

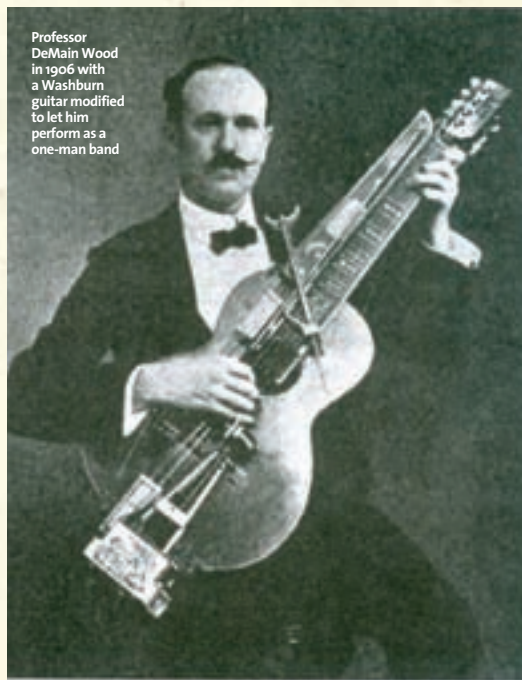
BURNING

MORE THAN

125 YEARS

OLD AND STILL ON TOP
OF THE LATEST TRENDS,
WASHBURN GUITARS
CONTINUES TO FIRE
UP PLAYERS WITH ITS
INNOVATIVE INSTRUMENTS.
GUITAR WORLD
CELEBRATES THE HISTORY
OF AN AMERICAN LEGEND.

BY ALAN DI PERNA

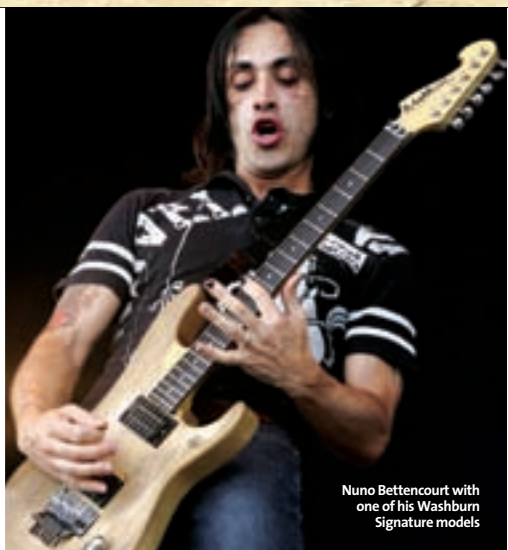


Professor
DeMain Wood
in 1906 with
a Washburn
guitar modified
to let him
perform as a
one-man band

FOR YOU



Dan Donegan with his Washburn Maya Series DD 91 electric



Nuno Bettencourt with one of his Washburn Signature models



Paul Stanley and his PS 2000 Washburn with Cracked Mirror finish



The Salt Lake City Spanish Guitar and Mandolin Club circa 1900, with 40 Washburn Instruments



Scott Ian with his signature WV 540VAS1 with Blood Red finish



Dimebag Darrell, one of Washburn's best-known players

YOU'VE SEEN THEIR GUITARS in the hands of rock and metal guitar heroes like Dimebag Darrell, Dan Donegan, Joe Trohman, Scott Ian, Nuno Bettencourt and Ace Frehley. So under the circumstances, you'd be forgiven if you thought Washburn was, relatively speaking, a recent entrant to the world of the guitar.

But in fact, Washburn is the second-oldest guitar company in America, having been established some 125 years ago, well before most of the today's leading guitar makers were around. The company's success over the decades was due to many factors, but its status as a preeminent maker of guitar and metal guitars is certainly due to the vision of one man: Washburn chief Rudy Schlacher.

When Schlacher took charge of Washburn in 1977, he built upon its venerable reputation by introducing models that attracted modern guitarists and helped the company become a force in the electric guitar market. In the years since, Washburn guitars have found favor with a number of top guitarists in the rock and metal genres, including Paul Stanley, Mudvayne's Gregg Tribbett, Fall Out Boy's Joe Trohman and the aforementioned guitar legends.

