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CHICAGO READER

CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY | THIS ISSUE IN FOUR SECTIONS
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End Game



Gary Stern at his factory in Melrose Park



Gary Stern is the only guy in the world still making pinball machines.

By Seth Porges | Photographs by Marty Perez

Taped to the door of a small room next to the factory floor at Stern Pinball is a memo telling employees they have to sign up to play the company's latest game and test it for bugs. "If you don't sign up," it says, "you obviously don't want to work at a pinball factory."

Gary Stern, owner of the company and author of the memo, is inside playing *Elvis*. The room is dark, and only the flashing lights of the game's playing field illuminate his face. Asked a question, he says, "Shhhh. This is serious business." When he makes a good shot, a plastic figurine of the King shakes its hips, and the machine plays the hook from "All Shook Up." He laughs.

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Pinball

continued from page 1

Stern, whose father was a partner in the world's biggest pinball manufacturer, Williams Electronics, has loved the game since he was a little kid. "It's an American icon—part of the fabric of life," he says. "It's not a video game that every action has a programmed reaction."

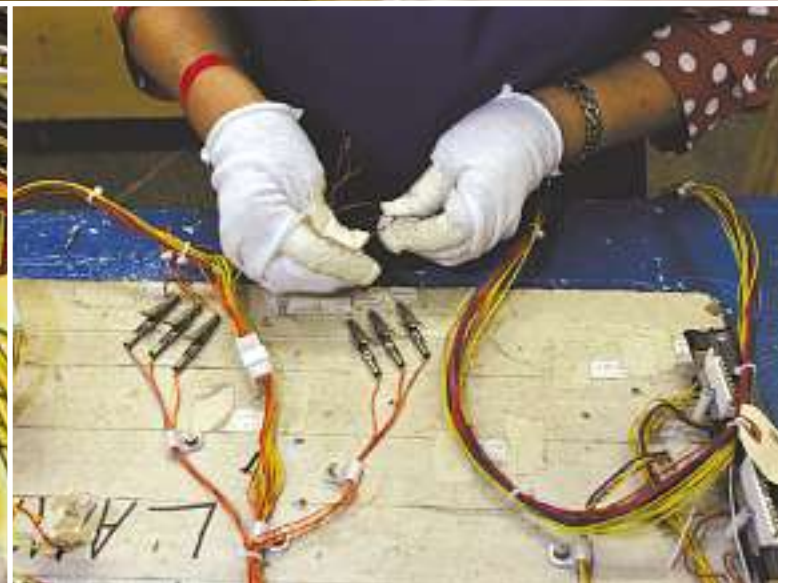
His 40,000-square-foot factory, at 2020 Janice in Melrose Park, about three miles west of Chicago, has around 65 full-time employees making some 10,000 machines a year. At the moment they're the only people in the world making pinball machines, and Stern insists that's the way it's going to stay. "If we ever quit," he says, "that will be the end of pinball."

Pinball has its roots in games such as the 19th-century French bagatelle, in which players used sticks to push balls into numbered holes on a table. But Chicago has always been the center of the modern game. In the early 1920s the city became the base for the coin-operated machine industry, manufacturing peep-show and gambling machines, and in 1929 some unknown Chicagoan invented a coin-operated pinball machine. In 1932, as the country was sinking into the Depression, another Chicagoan, Raymond Maloney, designed the first pinball machine that could be mass-produced. The game was called Ballyhoo, and according to Michael Colmer's *Pinball: An Illustrated History*, more than 50,000 of the machines were sold across the country within seven months.

The success of Ballyhoo led to an explosion of manufacturers looking to cash in on the craze—some 150 companies, most of them in Chicago, were soon turning out the games. Some of them became legends—Bally, Chicago Coin, D. Gottlieb & Company—but most were small shops. As the Depression got worse, the small manufacturers went under, and by 1934 only 14 manufacturers were left. Many of the remaining factories were in the area between Diversey and Belmont, Western and Elston.

