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In stereo

Two new recordings of Wagner's opera "Tristan und Isolde," one featuring Placido Domingo, go head to head. **N5**

A quick study

Starting with a gimmicky theme — making an entire record about one US state — singer Sufjan Stevens has become one of the most acclaimed indie artists of the year. **N7**



First Act chairman Bernard Chiu in the company's Back Bay store.

His business is rocking

Guitar maker strikes a chord in mass retail

GLOBE STAFF

New guitar companies crop up roughly as frequently as world wars. There are two industry giants, Gibson and Fender, and they've dominated the market since the invention of guitar amplification in the 1930s.

Bernard Chiu, chairman of the Boston-based First Act, believes his company's name will someday be just as familiar to music enthusiasts.

First Act, founded 10 years ago in a Brookline basement, this week celebrates the grand opening of the First Act Guitar Studio with a series of concerts and autograph signings. Located on Boylston Street in the heart of the Back Bay, it's the company's only storefront. Inside the sleek space, which feels more like a gallery than a music store, the walls are lined with limited

edition stringed beauties with names like Lola and Delia and price tags in the thousands.

But the company's most notable contribution to the guitar world doesn't boast a high-grade maple top or detailed inlay, and isn't presented under museum lights. First Act's secret weapon is a line of small guitars in cardboard boxes with see-through plastic fronts. They're sold in the toy departments at Target and Wal-Mart. And they're revolutionizing the market for musical instruments.

In the past decade First Act has essentially created the musical instrument niche at the country's mass merchant retailers. In 2004 First Act grossed over \$100 million and accounted for more than 90 percent of the mar-

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Pop Music



Jay Richardson, assistant manager at the First Act Guitar Studio, tests an instrument at the company's new Boston storefront.

First Act shakes up the guitar market

► FIRST ACT
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ket share in instrument sales at such stores.

"The concept is no novelty," says Chiu, 49. "Time after time people have tried and failed. I think it's because people didn't really understand how to marry music and mass merchandising. What's unique about our company is we have people who know about moving products and people who know about music. These aren't toys. They're real instruments."

Chiu, who in the late '80s founded the Southborough-based Duracraft company, decided early on that First Act needed to ally itself with prominent musicians. People want to play what their idols play, which accounts for the enduring love affair with such iconic instruments as the Fender Stratocaster, guitar of choice for Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and countless other guitar gods.

So First Act lured two key figures away from the Gibson company. In 2002 it recruited a top luthier, Kelly Butler, to start a First Act custom shop in Boston. The following year First Act hired artist relations whiz Jimmy Archey, whose Rolodex of rock guitarists' phone numbers has helped get First Acts into the hands of Franz Ferdinand's Nick McCarthy, Rick Nielsen of Cheap Trick, Brad Whitford of Aerosmith, David Hidalgo of Los Lobos, and Nick Zinner of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

"Last fall I was talking to Jimmy and mentioned that I was going to be doing 'Saturday Night Live,' and the next day this beautiful

An open invitation

First Act Guitar Studio (745 Boylston St.) will hold several in-store events this week to celebrate its grand opening:

Wednesday: Autograph signing with Steve Pedulla of Thursday, Kurt Ballou of Converge, and Billy Brown of Crash and Burn at 2:30 p.m.

Thursday: Juliana Hatfield performs a free show at 5 p.m.

Friday: Mary Lou Lord performs a free show at noon.

handmade instrument arrived," says Jimmy Messer, Kelly Clarkson's guitarist. "I loved it and used it on the show. When we were in Boston, I stopped by the shop and Jimmy let me take another guitar, something a little more rock 'n' roll, to play at the VMAs last Sunday."

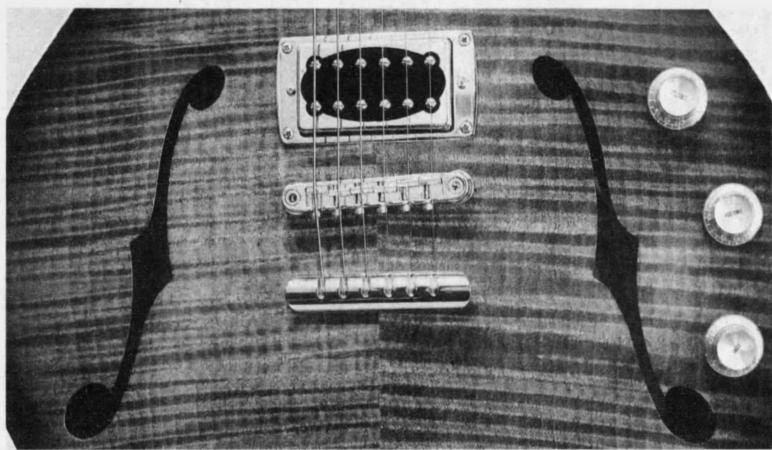
Paul Westerberg prefers his crimson ME501, purchased for \$179.98 at Wal-Mart and used nightly on the rock musician's spring tour. First Act's Butler — whose custom shop in Boston has grown from a one-man operation to a 13-person guitar-building team with a 40-artist roster and a waiting list of 20 — isn't surprised. "Be aware that that guitar, even though it's inexpensive and sold in the mass market," Butler says, "was designed by one of my luthiers here in-house."

