

# JIM COLE & CHAD GRACEY

## Rockin' the Off-Road Nation

story by HILDA J. BRUCKER | photo by TIM MANTOANI

The most appealing untold story about CAGE Offroad Products is the scoop on its top management team—an improbable pairing of a rock 'n' roll musician and a former machinist who learned to weld when he was six. (Who says you need a degree from Harvard Business School to run a successful corporation?)

Chad Gracey, the company's president, happens to be the drummer for the band Live, which has multiple platinum albums and a *Rolling Stone* cover to its credit. A self-proclaimed off-roading "mini-enthusiast," Gracey grew up using off-road vehicles to get to remote fishing holes in rural Pennsylvania. His partner and vice president, Jim Cole, has been adapting and redesigning his current set of wheels ever since he was a kid. "From a very early age, my dad taught us to modify things," says Cole. "We actually used to put lift kits on old Schwinn bicycles. We'd cut and turn the frames and put three foot extensions on the seat and handlebars so you'd end up riding about eight feet up in the air. Not fun when you crash, but it felt pretty neat riding around! We also used to build go-carts. I've been fully immersed in modifying things since I was very little," he remembers. By his late teens, Cole was designing and fabricating small accessory components on his own and installing lift kits as a side job.

### CITY OF ROSES

When Cole and Gracey initially met, they struck up a friendship based on their similar outlook on life and a shared, keen interest in military history—not the sport of off-roading. Eventually the two talked about collaborating in business, and when an automotive company in Portland, Ore., went up for sale, they agreed

that Gracey would buy it and Cole would grow and expand it. That deal fell through, but the two made plans to start their own company, founding CAGE Offroad Products in 2004.

Today, CAGE is a wholesaler specializing in suspension systems, lift kits, winch bumpers, side bars and other accessory items for Ford, Dodge and Jeep products. Other product lines for Nissan, Land Rover and Toyota vehicles are becoming available just as fast as Cole can draft plans for them. Though he does nearly all the design work himself, he's always seeking input from employees, friends and anyone else he might come in contact with while out on a test drive with a new product.

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### TURN THE PAGE

Gracey is frequently on the road or out of the country while touring with his band, yet Cole says the two use e-mail and cell phones to remain in constant communication, making all the big decisions together. "Chad has a very diverse background and many times has a different perspec-

tive on things than I do—especially when it comes to marketing—so sometimes we can put our ideas together and create a nice marketing platform. He's a little bit more hip than I am," he says with a laugh. Gracey has also helped out at Off-Road Impact and SEMA, most likely rubbing elbows with music aficionados who didn't even realize who they were talking to.

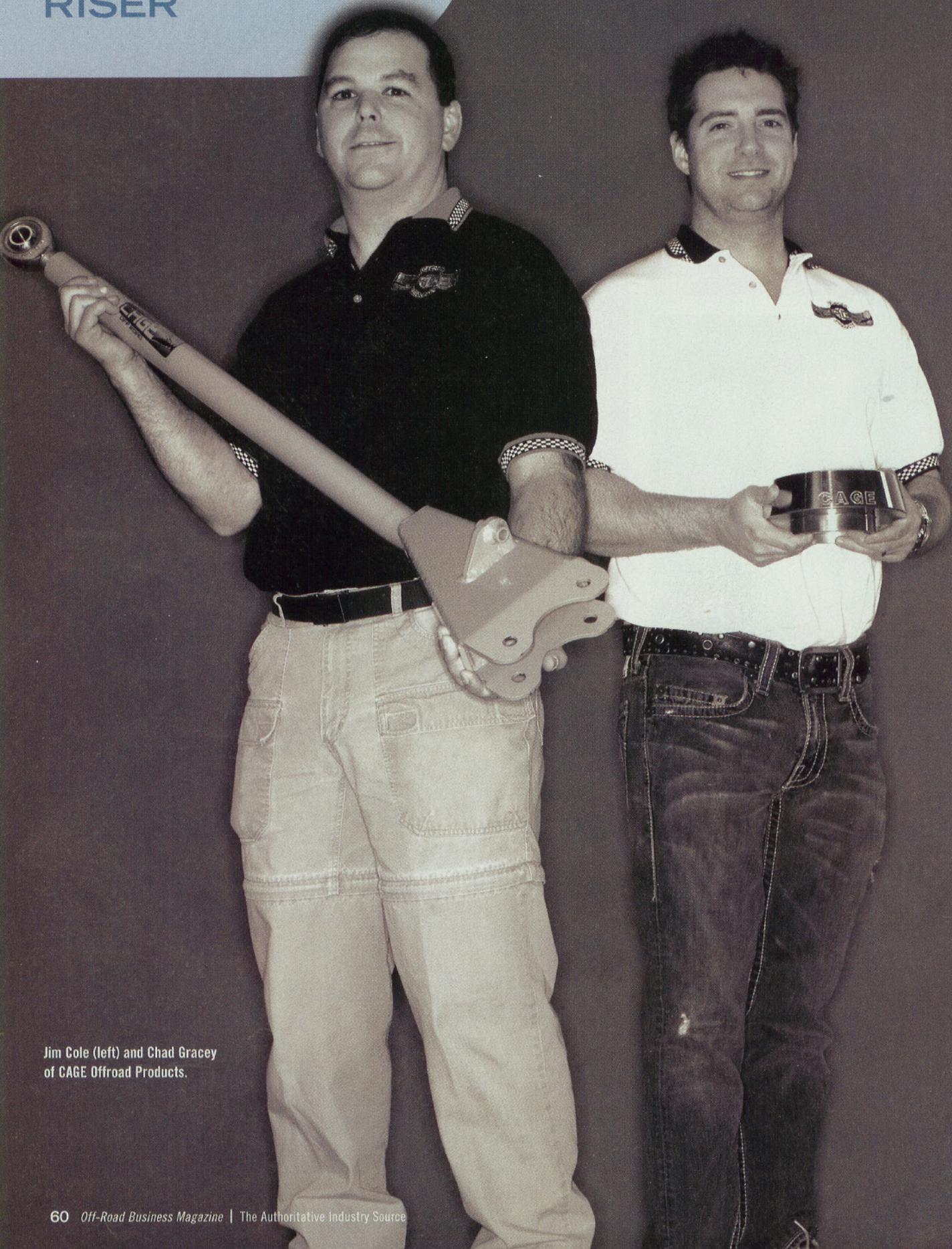
The team is completely united on a business philosophy. "I couldn't put it into a phrase, but we make good economical products that are super strong," explains Gracey. Cole agrees that high-performance and giving customers "a lot of bang for their buck" are definite priorities. "Generally speaking, we try to make all our products two things: one, very heavy-duty so people can actually use them and not worry about having problems; and two, extremely easy to install. When we write instruction sheets, we write them for the person at home working in their driveway or garage."

The strong emphasis on catering to the do-it-yourselfer is also a throwback to Cole's early experiences with working on vehicles himself, when he swore he would make sure "the bolt holes actually line up" if he ever got into design on a large scale. "For us, it's fun," he says. "For every kit that goes out the door, we feel like we're helping somebody else build what is basically their dream vehicle—and how cool is that to be a part of?" **ORB**

### SOURCE

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Jim Cole (left) and Chad Gracey  
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