Stern's father, Sam, got into the business in the early 30s in Philadelphia, setting up games in bars and restaurants and taking a portion of the earnings. "In those days," says Stern, "pinball machines were countertop games with a bunch of nails in them."

Most of the early machines were designed just for entertainment, though some rewarded winners with cash, and gamblers routinely bet on the outcomes of others. The games were popular even though many people were desperately poor. "Inexpensive entertainment, diversions from the issues and problems of the day-to-day were most definitely in favor," says Roger Sharpe, a Chicago native and author of the history *Pinball!* "If you could be entertained and have a chance to make



The machines are assembled entirely by hand from more than 3,500 parts; Stern's Harley-Davidson game

some money, so much the better."

The American public soon saw pinball as just one more game of chance, not a harmless amusement and certainly not a game of skill. It got lumped in with gambling devices such as slot machines, which were popular with Chicago's gangsters, and so became associated with the city's seedy underbelly. "A lot of it was this Hollywood image," says Sharpe.

But the image stuck, and pinball became a target of antigambling zealots. According to Sharpe, the first antipinball law was probably enacted somewhere in the rural south in the mid- or late 30s, and bans then "spread like wildfire" through small towns.

Antipinball fever didn't take hold in big cities until World War II, even though production of the machines ground almost to a halt. Pinball manufacturers were among the country's largest makers of copper wiring, and they quickly shifted their production to the war effort, churning out wiring, parachute straps, and aircraft parts for the military. The new games that did appear

were almost all conversions: operators would bring in their old machines, and the factories would rework and repaint them to look new. Many of these refurbished games had what were seen as patriotic names: Marines, Yankee Doodle, and Smack the Japs.

Big-city politicians weren't impressed. "Pinball machines are a harmful influence because of their strong tendency to instill desire for gambling in immature young people," said New York City police commissioner Lewis Valentine. "Children and minors who play these machines and frequent the establishments where the machines are located sometimes commit petty larcenies in order to obtain funds, form bad associations and are often led into juvenile delinquency and eventually into serious crime."

"I think there's always been this attitude that where there's a lot of young people gathering, something must be desperately wrong," says Sharpe. "If they're congregating at bowling alleys, bowling is bad. If they're congregating at a penny arcade, then that's no good.

It was like that with pinball."

New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who called the pinball industry a "racket dominated by interests heavily tainted with criminality," demanded a citywide ban on pinball machines, and in late January 1942 a judge declared one. Newspaper front pages ran pictures of police and screaming crowds surrounding La Guardia as he pushed over and smashed pinball machines with a sledgehammer. The photos were strikingly similar to those of prohibition-era officials swinging axes into barrels of booze, though according to Sharpe, some of the machines La Guardia demolished were actually jukeboxes.

La Guardia's campaign attracted lots of publicity around the country, and soon mayors of other big cities—Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City—followed his lead. Even Chicago banned the games, though illegal pinball machines remained scattered around the city. But the ban was rarely enforced during the three decades it was in place, and

Sharpe remembers machines in the train station at Randolph and Michigan, in a game room in a building that stood on what's now Block 37, and in a game room on South State.

The end of the war allowed manufacturers to get back to full-scale production, and in 1947 yet another Chicagoan, Harry Mabs, invented the flipper. Players had learned to manipulate a ball by tilting and shoving the machine, but flippers required a lot more skill—one reason the game's popularity soared again. It was the beginning of a golden age that would last through the 50s.

Sam Stern, who'd been making decent money in Philadelphia from the pinball machines he was distributing, visited Chicago in 1947. He went to see Harry Williams, who'd founded his company a year earlier. Gary Stern says his father put his feet up on Williams's desk and asked if he wanted to sell his company. Gary thinks Williams was surprised. **continued on page 22**

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Pinball

continued from page 20

prised but intrigued by Sam's audacity. "They were young guys," he says. "Williams wasn't much of a company—none of these businesses were very big. I'm not sure how serious Sam was in asking to buy or if he was kidding—kidding on the square. Harry lived in California and Chicago. I guess he wanted someone else involved so he could spend more time in California." At any rate Williams soon offered to sell Sam half his company, and the Stern family moved to Chicago.