Today, Washburn's range encompasses everything from acoustic guitars, mandolins and banjos to traditional and ultramodern electric guitars, and the company has made its mark in virtually every area of guitar making. For instance, Washburn has played a leading role in developing electrified acoustic guitars and basses that sound like real acoustics even when cranked up loud. Diversification has been one of Schlacher's key strategies.

"We've never had one single model that sells really strong, like a Stratocaster or Les Paul," Schlacher says. "Fender sells thousands of Stratocasters and Gibson sells thousands of Les Pauls. But in order for me to sell thousands I need to have 10 different models, so we were always forced to have a lot of different instruments. But on the positive

side, that has given us more flexibility to be creative. We have the freedom to do some not-so-standard things, so we can get a little bit wilder.”

IN DAYS OF OLD

IN THIS REGARD, Washburn’s recent history reflects the company’s origins. Washburn was founded in 1883 as the house brand of music retail giant Lyon & Healy. As such, Washburn pretty much started out big, with a full line of stringed instruments to offer the public. Says Schlacher, “Martin is the only company older than Washburn. But in the late 1880s, Martin was a small builder, whereas Washburn produced hundreds of thousands of instruments.”

The Lyon & Healy music store was established in Chicago in 1864 by George Washburn Lyon and Joseph Patrick Healy, both of whom came from music retail backgrounds. Healy was the young go-getter, and Lyon was the more experienced partner and hands-on musician, being proficient on a number of string and brass instruments.

The American Civil War had recently ended, and Chicago, still a young city, was growing fast in the rush of post-war prosperity. Then as now, the city was an important hub—the “gateway to the West”—thanks in part to its location, on the southern tip of Lake Michigan. Just as thousand of daily airline flights pass through Chicago in the 21st century, the city was a vital connection for railway and shipping lines in the 19th century. And like many port cities, Chicago became an important musical center. The city played a vital role in the development of American jazz, blues and other genres.

Given these favorable conditions, Lyon & Healy grew quickly. As the retail business flourished, George Lyon and Patrick Healy decided to go into the musical instrument manufacturing and wholesale business. A factory, the first in a series of many, was erected at Michigan Avenue and Wabash Street in Chicago. Around 1883, Lyon & Healy began to produce a line of high-quality guitars, mandolins and zithers that bore George Lyon’s middle name, Washburn. It is thought that Lyon himself had a role in designing the earliest Washburn instruments.

In the late 19th century, guitars were still principally strung with catgut strings, a precursor of today’s nylon strings made from the intestines of sheep, goats or other farm animals. Steel-string guitars were starting to make their appearance but hadn’t yet come into prominence. Guitar body sizes also tended to be smaller than what we’re accustomed to—dreadnoughts and jumbos were still a little

way down the road. Mandolins and banjos were equally popular, if not more so, although the guitar did have an important role both as a solo instrument and in the string bands, guitar and mandolin orchestras of the day.

Washburn guitars began at \$2 and ran into the \$100 range. The top-of-the-line instruments, such as the model number 308 of 1889, were elaborately inlaid, stunningly beautiful instruments. The 308 is recalled as the most ornate guitar on the market in its day, with intricate pearl inlay work running along the outer body contours, rosette, fretboard and headstock, and down the center of the back. But even that looks plain next to 1892’s Style 9 (\$155 in the grand concert size) with delicate pearl inlay work and marquetry (wood inlays) in multiple colors. Even more ambitiously bedizened were Washburn’s presentation guitars, the forerunner of today’s custom shop models. The inlay work on all of these 19th century Washburns was very much in the neoclassical/beaux arts style of the period, with plenty of floral motifs and Grecian lyres, but executed with a distinctly American exuberance and panache. The basic body, top, neck woods and overall craftsmanship were all top quality. Today these instruments fetch figures in the

\$40,000 range on the vintage market.

In the late 19th century, Washburn’s in-house advertising department pioneered many of

the standard guitar marketing techniques that are still in place throughout the musical instrument industry, including the use of illustrated catalogs and endorsements. The endorsees tended to be music teachers and performers from the vaudeville and classical worlds, but the basic concept was the same as today.

As the 20th century dawned, Washburn’s place at the top of the guitar market was secure. The company had the manufacturing power, the marketing clout and a well-tuned retail machine, and its ornate guitars continued to captivate the public.

