

Eric Clapton & his Santa Cruz FTC

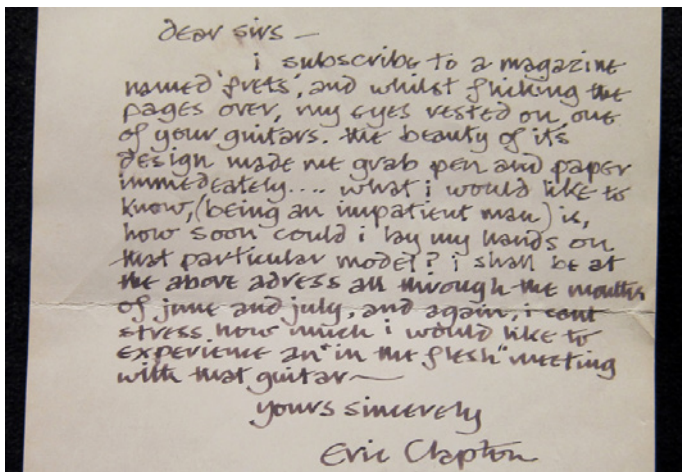
By Guy Little | April 27, 2015

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‘The beginning of this story is back before email. I walked to the mailbox one day and there was an envelope on which the return address was E. Clapton, London, England.’ So begins the remarkable story of a beautiful instrument in the hands of one of the most celebrated players on the planet and its occasionally bumpy rite of passage over the last 35 years...

Words [David Mead](#) Images courtesy of the [Santa Cruz Guitar Company](#)



The original letter from Eric Clapton to Richard Hoover at the Santa Cruz Guitar Company

In 1980, the Santa Cruz Guitar Company built a guitar specially for Eric Clapton. Over the past 35 years, they’ve seen the guitar returned to them twice for some tender loving care in the form of essential repairs. The first time was a case of too-long-in-the-sun, but the second time involved practically a full restoration, as the instrument had seen a lot of action. But we’ll let Santa Cruz’s Richard Hoover take up the story. So, after finding a letter in the mail with a very familiar name on the return label...

‘I said to myself, “What a coincidence; there’s another guy in England with a name like Eric Clapton,”’ Richard chuckles. ‘I opened the letter and it was handwritten, saying that EC had seen a picture of one of my guitars and how soon could he get one? He included a telephone number and so we spent a good part of the morning trying to do an international call because we’d never done one before. When we got through, Eric’s colleague Diana asked if we’d received the order and we said, “Ahh, OK, we’ll do it!”’

‘Eric ordered our FTC model, which is our F body shape, just like an old Gibson Everly Brothers guitar with a cutaway. It’s a carved back like an archtop and the top is conventionally braced. So we made this guitar for him in 1980 – that’s when it was finished, anyway – and there’s a couple of pictures of it: there’s one on the album Another Ticket with Eric wearing overalls playing the guitar, and there’s another picture of him in front of his country house with the same instrument. So he had a nice run with it, but when he took it to the Bahamas it got left out in the sun and that didn’t do it any good at all! So it got sent back to us for repair and, of course, in those kind of temperatures it was hot enough for the glues to become a little elastic. So, at that point, we reset the neck angle, shored some things up and sent it back to him.’



The FTC prior repair

Clapton obviously loved the guitar because he ordered another one as backup and Richard believes that the second model was eventually sold in one of the auctions that EC held to raise funds for his Crossroads charity. As far as the first FTC was concerned, after the bad case of sunburn, nothing more was heard about it until a few years ago when British luthier Dave King contacted Richard, saying that he’d had the guitar sent to him for repairs, since it had obviously seen quite a lot of use in the intervening period.

‘As I have no shame, I said, “Give it to us! Let us rebuild it because we have the original specs.” I knew we could find some of the original woods and so on and there was a little shameless pride – we wanted to do it. So Dave sent it to us

and when we received it, what we found out was that it had been through a lot. The top had been re-braced and, let me say, it was a remarkable job, in that I don't know how someone could have done that through the soundhole! We assumed that the top had been taken off, but there wasn't much evidence of anyone putting the original binding back and so it was a mystery to us as to how this was done. But the top had been re-braced and it's possible that it had been done through the soundhole, because the work wasn't consistent with anyone I know; it was the quality of someone working blind. We knew that this guitar had been overheated which had caused distortion and so perhaps this was a way to flatten the top back out, but it had also made it incredibly rigid and not very responsive. Also, someone had begun the process of trying to work on the guitar – not Dave King – in that the fingerboard was cut off and the dovetail joint at the neck had been filled with epoxy. The neck itself was compromised, too; I think it was delaminating a little bit. So if we had been in the museum restoration business, the Hippocratic Oath is not only “don't do any harm”, but it's also, “don't do anything that can't be undone in the future when better techniques have become available”. So really, that's the approach that we take on the restoration of any guitar that has either a dollar or an emotional value. We would have been pleased to lovingly restore it using all the original components, but to a degree it really wasn't possible, because there was too much damage and too much alteration already. So our best judgement was this: since we were the original builders, we could take the liberties of adding new components and doing some reconstruction.'



