in three states

2012
George Quinlan Sr. and George Quinlan Jr. receive Don Johnson Service Award
school rehearsals from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., then go to grade schools, then stop by the store, then teach downtown at night… I’d sneak in to see my family once in a while when I wasn’t playing trumpet for whoever was headlining in Chicago, like Nat King Cole or Frank Sinatra.”

Now if this was the typical MI story, we’d make that often-heard Beatles reference here, followed by tales of a rush to combo instruments, leading to a landslide of rock and roll success. But the Quinlans’ story isn’t typical. “We had a few guitars when the Beatles hit, but they had a clear focus, and that focus was to stay with band and orchestra instruments,” explains the younger Quinlan.

Yamaha’s Rick Young states that this is a major reason Quinlan & Fabish have been successful. “It would have been very easy for them to expand into combo, to get into selling acoustic pianos, things like that, but they never did,” Young says. “I’ve seen a lot of others do [similarly] and then lose focus, but they stayed with what they knew, which was providing quality instruments and service to their market.”

“They did the smart thing and concentrated on their band business and didn’t stray from that,” Ragin adds. “They are the specialists, the top in the country.”

As to maintaining this laser-like focus, Quinlan Jr. says, “It never seemed strange. We had plenty of room to grow in our niche, and I believe we became a stronger company because of our decision to stick with what we know.”

And while they didn’t pioneer it, Quinlan & Fabish arguably perfected the art of getting music instruments into parochial schools. Early on, Quinlan Sr. and Fabish put together a package that the schools could not turn down. “The student would get the instrument, books, and stand from September to June for $125,” Quinlan Sr. recalls. “We were organized, bringing in student teachers from DePaul.” Concerts and festivals ensued and the two former band directors were a de facto band department for the Chicago Archdiocese. For the first 20 years the company focused on that market, which hinged on getting quality teachers and quality instruments into those schools. The profit margins were questionable in the beginning and “it was a labor of love,” but in the end a lot of kids were making music.

Quinlan Sr. likes to joke that the program had band directors looking at things differently from the podium. At $5 a month per student, rather than counting off 1-2-3-4, the director would look out at the class and count “$5-$10-$15-$20 … They never wanted to lose a student because it would cost them, so retention levels were incredible!”

Through it all, the Quinlans never hesitated breaking the norm. “The other thing we did that was unusual was we had two women on the road in the late 1960s and 1970s,” George Sr. says. “We were one of the first to do that.” Simply, he spotted potential in Rosemary Kellam and Ann Szafranski and the two turned out to be excellent at their jobs. (Szafranski’s son, Alan has worked for the Quinlan since he was 10, and today is their number one rep and oversees the repair department.)

In an unusual foray off the typical industry path, George became chairman of a local bank in the 1970s. It would give him an edge that is often cited for his success today: He understood mon-

They are more than a music retailer – they develop friendships and sincerely care for everyone they work with.”
ey. In the 1980s he was an early adapter of computers, working with and even consulting on inventory software for retailers. He also learned to fly a plane, which he used for work and pleasure — sometimes both. He’d fly directors and employees around, and would shuffle instruments to schools in Peoria in the plane as well. “I would take a band director from Chicago and fly up to Wisconsin for lunch — we’d call it the $100 burger!” Quinlan Sr. laughs.

Through it all, Lorraine Quinlan was part of the operation, even when polio confined her to a wheelchair early in her adulthood. She would have five children, three post-polio. She traveled with Quinlan Sr. to every single conference, convention, and industry event. “Lorraine was a very integral part of the business,” says Jim Kidder of Kidder Music. “She raised the whole family and worked for the store while in a wheelchair, and did it well.” (Lorraine passed away in 2006, and there’s a scholarship in her name at VanderCook.)

A Chip off the Old Block

“He’s learned a lot from his father, and successfully took Quinlan & Fabish to become one of the leading music retailers in the country,” says McBryde of Quinlan Jr. “Under his leadership he has expanded from one store to seven successful locations in Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. He has given back to the music industry through his involvement in the NASMD, in which he helps school music dealers become better at serving their customers and music education.”

