As Jimi Hendrix once stated, “Music is my religion.” This is a belief that many people carry with them everywhere. Many realize the enormous effect music has on the world. People believe in music. What is music, though, without a source? Music is everywhere, during every second of every day. It just doesn’t always have a connection with our ears, and therefore, our minds. This is where the corporation “Alembic” comes in. Alembic was founded with a dream to help people guide music into our world. In 1968, Ron Wickersham and Susan Frates met at Pacific Recording Studio. Here, Ron was designing the first multi-track mixing console for use with the studio’s new Ampex MM-1000 16-track recording machine. It was the second in use. At the time, the Grateful Dead was recording their new album, “AOXOMOXOA”. At the time, Ron was an Ampex design engineer, who had made the prototype for the first low-speed video tape recorder. Susan had been hired to do a painting on the studio walls to spark up the atmosphere of the place. The meeting between Ron Wickersham and Susan Frates was the beginning of something great.

In the beginning of 1969, Ron left Ampex to form Alembic and work with the Grateful Dead. The Dead were dedicated to majorly improving their live sound, and Alembic wanted to help with that. Alembic moved to Novato, where the Grateful Dead shared with them their office and rehearsal space in a building well known as “The Pink Behind Pinky’s”, which was right next door to the Hamilton Air Force Base. The office was shared by the Grateful, Alembic, and Bob Thomas, who painted the Alembic and Grateful Dead logos. Later that year, Ron developed the first Alembic electronics and pickups. These were first installed into David Crosby’s 12-string Guild guitar, and then into Phil Lesh’s SG bass, which had been painted by Bob Thomas. During the summer of ’69, Ron met Rick Turner, when invited to participate as a local music instructor. Around this time, Pacific Recording went out of the 16-track business, and Alembic acquired the MM-1000. This made Alembic turn to live recording. They also provided sound systems. Alembic was also hired to record the live soundtrack for the Altamont concert, “Gimme Shelter”. This was a very violent concert, where someone hired the Hell’s Angels as security. The PA system was partially destroyed in a bonfire, and a high man was beaten for knocking over a motorcycle. In 1970, Alembic moved to 320 Judah Street, San Francisco. Ron and Susan were the design team, John Curl was the engineer, Jim Furman was Ron’s technician, and Frank Fuller and Rick Turner were the instrument repair section. Alembic was mainly working on custom basses, and they soon became a corporation. Not long after, they were hired to do the PA and soundtrack for “Medicine Bell Caravan”. Each team had its own bus, with the bus’ name displayed on the front. Alembic’s was named “Pursuit”, with the slogan, “We have come for your daughters (and sons)” displayed on the front and back. Nebraska wasn’t a fan of Alembic, and the day after the Nebraska concert, state troopers escorted them out of town. The last USA concert featured Alice Cooper behind the Washington D.C. National Archives. Afterwards, everyone flew from New York to London, with 60 members on the plane. They landed at Heathrow Airport, and the last gig was Pink Floyd at the University of Kent in Canterbury.

