

Santa Cruz Economic Development

The Sit Down: Santa Cruz Guitar Company

By: Amanda Rotella / October 2016

Santa Cruz
GUITAR
COMPANY

HANDMADE, HANDED DOWN.

Collaboration is everywhere in Santa Cruz. From entrepreneurs that come together to start a new business, to businesses sharing materials and supplies, we are a community that loves to work together. Our newest Choose Santa Cruz video series, The Sit Down, is all about local businesses that work together. The first video in this series features long time Santa Cruz business Santa Cruz Guitar Company. We got to sit down with Richard Hoover, founder and CEO, to learn more about his business and his collaboration with Ventana Surfboards and Supplies and Sylvan Music.

What was your biggest motivations for starting a handmade acoustic guitar company?

I learned to play guitar to impress a girl. And it worked. We just celebrated our 45th anniversary. It is incomprehensible.

When I started to build guitars, I couldn't learn fast enough. I was working in a vacuum. There weren't books or videos I could learn from. So, I thought that if I work with other people it would go faster, we could experiment more, I would learn more, and it would be a lot more fun than doing it on my own. That was really the beginning of Santa Cruz Guitar Company.

Why is it so important to be transparent about your guitar making process?

Well it is a whole lot easier than keeping secrets, that is for sure. Part of it is really fundamental values. I call it open source. One of the prime reasons is that I made that promise to the people that taught me, two local guys that have since passed on Bruce Mcquire and Jim Patterson, that I would pass along the knowledge. And the benefit of transparency became obvious pretty quick. If you shut the door to protect something, the door is shut from the other side as well. So if we are free in giving information, other people can't deny us. And the whole industry is like that, as least with the guitar makers. I think that also applies to life as well.

You have a culture of learning and teaching, where do you find the people that work for you?

One of the attractive things is that we are truly a custom shop. As a custom shop we are doing a lot of cosmetic things for people, we are doing functional things, and we can also control the sounds of the guitar and that is really unusual in guitar making - that is the violin making principle. People know that and that is why people want to come work here

and learn. Most of the schools consider us the prime destination for a student as either graduate school or to launch a new career, because students have the possibility of getting a well rounded education in guitar making, as opposed to being specialized as the best hole driller in the world in the factory. And being located in Santa Cruz is very attractive.



If it's going to add value - creatively, artistically - hands are the way to go. If it's not and it's going to hurt you, we use a machine. — Richard Hoover

How many hands will a guitar go through in the process of being made?

Right now we've got 16 luthiers and 3 dogs in the office. Sometimes we're training a new one and we've got 17. Sometimes we get efficient enough and someone leaves and we drop to 15, but it stays around there. I know everybody's name, their significant others, and I really like it that way. At this size we don't outrun our resources, our responsibly harvested wood, and we get people who are passionate and career guitar makers.

How do you decide what's done by hand, and what's done by machines?

People use terms like 'hand made' or 'factory made' and it's not very accurate. The value of our company is our ability to work with our hands, and being so skill oriented, and that comes from good training and practice, practice, practice. It's also a bit fragile. God didn't design our hands to do these repetitive tasks over and over again. So, if it's going to add value - creatively, artistically - hands are the way to go. If it's not and it's going to hurt you, we use a machine.

What are the top three things that make your guitar's unique?

They sound better, they play better, and they are made from responsibly harvested materials that can make you feel good about it.

How do you source your wood?

Our food chain of woods is very different from the large companies, and even some individual builders. They are all based on personal relationships often with small family operations who have the same values as we do. We work with people who work with reclaimed wood, with trees that have already fallen down, wood that is part of an old building, or with what they call “sustainable yield” - where they grow it like a Christmas tree farm.

And old wood sounds better than new wood. It is one of the reasons why we prize old guitars and violins for their sound, and starting with an old piece of wood makes a new instrument sound like it is really old. We can get that sound without cutting down a tree.

It seems like you do a fair amount of travel to source wood.

I have come to love adventurous travel. But these woods aren't predictable. You don't go and get them. Sometimes they come to you and sometimes you hear about them and go after them that way. What is nice now, which is bittersweet, is that I don't have to travel as much because our relationships are established. People trust us and they know what our quality is. I can text someone in the bush outside of Mumbai on their Blackberry and tell them what I want.

Can you share one great story about wood you have sourced?

One of the really satisfying things is when I build a guitar, I can work with old wood, and the story with the old wood ties into something else that's dear to me or close to my values. And recently we had the opportunity to get some beautiful old redwood that was the siding on John Steinbeck's boat The Western Flyer. John Steinbeck, and all of his great colorful stories about the area, was one of the major influences of me moving to Santa Cruz. So when I build a guitar from wood that comes from Steinbeck's boat, I tie in everything, my history, my past, my present, my future. And that is really gratifying.

How do you measure success?

Quality of life and peace of mind. I had to choose a mission statement and I thought that's a good one. I think most everything I do is towards that end.

Your guitars are known worldwide. Who are some of the famous musicians that play them?