Williams was the ace designer—he would design more hit pinball games than just about anybody who ever lived, in addition to inventing the "tilt" device that ends a game if a player shoves the machine too hard. Sam Stern was the savvy businessman. They made a good team, eventually turning Williams Electronics into the world's largest pinball manufacturer.

"I entered the game business in 1945, the year I was born," says Gary Stern. "I attended as a kid many business dinners where I sat and listened and learned." His first paycheck came in 1961, when he worked a summer job in the Williams stockroom. After graduation he went off to college, majoring in accounting, then got a law degree from Northwestern University. He practiced bankruptcy law for a couple years, but in 1973 he was back working full-time at Williams with his father. "Practicing law wasn't for me," he says. "If I represented a bank it was fine. If I represented a small businessman I got a little nervous—



Roger Sharpe today (top and right), helping overturn New York's pinball ban in 1976

story. But even though business was booming, the games were still illegal in many cities, including Chicago and New York City.

There'd been attempts to repeal the bans on the game, but most

had written about the game in *GQ* and the *New York Times* and was known as a superb player, to be its star witness.

That April Sharpe walked into a Manhattan courtroom, where,



MARTY PEREZ (TODAY), COURTESY OF ROGER SHARPE (1976)

In a move he compares to Babe Ruth calling his home run in the 1932 World Series, Roger Sharpe pointed to a lane at the top of the playing field and said, "I'm going to pull the plunger back, and the ball will go there."

'cause I could mess up their life." By that time interest in pinball, which had dropped off in the early 60s, was surging again, partly in response to the 1969 release of the Who's pinball saga *Tommy* and the 1975 movie of the

had failed. In 1976 the Music and Amusement Association decided to try to persuade New York City to overturn its laws, hoping that if it did, other towns and cities would follow its lead. The MAA asked Roger Sharpe, who by then

surrounded by cameras and reporters, he stood before a committee of the city council. "I didn't expect it to be a spectacle," he says. "I feel my heart beating now just thinking about it."

He knew that one member of

the committee had sponsored a bill to overturn the ban and that the other five would be tough sells. He told them that pinball had become a game of skill, not chance, that it was an all-American art form, not gambling. Then he began to play one of the two games that had been set up in the room. In a move he compares to Babe Ruth calling his home run in the 1932 World Series, Sharpe pointed to a lane at the top of the playing field and said, "I'm going to pull the plunger back, and the ball will go there." The ball went exactly where he said it would, and the astonished committee members promptly voted to allow pinball machines back into the city. Sharpe acknowledges that it was, ironically, a lucky shot. "There was divine intervention," he says. It wasn't long before other

cities dropped their bans—that December the Chicago City Council voted to make pinball legal again. Yet Nashville didn't overturn its law until last fall, and Ocean City, New Jersey, still forbids pinball playing on Sundays.

New technology, especially microprocessors capable of producing endless flashing lights and ringing bells, was changing pinball machines. In 1976 Gary and Sam Stern decided to leave Williams Electronics and try to make it on their own. Stern says Williams "was a public company, and we didn't necessarily agree with what they were doing. It was time to go." He refuses to be more specific. The two bought Chicago Coin from a bank that had foreclosed on it and rechristened it

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Pinball

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Stern Electronics. Stern says it became the “fourth or so” biggest manufacturer, and they ran it together until Sam died in 1984.

After his father’s death, Stern shut down the company. But he immediately started working on a plan for a new pinball business and two years later sold it to a Japanese video-game company, Data East. The company set up a separate pinball division, and he became its general manager. He says he often developed machines with licensed titles connected to a well-known name, because the name widens a game’s audience beyond pinball devotees: “We say that the license gets the first quarter.” He also says, “The

licensors have to want to be in pinball. They all take some free games. We had one license where they took almost no cash and we paid them in games.” In 1990 he developed a game called *Back to the Future*, based on the movie Steven Spielberg produced. Stern tried to send Spielberg a free machine, only to find out he’d already bought one.