Introduced in 1912, the model number 3150 boasted an all-pearl fingerboard, nut, saddle, tuning pegs and bridge pins, plus extensive inlay and marquetry. It sold for \$237.50, nearly twice the \$120 one would have paid then for Martin’s 000-45. The company also began to experiment with innovative designs. Lyon & Healy’s Lakeside Jumbo Size steel-string is regarded by some guitar historians as the world’s first dreadnought.

Viewed today, some of the company’s design ideas seem bizarre, others prescient. The Washburn model 804 lyre guitar had upper-body bouts that extended all the way up to the headstock. The company also produced some early doubleneck models under

the American Conservatory sub-brand. A somewhat grotesquely large-bodied “Monster Bass” guitar was manufactured as well. There was no shortage of innovative ideas,



A Lyon & Healy truck and workers in the early 20th century



A late-19th century top-of-the-line model 308 acoustic



a tradition that continues in the Washburn guitars of our own time.

DECLINING FORTUNES: BETWEEN TWO WARS

THE HORRIFIC CARNAGE and bitter struggles of the First World War (1914–18) put an end to turn-of-the-century gaiety and innocence. The war years also marked the end of ornately inlaid Washburn guitars.

However, the company did continue to experiment with innovative body shapes. The mid Twenties saw the introduction of the pear-shaped Washburn tenor guitar. The four-stringed instrument represented an effort on Washburn's part to get in on the craze for tenor banjo in the dance bands and jazz bands of the Roaring Twenties. The instrument was tuned like a four-string banjo and may have played a role in the guitar's eventual ascendancy over the banjo and dance band rhythm sections.

The Twenties were also the era of Washburn's bell-shaped guitars, still distinctively eye-catching today, and the somewhat balalaika-shaped Shrine guitar, tenor guitar and ukulele. But by the end of the decade, Washburn's parent company, had shifted its emphasis. Both Lyon and Healy were long gone: George Lyon had left the firm back in 1889 and died in 1894. The younger Patrick Healy at least lived to see in the new century, passing away in 1905.

By 1928, Lyon & Healy's management, now headed by Raymond E. Durham, had decided it wanted out of the manufacturing and wholesale business. The Washburn factory was sold off to the J.R. Stewart Company of Chicago, and the L&H wholesale operation went to another Chicago firm, the Tonk Brothers. By 1930, however, J.R. Stewart went bankrupt in the Great Depression. The Tonk Brothers acquired the Stewart manufacturing facility at auction for a very low price.

Lyon & Healy continued to flourish and is still around today as a leading manufacturer of harps. Unfortunately, the Washburn brand didn't do as well under the Tonk Brothers as it had under its former owners. The new management began to subcontract some of the manufacturing, to the detriment of quality. Washburn guitars slipped into the mid-priced market during the Thirties and were eclipsed by Gibson, Epiphone, Gretsch, Vega, National and other brands. Another problem was that Washburn was slow to get into the archtop, jazz guitar-style guitars that came into vogue during the Thirties. As a result, the brand was pretty much extinct by the end of World War II in 1945.

"Washburn guitars were out of production in the Fifties and

Sixties," says Jody Dankberg, Washburn's director of marketing and artist relations. "Rudy and I always joke that that's how we never got Elvis Presley or Jimi Hendrix. We missed it."

But the world hadn't seen the last of Washburn.

A SEVENTIES REVIVAL

THE MAN WHO brought Washburn back into the land of the living was Thomas L. Beckmen. In 1974, Beckmen acquired the rights to the Washburn name and added the brand to the products distributed by his Los Angeles-based company, Beckmen Musical Instruments, which also handled Boosey & Hawkes woodwinds and Camco drums. Under the Washburn name, Beckmen began to import a line of guitars, mandolins and banjos manufactured in Japan by the Tarada company for sale in the U.S.

These imports were just a small part of the massive Japanese guitar explosion taking place at the time. The Seventies were a relatively grim period for American-made guitars. Corporate takeovers of many major U.S. guitar companies had taken their toll on quality. Meanwhile, Japanese firms like Yamaha and Ibanez were acquiring a reputation for turning out high-quality guitars at

a very attractive price. Word on the street was that copies of iconic American electric guitars made by lesser Japanese firms like Tokai were actually better than their American counterparts.