The confluence of quality and affordability is the foundation of Chiu's business plan, but his impetus to become involved in First Act had deeper roots. As a child, Chiu, who grew up in Hong Kong, loved the guitar, but his parents couldn't afford lessons. At 13, he began working in his family's plastics shop. He never attended college and describes himself as a self-taught innovator with more than 100 patents in the United States.

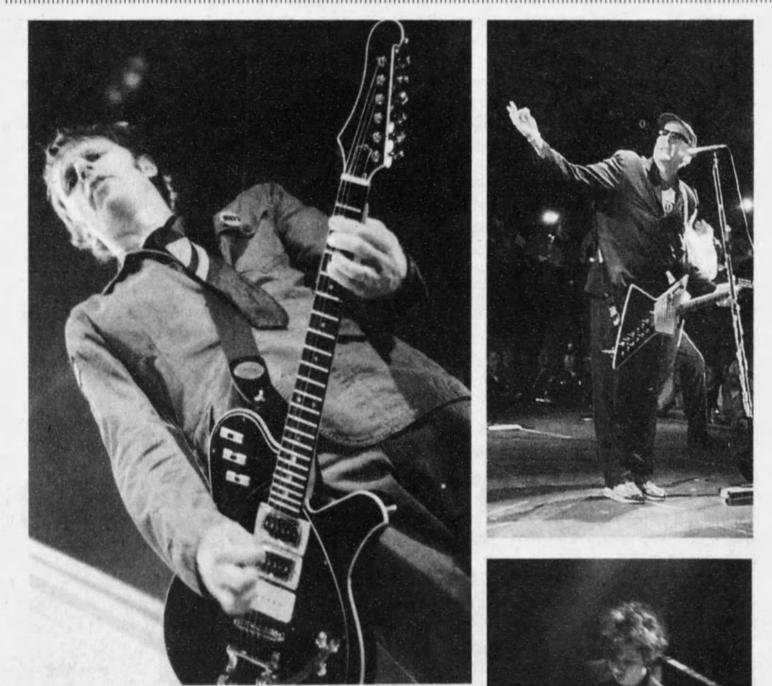
Chiu moved to Somerset, Mass., in 1982 and gave himself a business education through a series of office jobs. He married, started a family, and in 1987 founded the Duracraft company, maker of heaters, fans, humidifiers, and other appliances. The company grew quickly, the Chius moved to Wellesley, and after selling the company to Honeywell in 1996, Chiu began an early retirement: playing golf and spending time with his family. A year later he received a call from former Duracraft colleague Ronald Izen and his brother Mark.

"They wanted to talk to me about bringing musical instruments to the mass market," says Chiu, "and from a business standpoint it sounded like a good idea. People buy what they see. How many people are getting up in the morning and going to a music store? But they completely missed the point. The better idea is getting more people to play more music. I got very excited thinking about placing instruments in front of consumers every day."

With Chiu coming on as chairman, First Act moved from Izen's Brookline home into its first office in Needham in 1999, and then re-



The 10-year-old company, which last year grossed more than \$100 million, makes high-end guitars such as "Delia" (above) but has thrived with its line of inexpensive instruments.



Jimmy Messer (above), Rick Nielsen (above right), and Nick Zinner are part of the company's client list.

The backing band

Custom-made First Act guitars are turning up in the hands of a growing number of artists:

- Brad Whitford of Aerosmith
- Rick Nielsen of Cheap Trick
- Nick McCarthy of Franz Ferdinand
- Craig Finn of the Hold Steady
- Dante DeCaro of Hot Hot Heat
- Jimmy Messer of Kelly Clarkson's band
- Margaret Garrett of Mr. Airplane Man
- Aaron North of Nine Inch Nails
- Perry Bamonte of the Cure
- Ryan Sinn of the Distillers
- Maya Ford of the Donnas
- Nick Zinner of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs

located to a larger space in Newton with room for the luthier's workshop, a product showroom, and a growing staff that now numbers 80 in Boston. The company (as well as Chiu and his wife) moved to the Back Bay this spring.

First Act's initial product, which arrived in stores in 1997, was a line of children's instruments called First Act Discovery. Priced from \$4.99 to \$99.99, Discovery included not just guitars but drums, other percussion instruments, and a junior piano. The biggest challenge, Chiu says, was persuading merchants to take a chance on them.

"All the retailers knew was that it didn't sell in the past," he says.

"We had to convince them that ours would sell despite the history. What I did was instead of trying to sell to the traditional departments, I put them in the toy department. Toy buyers are more creative. If I had tried to put them next to the VCRs, I don't think it would have worked."

Sales took off immediately. First Act Discovery grossed a million dollars its first year, and the next year it introduced an adult line of guitars, simply called First Act, which is sold in mass merchant electronics departments. The adult instruments, which sell for between \$59.99 and \$199.99, now account for 60 percent of First Act's annual revenues.

First Act's success hasn't gone unnoticed. Other low-priced instruments are starting to appear on the shelves of Wal-Mart and Target, and Chiu says he welcomes the competition.

"When you see people jumping in, that means you're doing something real good. We now have some other people who want a piece of the pie. But I still think we have expertise and integrity that the others don't. When you put a guitar in Target or Wal-Mart, there's no salesman to pitch it to the consumer. So the instrument has to sell itself."

With a little help, perhaps, from Aerosmith and Cheap Trick.