So began the long process of painstaking restoration. Every separate component of the guitar was gauged, the intent being to keep as much of the original instrument as possible and only replace parts where it was absolutely necessary to do so.

'In our judgement, it was best to replace the top with similar wood – in fact it was wood from the same era – and to brace it in the same fashion that we originally did. The only alteration was to put the top in a slight radius, which is something that we learned the hard way, along with every other maker. A top that is flat and pulled into a loaded position by the strings has the tendency to raise behind the bridge and push in to the front, and that shortens the top and necessitates a neck reset at some time in the future. A radiused top is not visible, but it adds strength to the guitar and actually improves the projection of it. We don't build by measurement, we build by frequencies and flexibility; that's how we gain control of sound. So the braces wouldn't measure identically to the original, but they would give the original sound. We wanted EC to get this guitar and go, “Wow! That's the guitar I loved in the first place...” and rekindle his appreciation for it.'



'The back was intact and the sides were fine, but the neck had too much distortion from the delamination and, in my opinion, the chance of getting the epoxy out of the dovetail without damaging the body was too small. So we had to saw the neck off at the body joint and then rout out the dovetail for a new neck. We would have salvaged the fingerboard, the overlay on the peghead and the original inlay, but the fingerboard had been compromised by refretting and there was a piece of it missing from a previous attempt at restoration. So we used an old fingerboard that we had and decided that we could save the overlay. The inlays are special; they're shell from Tahiti and it's the outer part of the



Richard Hoover works on Eric Clapton's FTC

shell that's gold; it's extremely rare and protected now, but we contacted the people that we bought it from way back then and, although retired, they dug around and found it for us.'

'The overlay we matched with ebony, but the inlay is almost comical to me because this is something I cut by hand back in 1980 when we'd been in business four years and, although I thought that we knew everything in the world, when I look at some of that work it makes me wince a little bit. If you compare the inlay in the pictures to what we do today it lacks refinement and it looks a little cartoonish – but nonetheless, it's original!'

The binding proved more of a problem to match, however. A long time ago, the pickup company DiMarzio built guitars and used a particular binding on its instruments which Richard had obtained for the FTC – and it proved almost impossible to track down.

'It's sort of off-white with a tiny tint of pink in it and where in the heck are you going to find that? So we tracked down

the remnants of DiMarzio Guitars, but they didn't have a clue what it was or where it was. But we had to get it, because we didn't want to rebind it with a modern material if we could avoid it. So we networked and Joe Glaser in Nashville, who is in the top tier of guitar technicians and repairmen, had some in his bag of tricks and so we got the original binding for the body, fingerboard and peghead.'

So all the parts were assembled and the restoration began. I asked Richard to detail the spec of Clapton's reborn FTC model.

Richard Hoover works on Eric Clapton's FTC

'The top is German spruce, which did actually come from Germany, and it's a Picea abies, which is the same as Swiss and Italian and so forth, but it grows in a different climate with different nutrients and mineral content in the soil. So it's very specific and we were lucky in that we had a sister set that we could use to replace it. It was old when we got it and today it has another 35 years on it, so it's probably a 70-year-old top; that's beautiful, because we didn't want to

take an old guitar and make it sound new. One of the things that makes older guitars sound better is the age of the wood; with ageing, the resins – the sticky stuff – polymerise and become more like crystal and more resonant. That stuff doesn't dry by evaporation and so you really can't accelerate that process.'

'The flamed maple back and sides I bought in Germany as part of a cello set and the back is carved by hand and tuned to the air chamber like a violin or cello. It's all original, which is a good thing because I don't know if I could come up with that again. The idea is that it has the power and projection of an archtop, but the sustain of a flat top guitar. The neck is also from the original source; it's Eastern US maple which is heavier than the European variety that they use for violins and cellos. The reason for this is that it's part of the sound of that guitar; when you put additional weight and density in the neck, it blocks the vibration from the body and gives the guitar more focus, better projection and separation between the notes. If you think of a conventional jazz archtop, the neck is maple which is heavy, the peghead is really big, which adds weight, and they used weighty gears like the old Grover Imperials that were on some of the jazz guitars. So by having that mass and weight in the neck you really focus the projection, and using Eastern US maple instead of the European was a decision for sound. The black-white-black around the top is violin purfling and is also from the original source; a good part of all this has been thoughtfully sourced.'

Fully restored Santa Cruz FTC

'Like the top, it made way more sense to use contemporary fret wire that wears better and plays better than what we had available 35 years ago. Using the old frets? It's cute, but it makes no sense; they were pitted and worn and although they'd be original, we were really hoping that Eric would get this guitar, fall in love with it and actually play it. When we took out the old frets there were enough of them to give one to everyone in the shop!'

And what about feedback from Slowhand himself? 'We heard from Clapton's manager who said that we'd be pleased to know that Eric keeps the guitar at his house and he inferred that that's a big deal and our testimony to the fact that all of this was successful.'



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