George the younger grew up going to the store after school, cleaning the windows, and ringing up reeds for 25 cents each. Unlike his dad, he gravitated towards the bass clef, playing trombone and electric bass. “Once I decided to go into music, I went to University of Miami in Florida and finished up with a Music Business degree,” he says. He graduated Cum Laude in 1977. From there he interned at Conn-Selmer, and moved into customer service and then marketing. “Brian Haut was my boss and I watched how he worked and thought, ‘Man, that guy has a work ethic!’” A few years later, George went to work for Vito Pascucci at Le Blanc in Kenosha, Wisc., who is another mentor he credits as being influential.

By the early 1980s Quinlan returned to the family store and went out on the road, learning the ropes as he went along. When asked when he “finally” got off the road during the interview for this feature, he lets out a big laugh and declares: “About a half hour ago!” Turns out that he was just out visiting a band director hindered by 17 slightly wayward French horns who needed to learn how to oil their bells in order to keep the instruments working well. “It’s about being pro-active,” George states. Indeed.

Today he serves as chairman of the Board of Trustees for VanderCook College of Music and is on the board of directors for NAMM. He also serves as secretary/treasurer of NASMD and previously served on the board of directors of the South Shore Brass Band. He still takes calls to sub in the popular variety band Sundance occasionally.

On advocacy, Quinlan Jr. is uncomfortable. “With music advocacy, it feels like you’re self-promoting because as a music store owner you do have a vested interest,” he states frankly. “But I know you’re doing much more than just business — you’re impacting the lives of students. We know that even those who play music as kids but don’t go on to play music professionally are still influenced by the experience. They go onto to be better students, better people, and do better in whatever career they choose.”

Quality instruments, quality service,
and a fierce support of music educators have been the Quinlan’s mantra. “What we do doesn’t matter unless a real good music education is going on,” says Quinlan Jr. “So you have to do whatever you can to help the kids, and no job is too big or too small. You want to help young teachers become better, and so you guide them in anyway you can. You get a young teacher mentored. You get them into your repair shop over the summer so they learn to do some things themselves. Whatever you can do to make the music program succeed.”

“Here’s what you don’t often see,” says Charles Staley, Fine Arts chair at Neuqua Valley High School in the suburb of Naperville, and customer of Quinlans. “They look at band directors through the filter of what we need to do our job best. They listen to what we need, and meet our needs as best they can. For the Quinlans, the bottom line is customer service. It’s not the amount of money they make on a customer, it’s how well directors are satisfied.”

Staley says when his school started their string program in 1987, there were no full service music vendors dealing in strings. “We needed someone to handle our large district, and at the time George [Jr.] didn’t have a big string department. He provided it and proved to be a premiere supplier of string needs.”

Staley says the Quinlans even stepped in to help economically disadvantaged kids who couldn’t afford the instruments. “With kids who are on the free/reduced lunch program, what can you do with them? [George Jr.] decided he’d provide instruments for them.” Staley adds that Quinlan Jr. is a member of ARTSPEAKS, an advocacy groups that brings in professionals who talk about how the arts positively affected their non-music careers. “We’ve had executives from Microsoft, Harvard Professors, [et cetera] come and talk about how their music experience transformed them, made them more competitive, and more successful.”

Cash is King

In 1991 they had a fire in the Chicago store, and George Jr. was there when it happened. A space heater was the culprit, and the fire spread quickly. Luckily everyone got out safely, but the store was destroyed. They would move to the growing suburbs. More reps were added, and the next big push was into the northwestern suburbs.

In 1996 they merged with Bandstand, a store opened 10 years earlier by Ed and Dale Ward, former Quinlan & Fabish students (Dale still works for them today). More expansions, mergers, and acquisitions followed and – yet another example of how respectfully they do business – former owners immediately went to work for them. When they acquired Paxton Music, that former proprietor, John Shaffer also joined the team as an employee.

Stories abound. Musselman tells of being invited to the Quinlan & Fabish Burr Ridge, Ill. location for the grand open-
Senior was extremely proud, but one thing we all learned that day is not to leave big metal scissors out in the sun,” he laughs, explaining that when it was time to “cut the ribbon” it was too hot to handle. Of course, being Quinlan, George was the first to make fun of himself about it.

