

Richard Hoover's Santa Cruz Guitar Co. Celebrates a Milestone

By Mark Kemp: September 23, 2016

In late May, the acoustic-blues and folk singer Otis Taylor was hanging out at Immersive Studios in Boulder, Colorado, working on some new songs, when he ran into Bill Nershi, the guitarist for String Cheese Incident. The two got to talking about their instruments.

“He said, ‘Hey man, check out this Martin I have,’” Taylor remembers.

The next day, Taylor upped the ante, bringing in his new signature Santa Cruz Otis Taylor Chicago model. “Bill picked it up and started playing it,” Taylor says. “He really liked it.”

Who wouldn't like it? With its earthy, red clay-colored mahogany top, back, and sides, the small-body OT Chicago is no-frills guitar art at its finest. The instrument has a subtle but utterly distinctive look, with 13 frets stopping just beyond the joint where the neck meets the body, and an elegant OT insignia based on the signature that Taylor's artist father, Otis Taylor Sr., used in his paintings. It also has a rich and resonant growl that befits the singer's hard-hitting story-songs about racial injustice on albums with titles like *When Negroes Walked the Earth* and last year's *My World is Gone*, his tribute to Native American culture.

“People like the guitar because it has a very deep sound,” Taylor says. “It's just such a high-grade instrument. Richard's guitars are masterpieces.”

Taylor is hardly the only artist to be inspired by the instruments Richard Hoover makes at Santa Cruz Guitar Co., the boutique shop he founded 38 years ago in the Northern California beach town some 70 miles south of San Francisco. Other Santa Cruz owners have included Eric Clapton, flatpicker Tony Rice, country star Brad Paisley, CCR founder John Fogerty, folksinger Janis Ian, jam-band-improviser-turned-bluegrass picker Scott Law, and many less well-known players and guitar aficionados.

This story originally appeared in 2014 to mark the 38th anniversary of the Santa Cruz Guitar Co. SCGC celebrates its milestone 40th anniversary this year with two concerts—Friday, Sept. 23, and Saturday, Sept. 24, 2016—in Santa Cruz, California.



John Fogerty was looking for a road guitar similar to the two '50s-vintage Gibson jumbos he keeps at home. His friend Brad Paisley urged him to call Hoover. “I wanted to take a guitar on tour with me that sounded as good as those old Gibsons,” Fogerty says. “Richard said, ‘Oh yeah, no problem.’ When a guy like Richard Hoover says something like that, it's a very big deal. He has so much knowledge and expertise.”

Scott Law agrees. “Be careful what you ask Richard to build, because he'll build exactly what it is [you want],” Law says. Hoover's team was so proud of the guitar they built for Law—whose all-acoustic solo album *Black Mountain* came out earlier this year—that they asked if he minded them making it a signature Santa Cruz D-Law model. “I was like, ‘Yeah, of course,’” Law says. “Everyone there—the whole crew—is a really nice family of people. . . They're just righteous, you know?”

Inside the Factory

On a Friday morning, Hoover—wearing faded jeans, brown boots, and a green sweater vest over a long-sleeve shirt—leads a group of about eight on a tour of his 9,000-square-foot factory, showing off big stacks of spruce and strips of mahogany, as young builders lean over work tables, sawing, drilling, sanding, and painstakingly constructing the inner bracing of soon-to-be guitars. The floors are concrete, the walls a dull yellow. Photos of musicians hang in the work areas: Jimmy Page, Peter Rowan, and Tony Rice in the wood room; a giant Hendrix

poster and collage of magazine images—from Hank Williams and Duane Allman to Questlove of the Roots—in the finishing room. A rack of cassettes spanning from the Byrds to Van Halen keep the workers entertained as they focus deeply on their individual tasks.

In the wood room, Hoover reaches for a piece of Sitka spruce and taps on it. “Listen,” he says. “It has a distinctive bass and treble sound even before we put the bracing in.” He walks to another table, taps on an already-cut guitar top that’s been fully braced, and pauses for a second: “When I tap the tops that haven’t been braced, you don’t hear this sustain.”

Finally, Hoover picks up the back and side pieces that haven’t yet been assembled with a braced top. “When we put all of this together, there will be a new note—the air space,” he says. “If these pieces aren’t brought into harmony, you lose everything you gained from the bracing.”

The tour group—seven men and a woman—is getting a crash course on a guitar’s journey from trees to fully built instruments. Santa Cruz, Hoover says, has long been committed to “green” wood procurement, using materials such as responsibly harvested Indian rosewood and reclaimed spruce. At the onset of the tour, he tells the group, “We don’t have trade secrets, so ask any questions you want.”

