

# Frets Magazine

## Richard Hoover on 40 Years of Santa Cruz Guitars

By Jimmy Leslie | July 22, 2016

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“Our philosophy is to be an open source, because we get as much as we give—sometimes more,” says Santa Cruz Guitar Company honcho and acoustic-guitar whisperer Richard Hoover.

These are not simply facile, “feel good” words. Hoover really means what he says. So if you’re lucky enough to take his factory tour of the company in sunny Santa Cruz, California, you should become inspired and fascinated by his openness and curiosity. First, he sits down with your group for a chat, taking notes on anything interesting, and encouraging you to do the same. During the tour, he talks freely about all aspects of the acoustic-guitar business—even if other builders are in the mix. From its humble beginnings as a custom shop, to international acclaim from players such as Tony Rice and Eric Clapton, to its current status as one of the high-watermarks of boutique acoustic-guitar production, Hoover’s run at Santa Cruz has become the stuff of legend.

### What comes to mind when you think about four decades in business?

It’s too much to assess in one breath. Someone said to me that 40 years must have just flown by, but I paused and said, “No, it seems like it was about 40 years.” The reasons are a lot of incarnations and team evolution, and that happened when I realized the limitations of working on my own. I couldn’t experiment and learn as quickly as I could by working with other people. Fast forward 40 years, and we have 16 builders still working the same idea with the same principles. We’ve deflected a lot of interest from large companies, and I’m very grateful we stayed true to our basic values.

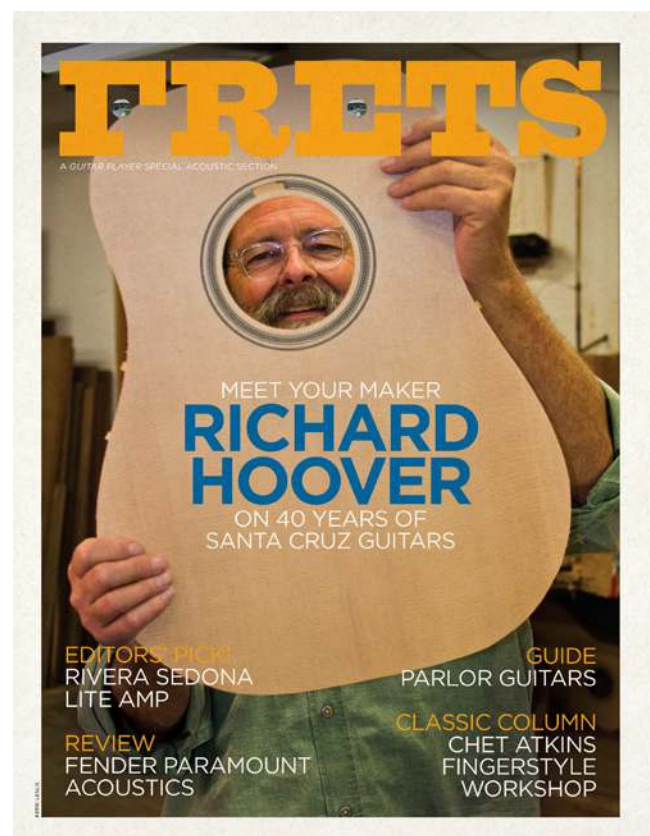
### How did you get into the guitar and guitar making?

I started playing guitar in the early ’60s to impress a girl. I started building guitars in the late ’60s for the same reason. I was sitting on the curb at my girlfriend’s house playing my all-mahogany Harmony waiting for her to come home from school, and I was considering gifting it to her so I could get a real guitar—like a Martin. I was thinking about fixing it up when it struck me, “Ding. Somebody makes this. I wonder how they do it?” My father decorated boxed-in windows at stores on Main Street. He worked in metal, glass, and plastic. We made toys, and we took things apart, so it was not a leap of faith to take that guitar apart. My mother was a reference librarian. She said, “Let’s find out how to put it back together.”

There wasn’t anything in print on guitar making at the time, but there was plenty on the violin. So that was my introduction to stringed-instrument making. Instead of showing you how to assemble something, those writings, logs, and diaries were all an extrapolation of how to control the sound of an instrument. That was truly the turning point for what we do today at Santa Cruz. Rather than make a really nice guitar from beautiful materials put together with a formula of dimensions, it’s done by composing frequencies to form a chord—a harmony, really—so we can ensure sustain and the development of complex overtones. We can control the remaining sonic elements by how we manipulate the wood.