Ragin met Quinlan Sr. when the former was a kid behind the counter at St. Ann’s School Music Service in St. Louis, and became friends with Quinlan Jr. when they were both in their mid 20s attending NASMD events. When Ragin opened up his wholesale/distributor business, it was long time Quinlan employee Marsha Orwig that gave him the idea to call it U.S. Band and Orchestra (he later acquired St. Louis Music). As recently as this past fall, Senior got in a car and drove down to St. Louis just to surprise Ragin by sticking his head in the door and saying hi. “He has quite an entourage now!” Ragin laughs.

“Number one, the Quinlans have a great staff of people,” Ragin continues. “It’s telling that when someone goes to work there, it’s their career. They have people who have been with them forever. Two, their family approach to doing business is so important and so key to their success. Then there’s [Quinlan Jr.]. Often with family business, when the second generation takes over it fails, but that is certainly not happening here.”

Ragin, astute on such matters in his own right, points out that Quinlan Senior’s fiscal sense is legendary.

Ragin was invited to the 90th birthday party this past summer, where it was announced that there would be a Quinlan Legacy Fund for VanderCook, and a rehearsal room would be named after him. But Senior had an odd twist on “his” birthday: “He gets up there and talks about how his whole life has been about ‘C.I.K. – Cash Is King,” laughs Ragin recalling the event. “And it’s true, because I can tell you he’s the best customer in the world – when he says the check will get to you on a certain day it gets to on that day! So then he walks

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With kids who are on the free/reduced lunch program, what can you do with them? He decided he’d provide instruments for them.

“With kids who are on the free/reduced lunch program, what can you do with them? He decided he’d provide instruments for them.”

around and gives everyone in the room an envelope, and inside that envelope is $90 in cash! There were about 200 of us at that party and we all got that envelope... only George!”

“They are fiscally conservative, knew when to take debt, and when to try new things, and that is absolutely the core of their success,” Young says. “Truly one of the most profitable areas of our industry is the B&O business when it’s done right, and the Quinlans do. I have the utmost respect for those guys.”

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“When I first met George Senior, the first thing I noticed was he was more financially astute than the average band director!” laughs Kidder. He says that when they go out to eat, George Sr. “enjoys a Martini or sometimes even two before a meal, and then proceeds to tell me what I should be doing to make my business better! I always point out that after a couple of vodkas, he’s suddenly my mentor and we all laugh at that!”

Young recalls a tale Quinlan Jr. likes to tell of when he went off to Washington D.C. for a Fly-In Advocacy meeting and being picked up at the airport in a limo. Riding along in the backseat, he tells that he was feeling pretty big up to the moment his wife rang his cell to inform him he had the wrong luggage, that he had taken a woman’s who had a similar bag instead. Not known is if he considered meeting industry honchos and congressional elite in drag, though he laughs and tells that return to the airport certainly brought him down a few pegs.

“They are both able to poke fun of themselves, and quick to do it,” Mussenman says. “Neither of them shy away from that, and I think it shows a confidence in your abilities, and that always rubs off on people in a good reason.”

A Legacy That Continues to Grow

Currently Quinlan Jr. is vice president of NASMD. “I got a great kick in helping planning the 50th Anniversary together,” he says. “It was a great time and a great success.” He’s also a trustee of VanderCook, and chairman of a capital campaign. Quinlan is working on the NAMM’s Music Achievement Council in addition to several other industry groups.
Both Quinlans have been NAMM Board Members.

Locally, Quinlan Jr. and wife Cindy are involved with the Juvenile Diabetest. “Our son George ‘Andrew’ III was diagnosed at 18th months, but he’s fine today and actually a percussion major at VanderCook.”

“The Quinlans are top flight, quality people,” says Musselman emphatically. “High ethics, integrity, a focus on quality service has always been the reasons for their success.” He met Quinlan Senior in 1972 when Musselman was at Selmer. “I was impressed how [Quinlan Sr.] was always very focused, and always talked straight. Junior is the same way.” Even when the latter worked with him at Selmer, Musselman noticed that he was focused like his father yet, “he put his own stamp on his career, and has his own success story to tell.”