Hoover’s soft-spoken demeanor and easy smile belie a quick, dry wit that you’ll miss if you don’t listen closely over the steady whirl of machinery. At one point, he motions to a stack of Adirondack spruce and quips, “This wood got a big buzz in the guitar world because it’s what Martin and Taylor used back when they made really good guitars.” At another, when discussing the difference between hand-built and mass-produced instruments, he says, “I don’t diminish cheap guitars—you can write a song on one that’ll change the world!” Then he gets serious. “But our job is to make the most sophisticated instruments.”



The Ballad of Otis B. Rodeo

In the early 1970s, Hoover was just another 20-something California folksinger with a guitar—on track to set the world on fire—when one day someone stole his beloved Martin D-28.

“I was going to be the next Bob Dylan—didn’t you read about that?” Hoover says, with a soft chuckle. He’s sitting in his factory’s front office later in the afternoon, next to a coffee table overflowing with guitar magazines. When he smiles, the 63-year-old looks like the kind of friendly folksinger the puppeteers of Sesame Street might caricature: rounded glasses, a full gray beard, and straight brown hair tied back in a ponytail.

“But when my Martin got stolen,” he continues, “everything changed.”

That crime more than 40 years ago was Hoover’s crossroads moment—the planets aligned in such a way that had him building guitars rather than playing them professionally. In the years since, he’s become one of the most revered steel-string makers in the world, the Santa Cruz logo among the most coveted. Today, the company makes between 500 and 650 guitars a year, with 75 percent of those falling into the custom category.

Hoover had been fascinated by the inner workings of guitars long before he dreamed of making them for a living. Growing up in Hanford, California—an agricultural town about 200 miles southeast of Santa Cruz—he’d help his dad, a commercial artist, set up local store displays. They’d build the shelving themselves, working with wood, foam, metals, and other materials. “We also made stuff,” Hoover says. “My dad always encouraged me to tinker, take things apart, figure things out.”

Naturally, when Hoover got his first steel-string at 15—an all-mahogany, OM-shaped Harmony, for \$47.50—he not

only learned to play it to impress the girls at school, but he took it apart. “I thought, oh, I can put all this stuff together—I can play guitars, I can make guitars, I can work in wood, I can discover stuff,” he says. “How cool is that?”

After leaving Hanford, Hoover traveled the country, lived in a commune, and performed with his Martin D-28 as Otis B. Rodeo, a stage name he cribbed from another childhood guitar—a cheap, nylon-string Rodeo he’d gotten for Christmas one year. “That’s the name I originally built guitars under,” he says. “In fact, I still sign guitars that way.”

Hoover landed in Santa Cruz in 1972, and his Martin promptly disappeared. He looked around for a new guitar and saw an Epiphone Texan at the local Union Grove Music shop. He fell in love with the instrument, but couldn’t afford it. A clerk sent him over to nearby Beneficial Finance, where he talked with loan officer Bruce McGuire, who happened to be a classical-guitar builder. McGuire introduced Hoover to Jim Patterson, a hobbyist steel-string maker, and the two served as Hoover’s early mentors. “They’re the reason I stayed here,” he says.

Hoover had already done some research on guitar making. “My mom was a professional reference librarian—she was sort of the search engine of her day—and she had gotten me everything that was available on instrument building,” he says.



It wasn’t much.

Before the 1970s, there was no information in print on steel-string guitar making. “Violins—tons; guitars—nothing,” Hoover says. He read everything his mother got him about building violins. “The whole principle of violin making was choosing, manipulating, and controlling the instrument to get the quality of sound you want, and that was nothing at all like steel-string guitar making, which had been born in factories for mass consumption. So I came in first assuming you made guitars

like you made violins.”

McGuire and Patterson guided Hoover in practical applications of his knowledge, the former teaching the young apprentice the fundamentals and the latter helping him learn specific things like making dovetail neck joints. Within a short time, Hoover was building Martin-style dreadnoughts. His early guitars caught the attention of local luthiers who were making mandolins. “One of them was Darol Anger, the violinist who’s now famous for pretty much everything,” Hoover says. “We made mandolins together for a while, and we’re still good friends.”