Sales of pinball machines peaked around 1992, when more than 100,000 were manufactured; among them was Bally’s *Addams Family* game, the best-selling machine ever. But consumers were shifting to home video and computer games, and mall arcades were closing. One after another the remaining

In 1990 Stern developed a game called *Back to the Future*, based on the movie Steven Spielberg produced. He tried to send Spielberg a free machine, only to find out he’d already bought one.

manufacturers folded. By 1996 only Williams Electronics—which had absorbed Bally and another legendary company, Midway—and Data East were left.

In 1999 Stern bought Data East’s pinball division and renamed it Stern Pinball. A few months later Williams Electronics unveiled a new game that melded video games and traditional pinball, projecting video images onto the

playing field. The company marketed it as the “future of pinball.” But the machines were expensive to produce, and it was soon clear that a hybrid wasn’t going to save pinball. Williams built only two games—*Attack From Mars* and *Star Wars: Episode I*—and that fall it decided to get out of pinball and focus on more lucrative slot machines. “I am the last man standing,” says Stern.

Stern Pinball produces only two or three new games a year, all licensed titles—the *Lord of the Rings*, the *Simpsons’ Pinball Party*, *Elvis*. NASCAR came out in July. Places such as bars and restaurants buy 45 percent of the company’s machines, and sales to nostalgic baby boomers who want pinball games in their homes account for another 20 percent. The remaining sales are overseas, mostly in western Europe, Russia, and China.

Nevertheless, Stern says, “Pinball is America. Take a look at our workforce—our factory is America.” His employees, most of them Mexican-American, put together the 3,500 parts of each machine by hand. “There’s about three and a half man-days of labor in a pinball machine, give or take,” Stern says. “That’s more man-hours than in a Ford Taurus that’s built around here, from what I’ve read.” Across the country robots have taken over this kind of work, but he insists they won’t replace people in his factory. He says pinball machines are so complex they require the attention of engineers the entire time they’re on the assembly line.

He also insists he isn’t afraid of competition from China or anyplace else, and he isn’t afraid he’ll be forced to move his company to China someday, though he admits some of his parts are already made overseas. “We’d all have to move there,” he says. “I don’t think there’s any blues bars I want to go to in China.”

Still, Stern might be aware that he sounds a little like he’s whistling in the dark. “They teach you in business school that you’re supposed to be in love with business, not in love with your business,” he says. “But we’re in love with our business.”

A tour of Stern Pinball will be offered to attendees of the 21st annual Pinball Expo, held November 17-20 at the Wyndham O’Hare in Rosemont. Admission is \$110 to \$135; more info at 1-800-323-3547 or pinballexpo.net.

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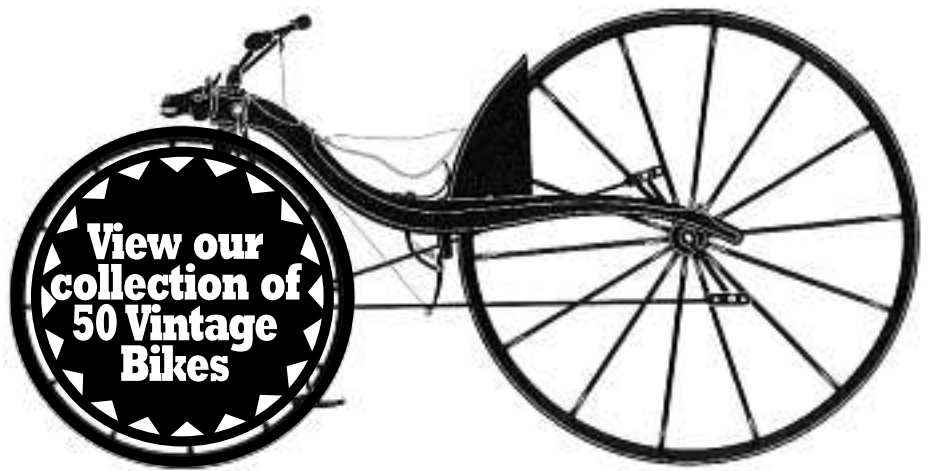
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