### So that study formed your own hallmarks as a guitar builder?

Everything about the guitar was always in my DNA—the music, playing it, handling it, making it, the wood. It was a perfect fit for me. But no one has ever made a Santa Cruz guitar alone. It has always been a team effort. William Davis and Bruce Ross were my original brilliant partners, and we agreed that we weren’t going to be the next Martin.



**Why not?**

When we began, Martin owned the world as far as the name for acoustic guitars. It was almost like Coke was for cola and Kodak for photos. Being young and prideful, the last thing I ever wanted to make was a Martin copy. That lasted until we made the first guitar for Tony Rice in 1977, and then the world changed.

**How?**

That guitar was never intended to be a copy of Tony's old Martin D-28 that belonged to Clarence White. He wanted an instrument that had more midrange and treble for the jazz phrasings he was doing with the David Grisman Quintet. He did want it to look like the old one, because of emotional and even superstitious reasons.

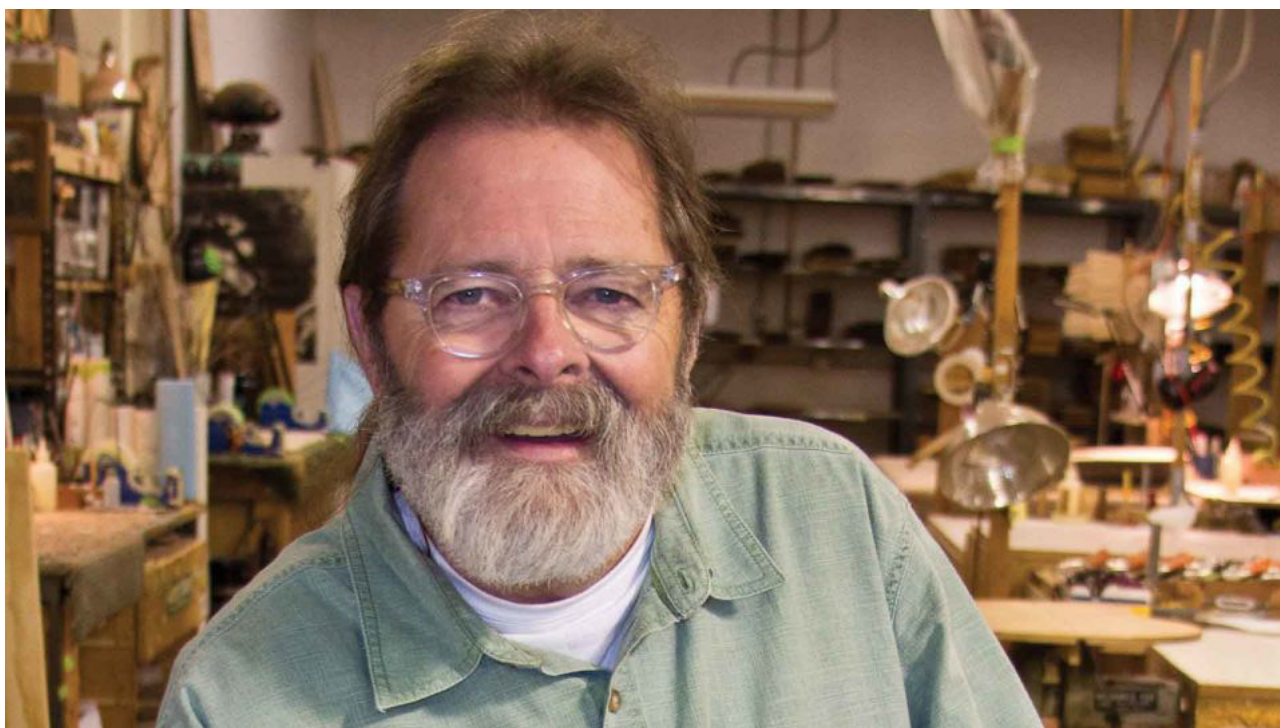
Once we made that guitar, people were calling up constantly to find out how to get one just like it. Our first response was,

name to drop, buying a Santa Cruz guitar became more than just okay. We had credibility. Those two events were huge for us.

**What happened next?**

The first small-body guitar we made was our H model, which was named after luthier Paul Hostetter, and it tips a hat to the Gibson Nick Lucas and L-OO, circa the late '20s, early '30s. It was a custom guitar, and we fell in love. The design honors the golden ratio—a natural dimensional formula found in nautilus shells and flowers that's pleasing to the eye. Everything about it was so cool, but, man, nobody would touch it. It wasn't a dreadnought, and it had 13 frets. Talk about market suicide. It was 20 years later that it started to get some traction.