In 1971, Alembic moved to 60 Brady Street in San Francisco, and they transformed the facility into a state-of-the-art 16-track recording studio. They also established a music store, where they sold guitars and basses. They sold Series I and Series II guitars and basses with PF-5 electronics as well as McIntosh amps, JBL, EV, Gauss, Shure, B&K, and custom cables. Additionally offered were PA design and consultation service, headed by Ron. Alembic had the largest physical studio in San Francisco. The walls were movable, and there was an R&R area with the video game “Pong”. The R&D department made the first parametric equalizer. In 1972, preparations were being made for the “Europe ‘72” tour with the Grateful Dead. Ron was redesigning the MM-1000 to allow the use of 14” reels rather than 10” reels. Alembic also started a weekly column in “Guitar Player” magazine called the “ALEMBIC REPORT”, in which products from other companies were critiqued. They also had a two-page insert in “Rolling Stone” magazine on pro audiogear. The insert dealt mainly on the high tech aspects of the company. L.D. Heater read the article in 1973, and decided to visit Alembic to ask for a more standardized instrument to distribute to their dealers. Heater music, based in Illinois, was owned by Norlin Inc., owner of Gibson, Ampeg, Epiphone, and other music companies. Heater Music gave Alembic the required purchase order. This was the beginning of the manufacturing of a standard high-end instrument for Alembic and the entire music industry. In 1974, Alembic sold the assets of the San Francisco recording studio to Elliot Mazer, and the assets of the 60 Brady Street Music Store to Stars Guitars. They bought the Alembic stock back from Bob Matthews and returned it to the Alembic treasury. Alembic moved to Sonoma County, where they established the office, electronics manufacturing, and purchasing in the barn at their home in Sebastopol. Rick Turner’s barn in Cotati was the working facility. In 1975, Ron began working on the “Sound Vendor” concept. The basic idea was to promote a group of products made by several companies in a vertical module design. They would fit in a standardized Sound Vendor rack. Ron also designed the “Time Align Generator” for E.M. Long associates. This enabled E.M. Long to develop the “Time Align Loudspeaker”. In 1976, Alembic, with Geoff Gould, the founder of Modulous Graphite Instruments, developed the first graphite neck through body necks. The first two basses made this way were sold to Stanley Clarke and John McVie of Fleetwood Mac in June. Soon after, Alembic changed distribution from Norlin Inc. to Rothchild Musical Instruments. In 1977, a facility to house all of Alembic was found in Cotati, California. Alembic started the “Kit Guitar” and the “Repairman’s Pipeline Service”, where pickups, electronics, and hardware were sold. In 1978, the distribution agreement with Rothchild Musical Instruments was terminated, as Alembic became its own distributor. In 1979, Alembic moved to 45 Foley Street in Santa Rosa, California. This was home to Alembic for 12 years. Here, they developed the Distillate bass and guitar. Yamaha also ordered hundreds of the F2B preamp. In 1980, Alembic revived the manufacture of Alembic pickups and active electronics. The new line of pickups was called “Activators”. The Activators were completely modular, and they required no soldering. The contacts were gold-plated to prevent corrosion. Even in non-Alembic instruments, Activators could give you an Alembic sound. In 1981, Alembic brought out the “Spoiler” bass, and they changed the name decal on the headstock to the Alembic logo.

A big part of Alembic’s history is the history of their body shapes. It all started with the Standard Point. When Alembic was still just a repair shop, many of the instruments that were brought in had problems due to people not putting the instrument in a stand. With the Standard Point, however, the instrument will fall over if not put in a stand. Next, they made the Omega and Small Standard. They then made the Heart Omega, the Stinger Omega, the Triple Omega, and the Point Omega. These all came from the same template. After the Omega variations came the Distillate. This blended the point and the Small Standard, but with a flat bottom. Next came the Exploiter. John Entwistle of The Who liked the Exploiter so much, he bought 15 of them! This is one of the best balancing bodies Alembic has made. Next was the Spoiler. This had nearly all unique curves, and most were a 32” scale. After the Spoiler was the Scorpion. All were different, but each had “pistol grip” horns, and a Heart Omega bottom. Following was the Elan, made for a Japanese customer who wanted a jazz-looking bass. The “H” in the Elan’s serial number means “Hojin”. After the Elan came the Europa. The first Europa was made for Ron. It was the first instrument with a tummy and elbow carving standard. After the Europa came the Essence. This had the smallest body. Merge the Essence with a Europa, extend the horn, and you have the Rogue. Following was the first set neck version bass, the Epic. This led to the Orion, the set neck version of the Europa. Finally, there was the Excel. The Excel was the new set neck Spoiler, but it was more circular. The Excel also had the most extreme inner horn curve. To this day, Alembic still designs and manufactures new body shapes.

Alembic has come a long way since Ron Wickersham and Susan Frates, now Susan Wickersham, met in 1969. It started as nothing but a consulting firm, working closely with the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and Crosby Stills Nash & Young. Now they create instruments to bring wonderful music into this world. Sometimes the wood shop didn’t make any instruments in a month’s time, and now they make around 1500 a year! Alembic is, by far, one of the best instrument-making corporations out there.