It's so much fun to drop names of celebrities, especially at dinner parties, you know when somebody says, “Oh, what do you do?” and I say, “I'm a guitar maker” and they say, “That's nice. What do you do for a living?” And then when I can drop some names, I have credibility. Over the years, we have made guitars for celebrities with great status. Early on we made guitars for Tony Rice (bluegrass flatpicker), Eric Clapton, and some of the classic rock people which really gave us credibility. Today, we work currently with Brad Paisley, who's a mega-star and an awesome guitar player. Almost always, these are personal relationships that develop from somebody choosing our guitar, rather than us going to the person to get it, which is really gratifying.

What we really amplify is that message that you can make the best stuff in the world without compromise to your values or the health of the planet. — Richard Hoover, on his partnership with Ventana Surfboards & Supplies **Can you describe your partnership with Ventana Surfboards?**

Working with Ventana Surfboards & Supplies is a point of pride for me. David Dennis, who has a brilliant marketing and business sense and Martijn Stiphout, who's gotta be there with the best surfboard makers in the world, their values match exactly ours as far as the materials they use, what their purposes are, what they want to do, and the statements that they make. It was actually they that approached us with the idea of giving them the stuff that we have left over when we make our guitars. They wanted responsibly harvested stuff, so just like us they didn't want to participate in deforestation, or contribute to the extinction of whole cultures. It was perfect. What we really amplify is that message that you can make the best stuff in the world without compromise to your values or the health of the planet. That's good teamwork.

Tell me about the relationships you have with some of the local retailers. We make almost 500 guitars a year. We're pipsqueaks. A popular American brand, our good friends at Taylor, make almost that many in a day. Our ability to make a custom guitar that looks right, feels right, and sounds the way that somebody wants is not only unusual, but it's hard to represent, and Sylvan Music, located on the Westside of Santa Cruz, does a really good job of that. Of all the stores in the US, there's only 1 store who sells more than they do. They're in a category in themselves as far as a friendship and a partner. There's a beautiful business with a heart.

I get the same feeling I did when I was nine years old and I came over here for the first time. This is a really special spot. The tolerance and the diversity in Santa Cruz are things that I really really prize. It's not like many places in the world. We're very lucky. It's a very sweet thing.

What first brought you to Santa Cruz?

Santa Cruz was always a fantasy destination. I grew up in a small town in the San Joaquin Valley. Just as I was turning 9 I was a paperboy delivering papers on my bicycle.

The newspaper also sent us out once a week to go door to door to get people to sign up and get subscriptions. As an incentive, the person who sold the most got a choice of new bike or a trip to the Santa Cruz Boardwalk and a Giants baseball game. I went for it and I won the prize for our little area and I chose the trip. The day of the trip I got up early in the morning and loaded onto a tiny bus in July. We poked into each little town and picked up the little boys who had won. Each had a bag of candy & some soda. It took forever, hours and hours in a super hot bus. Coming up out of Gilroy through Hecker Pass, I was not feeling the best from eating candy all day, but we came to the summit, I still get thrilled with this and I get a little teary, we came over the summit and dropped into the redwoods and fog. I looked at that and thought, I'm moving here. The beauty, the serenity of the fog. We proceeded to go to the Boardwalk and have a great time and go to the baseball game, but it never escaped me and that was my goal to live here. I lived a lot of places before this happened, but once I got to Santa Cruz I knew this was home.

You traveled all over the world. What's special about Santa Cruz to you that gets you excited to come home?

That's really well put. In traveling I'm visiting dealers, trade shows. I'm also making wood connections sometimes out there in the Alps, the Carpathian Mountains and places like that, just really awesome natural beauty. And I'm never disappointed to come home. I can come back from stressful travel, and do something like take a hike through Henry Cowell and see the ancient redwoods, any time of day, any season. You go in with your head full, all the world spinning, and you come out going, "what was all that I was worried about?". It's so restorative. I get the same feeling I did when I was nine years old and I came over here for the first time. This is a really special spot. The tolerance and the diversity in Santa Cruz are things that I really really prize. It's not like many places in the world. We're very lucky. It's a very sweet thing.

Are there others you want to thank?

Since we make guitars but also have a message, for any of us, our jobs are just a vehicle for the things that are truly important to us. So people like Design by Cosmic that help us get our story out is a really nice thing. Local venues like Kuumbwa Jazz and Don Quixote's, where we have had celebrations and benefits, have been really great. KPIG, which I know from the very beginning, has helped us with

promotions. And individuals who have different businesses. I think of Guitars not Guns, Rainforest Alliance, Greenpeace. They're just perfect partners in this. And working with them, we do more than we'd do individually.

I hate listing people who've been kind to you because you are always going to leave somebody out. I mentioned my mentors already and I gave credit to Mom and Dad, but my staff and the people who work here are really a treasure. Everyone knows Carolyn Sills from the Carolyn Sills Combo, but she really in many ways is the face of the company, the one that gets the message out to people. I love them all and I love them all differently.

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