And then we made our F model. It's a much sexier shape with the cutaway, and it was obviously a huge influence on



“Well, we don't make that. We're a custom shop. What else do you want?” We soon realized that our idea of building the best guitar for everyone in the world wasn't going to sustain us. Nobody would seriously consider buying anything but a dreadnought. We could make a Trojan horse with the dangerous stuff on the inside if we made it look familiar and safe on the outside.

Very quickly after working with Tony, we got a handwritten letter from Eric Clapton asking for one of our guitars. That was an awful nice double whammy. Once we had Clapton's

modern luthiers. Actually, in the early '80s, Frets gave us an international forum that previously didn't exist. Eric Clapton saw our tiny ad in Frets, and ordered an FTC—which is an F model with a carved arched back and a flat top. In fact, we completely restored one his guitars recently, and that inspired the FTC 40th Anniversary model.

Anyway, after the F model, the OM started to become obvious. Our first order for an OM came from Japan in the early '80s. We made it and went, “Wow. That's the answer to what we were trying to do on a dreadnought.” We began to

manipulate different parts of the guitar to control the EQ. The OM was hot. Who was around at that time? Nick Kukich of Franklin Guitars came out with an OM, and maybe some others, but Martin's was probably a little after '85. It wasn't until Eric Clapton played one on MTV that people started talking about an acoustic trend. That's really when the curve went up.

**Did the proliferation of inexpensive guitars during the unplugged boom concern you?**

Not at all. I have a friend in charge of a huge foreign guitar company. His goal is to make as many of the most affordable guitars as possible so more people can play music and make the world a better place. That gets my attention. Cheap guitars are a good thing. Steel-string guitars are loud enough that the cheapest guitar in the world can change international borders.

Now, having said that, when making an acoustic guitar for mass appeal, you don't have to go into the nuance and depth that a classical violin maker would to make the instrument cut through all the other orchestral instruments, and reach the back of the hall with sonic quality and sophistication. There was an amazing hole in the market for that kind of instrument when we came along.

**Santa Cruz has certainly come a long way in 40 years, and without the marketing muscle of some other companies.**

Altruism and marketing are self-canceling phrases, or oxymoronic. Marketing means promoting a product by extension of yourself, and good works are what you should do when no one's looking. My mentors didn't charge me anything to learn guitar making. In fact, both Bruce McGuire and Jim Patterson independently said, "You can pay me back best by passing it on to other people without asking for anything."

**So you don't sweat the competition stealing your secrets?**

What's to hide? Our foundation isn't the steel-string tradition. It comes from violin building. Those guys kept secrets to the death, but they wrote a lot down. There's a big body of knowledge about how to control the sound of a stringed instrument. People can find it. We've had the advantage of putting it into practice for 40 years. Nothing here is scalable. There are no magic devices or formulas that would allow you to hire more people, add more benches, and make more exceptional-sounding guitars. Believe me, we know.

**When stylistic trends such as slapping an acoustic guitar like a drum become all the rage, do they inform your guitar making in any way?**

We don't have to be a slave to market demand. We won't make a lot more than 500 guitars this year, and 70 percent are custom

orders. Big manufacturers make that many guitars per day, and they do have to respond to demand for things such as onboard electronics and durability. I think people might need a whole different kind of instrument for that percussive approach.

**How do you feel about onboard electronics?**

Some people love playing in a pizza parlor, and maybe they need to plug in for that. People also need to plug in for education, ministry, and so on. You've got to be heard. There are professionals who understand acoustic instruments, and they truly want to help people amplify them without compromising. That's their specialty, and I'm delighted to work with them. I have no attitude about plugging in the acoustic guitar. In fact, it would be embarrassing to be a purist, because it makes you seem like an idiot.

**How do you view the current state of acoustic music?**

The baby-boom generation is obviously aging out, but their influence is very strong. So is acoustic music, as far as I can tell. There's a lot of acoustic guitar out on the festival jam scene.

**As you celebrate your 40th anniversary, what do you feel is your proudest achievement?**

Well, I'll brag about the company, that's for sure. I'm also grateful for the big influence we've had worldwide. We're a dinky little company that makes a relatively miniscule amount of guitars, but everybody watches us for what we do and how we do it.

I hear a lot of comments such as, "I want to curse you guys for raising the bar so much, but you've made us such better guitar makers in paying attention to detail."

I don't feel this business is about efficiencies or the ability to make a lot of money. It's about the joy everybody felt when they got into playing or making guitars in the first place. The biggest industrialists probably still have that feeling. So I'm very happy if they can visit us—or see some of our videos—and then remember, "Oh, right, that's why we do this."

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