Beckmen might have held onto the Washburn brand had he not become increasingly involved with Roland. By 1977, the Japanese company had become a major contender not only in the synth and drum machine market but also in the effect market, via its Boss stomp boxes and Roland Jazz Chorus Series guitar amps. As head of Roland Corp. U.S., the Japanese giant's American wing, Beckmen would become one of the most powerful men in the musical instrument industry during the Eighties.

But in order to do that, he had to divest himself of his other brands and devote himself full-time to Roland. So Beckmen sold the

Washburn brand to a small Chicago company named Fretted Industries, owned by Rudolf Schlacher and his partner at the time, Rick Johnstone. Says Schlacher, "The reason I bought Washburn from Tom is that the Washburn name had a certain cachet, especially in Chicago. There were still a lot of old Washburns floating around the marketplace. And rather than starting with a brand called 'Joe Kadiddlehop,' so to speak, we started with a brand that had a certain amount of history."

Schlacher had just the right qualifications to take charge of the Washburn brand. He's a *bona fide* guitar guy, with years of European training in both guitar and violin making. But he has also always exhibited a shrewd instinct for translating his guitar knowledge into marketable concepts and products. Fretted Industries' big pre-Washburn product had been Nashville Straights, a set of guitar strings packaged in a long, thin, hermetically sealed box. The strings were not coiled up in

little envelopes, as most guitar strings are, and ads for Nashville Straights claimed that this kind of packaging improved the tonality of the string. True? Well, the strings were well reviewed at the time. The underlying concept seemed sound enough. Players felt that they were getting an extra edge by purchasing the strings, and improved confidence often does yield better tone and technique. Schlacher would soon apply the same kind of marketing savvy to Washburn.

With the purchase of Washburn, Schlacher got not only a brand but also a very valuable introduction to the Japanese manufacturing industry by none other than Roland's founder Ikutaro Kakehashi, who had been involved in Japan's music electronics business since the Sixties. "Tom Beckmen sold Washburn because he had to make a commitment to Kakehashi to get involved in the Roland brand,"

Schlacher explains. "So he had to dispose of his other brands. And then Mr. Kakehashi was the guy who took me personally to every factory in Japan that was worth anything. I spent two weeks in Japan with him, traveling in trains, buses and everything else, visiting the factories. Those were the early days of Roland, so I guess Mr. Kakehashi still had time to take me around and introduce me to all the factories there. I have a certain knowledge of instrument building, so I selected the factories I thought were the most capable."

And so Schlacher began designing instruments that were then manufactured in Japan. The instruments were of significantly higher quality than what Beckmen had been importing and releasing under the Washburn name. Acknowledging Washburn's early history, Schlacher designed and released a full line of stringed instruments—classical guitars,



A page from an early Washburn catalog



Wing Series Eagle

banjos, mandolins and, of course, electric guitars.

The first Washburn electric under the brand's new ownership was the Wing Series, bearing individual model names such as the Falcon, the Eagle and so on. The design was very typical of Japanese guitar making at the time: a symmetrical, double-cutaway solidbody with dual humbuckers and a racing stripe up the middle. Schlacher designed the distinctive V-shaped headstock that became a Washburn signature. He also brought back the original Washburn logo: the name "George Washburn" encircled by an oval belt. The Wing Series Eagle found favor with Heart guitarist Ann Wilson in 1980, but Washburn still hadn't quite found its own unique identity in the guitar market, and Schlacher knew it.

"When I started, I was faced with a simple fact," he says. "There was Gibson, Fender, Martin, and I clearly knew, Nobody needs me. So how do I come up with that fourth instrument that the player needs? I had to be creative and come up with an instrument that people would buy."

He did just that in 1980 with the Festival Series electrified acoustic guitars. Amplifying acoustics had been a major problem throughout the Sixties and Seventies. Big, boomy, acoustic guitar bodies made for horrendous amounts of unwanted feedback, especially when an acoustic guitarist was performing in an ensemble with a drum kit, bass guitar and other amplified instruments. Pickup and amplification systems for acoustic guitars were still in their infancy, but Schlacher found a solution.

"Barcus Berry was the only guy who had a piezo kind of [acoustic guitar pickup] system, but it was very crude and not very usable. So I was forced to brace those instruments to the point where they didn't really vibrate very much. They were fairly stiff, so they didn't sound great as an acoustic instrument, but they sounded very good electronically, and they didn't feed back. So you could stand in front of a Marshall stack and actually use a guitar that looked like an acoustic onstage. That wasn't possible before."