“At VanderCook College of Music, they arranged to provide us new student line instruments for all of our wind and string techniques classes,” Menghini says. “They support many new initiatives the college offers such as 40 scholarships for a ‘new teacher weekend’ at the college where college faculty will work with first, second, and third year teachers in band, string, choral, general music and technology classes. They arrange for guest artists to visit and present master classes. All of this happens beyond giving us great service, excellent pricing on instruments and equipment for the college, and of course, free music folders.”

For Menghini, it’s about the culture of music they have created. “They have created a community of music educators and musicians who all share common beliefs and common goals that focus on bringing successful, positive musical experiences into peoples’ lives through providing quality musical instruments, supplies, repair, and support. They are more than a music retailer – they develop friendships and sincerely care for everyone they work with.”

“What really makes both of them special is their passion for music education,” Stamper says. “They both work hard to make sure that every student in their area who wants to participate in music has that opportunity. That passion feeds their business and their successful business feeds the passion. George Sr. still comes to work every day and the only way to reach George Jr. is on his mobile because he is in the schools day in and day out, working directly with band directors and students, making sure their needs are covered.”

He adds that while Senior would be excused if he wanted to slow down a bit after all he has done in his career, that’s not happening. “Instead, you will see him at every NAMM, NASMD, and Midwest, among his countless other activities connected to music retailing and education. Nothing seems to slow him down. Several years ago we invited several of our dealers to join us in China for factory tours and sight seeing. George did not miss a step. In fact, he and I climbed the Great Wall together with me having to hustle to keep up!”

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Previous Don Johnson Music Industry Service Awards

Don Johnson was a longtime editor for MMR, and one of the most beloved and respected figures in the industry. In 2008, he died after a battle with lung cancer. To honor him, the Don Johnson Service Award was created to give to those who, like Johnson, have worked to make a real impact to the music instrument community. Here are the previous honorees.

2009

Dave Teeple, Port Huron Music.
At the age of 26 he lost his store at 10 miles to a fire (he was uninsured). He went back to work and built a formidable retail operation. He developed the New Horizons program, an initiative to provide entry points to music for adults. The program went national and is supported by NAMM. “Dave goes outside the box, and tries to improve music education throughout the country,” Roger White of Whitehouse Music said. “He absolutely has made a difference.”

2010

Felice Mancini, Mr. Holland’s Opus Foundation.
After Michael Kamen founded the organization based on the movie he composed the music score for, Mancini became executive director (she’s the daughter of Henry Mancini). Some 10,000 students a year benefit from the work and advocacy of the organization. She was honored for her advocacy and gift of keeping the worthy organization vibrant after Kamen passed away in 2003.

2011

Skip Maggiora, Skip’s Music.
Since he opened his first store in Sacramento in 1973, he’s been creating music makers (and future NAMM presidents – Joe Lamond was an employee at one time). He developed the Stairway to the Stars and Weekend Warriors programs, both of which were embraced by NAMM and spread to other retailers. “Three words: boundless, endless enthusiasm,” is how George Hines of Hines Music describes Maggiora. “And it’s contagious.”
“He has been an inspiration to NAMM, our school music dealer members and the industry,” Lamond says. “I have personally worked closely with George Quinlan Jr. and can say that while he would not credit himself, acknowledging his father and the great staff at Quinlan & Fabish, he is taking the business even further, serving even more school music programs and helping expand the number of active music makers and growing the market for all.”

Young says that both Quinlans and matriarch Lorraine were, “The quintessential midwestern family who speak straight, said what they meant and meant what they said. Were they astute business people? Absolutely. Did they know the value of the dollar? Yes. But how they did business with band directors and manufacturers really helped in the long run.”

“They deserve it,” Musselman says of the Don Johnson Service Award. “The way they treat people, the way they present themselves, everything about them is first rate.”

“It’s not just a store,” Quinlan Sr. says of his career. “It’s part of who I am.”