

## Gear review: Santa Cruz Guitar Company FTC 40th Anniversary

By Kate: January 5, 2017

California luthiers Santa Cruz decided their 40th anniversary was a great time to revisit a classic – and what better choice than this quirky flat-top cutaway made famous by one E Clapton?

Words: Steve Bennett

acm124-day1\_jb-santa\_cruz\_det\_oak4\_webIt must be handy being based in a town whose name conjures an instant and effortless California cool. Admit it, extolling the charms of your Jumbo Walsall or Custom Cutaway Scunthorpe isn't exactly going to thrill your acoustic acolytes. A limited edition, 40th Anniversary Santa Cruz FTC, on the other hand... now we're talking. Still, what's in a name? The answer, if you've been building a reputation for consistently superb, handmade quality since 1976, is 'a hell of a lot'. You simply won't find a duff Santa Cruz; it wouldn't get out of the workshop. And while we're naming names, Richard Hoover's West Coast headquarters is just that – a custom workshop – not, as he's at pains to point out, a factory. The company supports a staff of around 20 and builds in the region of 500 guitars a year. Consider a 'bespoke', individual luthier's output as being about a dozen instruments over a similar period and Hoover's point becomes abundantly clear.

The first FTC (flat-top cutaway), from 1978, was seen as something of a platypus when it was initially trailed – neither fish nor fowl – and at the time, the embryonic Santa Cruz Guitar Company didn't have the marketing machinery to explain the radical design concept, let alone extoll its virtues. The idea was to develop an instrument that would deliver the trademark projection and note separation of a big-bodied, jazz arch-top (the kind specifically modelled to 'cut through' volume-wise when surrounded by other orchestral instruments) in conjunction with the increased sustain of a traditionally X-braced flat-top. But Hoover's vision of harnessing the best of both worlds failed to ignite the collective acoustic-buying imagination; until, that is, fate did the one thing it's good for and intervened. Around 1980, Frets reader Mr E Clapton spotted a tiny ad in the classified column and duly contacted Hoover with a view to getting his hands on one of these intriguingly unconventional FTCs. He ended up buying one, loved it, featured it on the *Another Ticket* album and, almost overnight, kick-started an upward trajectory that's since seen the company established as possibly the best, big 'small-maker' around.



With those early FTCs having struggled to galvanise the buyers' market, the Santa Cruz luthiers focused their efforts on the more straightforward F and FS flat-backed models they've stuck with, successfully, to this day. It turned out that the development of that now-iconic F body-shape (the just-under 16" lower bout and slender waistline inspired by 1950s Gibson J-185s; slightly bigger than a OOO but smaller than a dread or jumbo) triggered a major design rethink among previously wary 'mass-manufacturers' and helped usher in a whole new era of acoustic innovation. Nonetheless, it was perhaps the reappearance of Clapton's 'original' (in dire need of repair after suffering a prolonged bout of wood-warping sunstroke on a Caribbean runway) that inspired the company to look back to their earlier, boldly inventive, carved, arch-backed hybrid as a fitting commemoration of this, their 40th year in the game.

The FTC arrives promptly on the back of the awesome, one-off 'Ghost Oak' acoustic, so it's got a lot to live up to



in the ‘follow that!’ stakes. This model is #6 of the subtly varying dozen SCGC plans to release this year before, it’s mooted, re-establishing the model as part of their regular production output. Straight out of the elegant, slim-line Ameritage custom case – and coming from the angle of your everyday, half-decent, OM-wielding fingerstylist (with occasional dreadnought tendencies) – this guitar looks different, feels different and sounds different.

First off, it’s a thing of striking beauty; a smaller, dressed-down version of those mighty, art deco, chord-comping monsters from the age of Ellington and his big band contemporaries. The clearest homage is in the white-bound, wave-roll headstock with its wonderfully precise and smooth-g geared Schaller tuners (modelled on the old jazz-era Grover Imperials) and the offset, oyster-shell fan inlays adorning the bound, ebony fretboard. Beyond this determined reaffirmation of the original Clapton-endorsed concept, the decorative appointments are comparatively restrained. There’s a discreet, inlaid half-moon ‘date panel’ above the nut and an elegantly-tooled ‘40th’ etched into the heel-cap, while the unfussy black and white ivoroid bindings and rosette (plus scratch-plate free top) offer an aesthetic balance that suggests this is very much an instrument to be played rather than simply admired from a distance. And it does, indeed, sound magnificent. As stated earlier, there’s something thrillingly different about the FTC; the defiantly retro-cool look, the comfortably sleek, luxurious feel of both body and neck, but, most significantly, that amazing tone. Hoover himself has described the FTC’s projection as “shockingly loud and direct” and – though that carries