Festival Series electro-acoustics were embraced by a lot of

legendary musicians including Bob Dylan, Gregg Allman and Jimmy Page. The Festival instruments helped forge a readily recognizable visual identity for the company, too, with their pointy Florentine cutaways and oval sound holes. And when Page appeared on a 1986 cover of *Guitar World* holding his B-bender Tele and a Washburn dreadnought, it served as an informal confirmation that, for the first time since the early 20th century, Washburn was once again up there with the big boys.

Electro-acoustic instruments would remain an important part of the Washburn line. The company also released the successful Mirage Series, with two-inch-thick solid bodies that nonetheless have the look and amplified sound of an acoustic. A related instrument category that Washburn pioneered was hollowbody acoustic bass guitars, many tricked out with the company's ultra-flashy "sound chambers"—a series of slashing diagonal slats in place of a conventional sound hole.

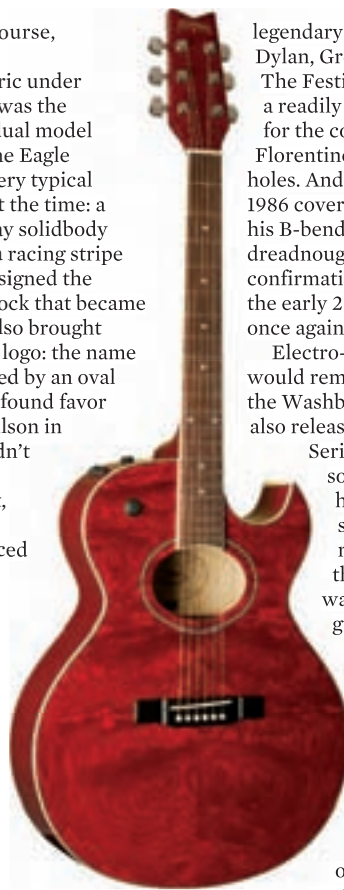
Washburn grew steadily throughout the Eighties, and in 1987 Schlacher bought out his original Fretted Industries partner, Rick Johnstone, and changed the name of the company to Washburn International. "As we went along we added different

brands, including Sound Tech, which was a P.A. company," Schlacher explains. "The name Fretted Industries had become limiting. The word 'fretted' didn't mix very well with the electronic side of things."

In time, Washburn began to manufacture in Korea as well as Japan, and in 1991, the company opened a U.S. manufacturing facility. Schlacher says, "We wanted to create a more high-end image as well as be able to service the artist community that we had at that time. And it has worked reasonably

well. As we went along, the American manufacturing operation never became too big, but we produced reasonably good guitars that are still around. And if you look at what we do now, we are quite proud that we have reached a level of sophistication that is quite amazing."

In 1993, Washburn hired celebrity metal luthier Grover



EA17TRK; (below) Page on a 1986 cover of *Guitar World* with a Washburn dreadnought





Azo

Dime 333DS

HM2oV

Jackson to run the U.S. factory and design guitars for Washburn. Jackson's earlier designs for Charvel and later his own company, Jackson Guitars, had created the template for pointy, Floyd Rose-equipped Eighties shred guitars. He brought some of the same flair to the Washburn Mercury Series guitar and Bantam Series basses, although he stayed with Washburn for only a few years.

Actually, Washburn had begun to court the metal market long before Jackson's tenure with the company. Early metal endorsees and signature artists included Rudy Sarzo and Ace Frehley. But the metal player who has practically become Washburn's Les Paul is Extreme guitarist Nuno Bettencourt. The Portuguese-born player signed up with Washburn shortly after the release of Extreme's debut album, in 1989, and he's been with the company ever since, releasing a string of coveted signature models. With their reverse headstocks and natural or stained bodies, the N Series guitars have



Dimebag Darrell with his Dimeslime Washburn, in 1998

become instantly recognizable.

The Nuno guitars play very smoothly, thanks to the Stephen's Extended Cutaway neck joint, which allows for a low-profile heel that, in turn, allows easy access to the upper frets. "The neck is held in place by approximately six screws that fan out in a radius," Schlacher explains. "So the neck cannot move sideways. Stephen Davis is a Seattle guitar designer who had this concept for a different kind of neck connection that is actually stronger. We experimented with the thing, and then Nuno came

along. He happened to see that, and he liked it. Nuno is one of the reasons why we've kept doing it all these years."