Hoover soon returned to making guitars exclusively, and by the middle part of the ’70s had gotten pretty good at it. When Bruce Ross and William Davis—two repairmen from Union Grove Music—offered to invest in a company, giving Hoover \$500 in credit in exchange for his teaching them to build guitars, Hoover was all ears. “They were brilliant guys who made a beautiful contribution to triangulate this thing,” Hoover says. “But of course, we fought about fundamentals like crazy and that’s part of the fire that forged the idea of Santa Cruz Guitar Co.”

To some, that triangulation was the birth of boutique guitar making in the United States. “What that means to me,” Hoover says, “is that this is not about the individual just trying to rough it out by himself, or the guy who’s trying to be the next Martin—this is the luthier principle of working together as a team.” It’s a hugely important part of how Santa Cruz began and how it has been able to continue its pursuit of creating great instruments, Hoover says. It’s why he has continued to bring budding luthiers into the fold, producing many who have gone on to make names for themselves—like Roy McAlister, who’s built guitars for David Crosby, Graham Nash, Jackson Browne, and Robby Fulks; Michael Hornick of Shanti Guitars; Bill Hardin of Bear Creek; and Jeff Traugott, who still lives and works in Santa Cruz.

Even today, Hoover says, “Everybody who works here is a career guitar-maker.”

Santa Cruz Goes Global

Hoover was just 25 on September 22, 1976, when he signed a partnership agreement with Ross and Davis, making Santa Cruz Guitar Co. official. Within a couple of years, the team came up with its Santa Cruz D model dreadnought with back and sides made of koa—an unusual choice for that time. Also unusual was its bracing. Tapered from the center of the X out towards the sides, it was totally unlike either the new Martins of the period, or the older ones. Its materials and design gave the Santa Cruz D just the kind of balanced bass-to-treble response that some younger acoustic guitarists were looking for.

With the emergence of progressive bluegrass—which blended jazz techniques with old-time folk and country—the tenor of acoustic music had changed by the mid-1970s, and Santa Cruz aimed to serve the musicians who played this new sound. By 1978, Hoover’s earlier instrument-building partner, Anger, was performing with mandolin player David Grisman, whose group also included a young flatpicking guitar genius named Tony Rice. In the mean time, Santa Cruz had rolled out two more models—the H, originally commissioned by luthier expert Paul Hostetter, and the F, inspired by Gibson’s J-185—and business was picking up.

When Rice, who famously had been playing the late Clarence White’s 1935 Martin D-28, approached Santa Cruz about building him a new instrument, Hoover and his team came up with some ideas. Rice wanted a more up-to-date version of his Martin, but with a slightly brighter sound that he could use in the studio.

The initial guitar that Santa Cruz made for him was a bit too balanced for Rice’s ears, so the team went back to the drawing board, undid all the stuff they had done to previous guitars to bring balance to them, and enlarged the soundhole. Rice loved it. When he took it on the road with him and played it before audiences, Santa Cruz got inundated with orders for guitars “just like Tony Rice’s.”

At first, Hoover and his colleagues avoided making more of them, because the instruments weren’t what the company had become known for. Within three years, though, the team acquiesced and Santa Cruz rolled out its first important signature guitar, the Tony Rice model.

In the years since, Santa Cruz has designed models of numerous different styles that have attracted orders from dozens of famous guitarists, including Clapton, who saw an ad for the company and commissioned a carved-back F model. By the early 1980s, co-founder Davis had left the company to pursue a different career path; in 1989, Hoover bought out his other co-founder, Ross.

The Santa Cruz Guitar Co. soldiered on, and to date the company has built more than 14,500 guitars.

Hoover still communicates clearly with customers who are looking for high-quality instruments to serve specific purposes. “Say you play bluegrass—you’ll probably want prominent bass. If you play jazz, you won’t want that,” he tells the tour group. “Rosewood gives you a more blended type of sound.”

He laughs. “I personally like that—I don’t want people to hear every note I play.”

Otis Taylor, who chose rosewood for his original signature Santa Cruz guitar—the Otis Taylor model—seconds



©2017 SANTA CRUZ GUITAR COMPANY

Hoover’s emotion. “I’m not a fancy guitarist,” he says, modestly. “I do a lot of thumb work, I do some fingerpicking, but I’m not a lead guitarist—I’m a rhythm guitarist.”

Taylor pauses and lowers his voice, as if to make sure no one is listening: “You know, when I play a Santa Cruz, I feel like I’m cheating,” he continues, then lets out a big, sustained belly laugh. “I don’t have to do too much to sound really good!”

SantaCruz
GUITAR
COMPANY

HANDMADE, HANDED DOWN.

SANTACRUZGUITAR.COM - 831.425.0999