perhaps too negative a connotation for the average UK language pedant – it’s certainly arresting; powerful to the point of ‘ears playing tricks’ double-takery. The first impression (apart from that volume) is of a clean, clear articulation whereby strummed, open-voiced chords come leaping out as groups of interlocking, individual notes rather than hitting you like some big, soggy overtone pudding; a perfect tonal illustration of the arched back functioning precisely as intended. Carving said back, especially from maple and in the traditional violin/cello method (as opposed to the more conventional back-building technique of bracing flat, book-matched pieces into a gentle curve) is a huge undertaking in terms of time and resources, but SCGC, with its commitment to impeccable craftsmanship, isn’t cutting any corners. By way of tone ‘compensation’, Hoover’s modified the top bracing and interior structure for increased resonance and sustain to produce an instrument with the lightning-fast response to reward the punchy precision of jazz chords and single lines, yet maintain all the warmth needed to serve the more lingering riches of DADGAD balladry. He’s also a strong advocate for European spruce, believing its high strength-to-weight ratio gives it an unmatched clarity of projection. The rumbling bass thump of the classic dreadnought has been filtered out here in favour of note separation and balance all the way up the neck, yet such is the ‘headroom’ when played hard, that precise definition never gets lost. There’s a sense the FTC could hold its own in just about any stylistic company.



The review instrument boasts a flamed maple back, sides and dovetail-jointed neck tinted to a rich auburn (only enhancing those flames) and an Italian spruce top, sun-bursting from autumnal russet to glowing amber; an overall finish the old Gibson mandolin makers would have described as 'Cremona'. The company is keen to make it clear, in these rightly eco-conscious times, that all the woods – maple, spruce and the ebony of both fretboard and SC-pattern bridge – plus the oyster-shell mother-of-pearl fittings, have been responsibly harvested. That bar of ebony that forms the fretboard, incidentally, is thicker by design; its density bringing an added weight to the neck that further serves in the cause of enhanced projection. With 14 frets to the body (plus extra room to the 15th afforded by the gently rounded, not-quite-Venetian cutaway), an ultra-comfortable neck profile, 25.375" scale and the company's own, project-specific, low-tension strings, the FTC boasts the kind of effortless playability that, paradoxically, encourages an increased focus on the challenge of doing it justice.

With luthiers of the calibre of Jeff Traugott, Marc Maingard and Stephen Strahm all having honed their skills at Santa Cruz, and legendary players like Tony Rice vetting and helping to refine the product, it's clear we could only be in the rarified, high-end stratosphere with any instrument Richard Hoover is prepared to stake his reputation on.



Combining, as it does, those elements of arch-top and flat-top design that inspired his late-70s vision (now newly refined to capture fully that elusive tone), the FTC is about far more than commemoration, it's about the realisation of a 40-year quest to find a unique voice in the acoustic guitar world.

The FTC looks and sounds like nothing else out there and on this evidence, you'd be hard pushed to find anything, regardless of price, that looks and sounds better – or even comes close.

### **Santa Cruz Guitar Company FTC 40th Anniversary**

#### **Need to know**

Manufacturer: Santa Cruz Guitar Company

Model: 40th Anniversary FTC #6

RRP: £10,995

Made In: USA

Body: F Style cutaway

Top: European spruce

Back and Sides: Carved flamed maple

Neck: Flamed maple with '40' on heel cap

Fingerboard: Ebony

Bridge: Ebony

Nut Width: 1 11/16"

Scale Length: 25.375"

Gig Bag/Case Included: Yes

Acoustic test results

Pros: It's fabulous and there are only 12 of them!

Cons: None, unless it's that there are, indeed, only 12 of them.

Overall: A genuinely special piece of modern lutherie history

#### Contact Details

[www.ivormairants.co.uk](http://www.ivormairants.co.uk)

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