Washburn has never been hesitant to partner up with outside guitar designers and bring their innovations onboard. Another feature that now comes standard on most

Washburns is the Buzz Feiten Tuning System. Feiten, a session guitar ace who has played with Bob Dylan, Stevie Wonder and Randy



Newman, among others, created a system that vastly improves intonation by means of a shelved nut that varies the distance of each individual string from the first fret in accordance with the string's thickness.

Dankberg says, "It's hard to understand what it is at first, but the difference is like day and night. I get a lot of calls from artists I work with saying, 'Man, the Buzz Feiten, it really works!' These are people you trust, the guys who are recording and playing out."

Washburn acquired Randall amps in the mid Nineties. It was the start of a series of acquisitions that would lead to another name change. These days, Washburn, Randall and a variety of other brands are now subsidiaries of U.S. Music Corporation. The Randall

connection brought Washburn a number of important signature artists, including Dimebag, Ian and, more recently Donegan. Current signature artists also include Gregg Tribbett and Joe Trohman.

Dankberg says, "When Joe hooked up with Washburn, Fall Out Boy wasn't a famous band or anything. They were just a punk band from Chicago. He started playing some of the Washburn Idol Series guitars. A couple of years went by. Fall Out Boy had a hit record and suddenly they're all over the television. We decided, Hey, we should definitely do a Joe Trohman signature model."

One of the founding partners of Krank Amplification, Dankberg joined the Washburn fold in 2007. He has concentrated on hooking



Washburn into the contemporary metal scene, recruiting players like James Malone of the death metal band Arsis as signature artists. One of Dankberg's first projects for Washburn was the new HM (heavy metal) Series of guitars: fully tweaked metal machines with original Floyd Rose systems and ultra-fast fingerboards derived from Parker Guitars, another brand now under the U.S. Music umbrella.

"They have carbon-fiber fretboards with stainless-steel frets," Dankberg explains. "We were thinking, How can we incorporate that into a more traditional electric guitar that doesn't weigh only five pounds and have an abstract shape like the Parker Fly? So we thought we'd combine that neck with some heavy metal body shapes: super-Strat styles, Flying Vs, pointy reverse headstocks. What better neck to put on there than this technology that makes you play faster, feels great and has a sleek look to it? It was really a good match."

But while Washburn continues to pursue the outer fringes of extreme metal,

the company has never forgotten its roots. Last year, Washburn produced the impressive Vintage Series, comprising exact reproductions of 19th century Washburns and loving tributes that bring together some of the best features of the old guitars. Carefully antiqued to look like they've been around for over a century, the Vintage Series guitars, mandolins and banjos are quickly becoming collector's items in their own right.

At the other end of the acoustic spectrum is the recently introduced Baby Jumbo Series. Dramatically narrow-waisted and more compact than conventional dreads or jumbos, the Baby Jumbos look like acoustic guitars that got caught in some bizarre sci-fi transporter beam and came out a little warped.

Dankberg says, "There are a lot of smaller people out there, and let's face it, a jumbo is made for a big guy. But a lot of people love the big, booming, jumbo acoustic sound. So how to get that without having a giant guitar? What Rudy was able to come up with is a baby jumbo. It has a slightly smaller neck, ideal for a woman or a child's hand. The body has the same amount of square inches as a regular jumbo, but the design kind of *squooshes* the body. In the acoustic guitar market, everybody makes a dreadnought or a jumbo. How do you separate yourself? This guitar looks really different and is immediately identifiable."

The new product lines and design ideas keep on coming. With a broad range of



A new Vintage Series R314K

Washburn's recently introduced WB400 Baby Jumbo

instruments and markets that span the globe, Washburn is a company that fine-tunes its identity continuously, moving with the changing times and finding just the right balance of tradition and innovation, electric and acoustic, craftsmanship and accessibility.

Dankberg says, "What people don't always understand is that we have an amazing custom shop here in Chicago. We build state-of-the-art guitars for multi-Platinum artists. Yet our specialty is also importing quality guitars from overseas, so that you get your best value for the money. I think that message has been lost over the years. What I'm trying to do is bring the brand to the younger players—make Washburn more of a pop-culture brand." ✨