

Fretboard Journal

Richard Hoover / Santa Cruz Guitar Company

By: Michael John Simmons / December 2008

Santa Cruz
GUITAR
COMPANY

HANDMADE, HANDED DOWN.

In 1966 a young Richard Hoover got the notion that he could somehow improve the tone of his old Harmony guitar by fiddling around with its insides. So he took it apart and, more importantly, managed to get it back together. His first attempt at guitar surgery didn't make his Harmony sound better, but it did instill in him the desire to build guitars of his own.

Over the next few years he searched in vain for information about his new passion, but there were no books in print on the subject at the time. He made do with lessons in general woodworking from his father, who was a skilled cabinetmaker. Hoover learned many useful techniques and gained experience with a variety of tools, but his growing skills didn't bring him any closer to his goal. Instead, he decided to channel his energy into becoming a better guitar player. When he moved to Santa Cruz in 1972, it was with the intention of becoming a guitar player, not a guitar maker. But when his guitar was stolen, everything changed.

"I had a really nice Martin D-28 and somebody took it," Hoover says, without rancor and with more than a little glee, realizing the thief had actually done him a favor. Hoover had never given up his dream of becoming a luthier, and that long-ago misdeed led directly to his founding of the Santa Cruz Guitar Company, which now builds some of the world's finest steel-string guitars.

Richard Hoover is a compact, energetic man with a brown beard that is starting to show streaks of white. He laughs easily, particularly when he ruminates about the absurdities of the music industry, but when he talks about the guitars that he and his crew build, he is deadly serious. The area around his desk is littered with curious bits of instrumental detritus, including the carcass of a Portuguese viola de arame, samples of tonewoods, unfinished necks and half-shaped bridges. As he sits, he fidgets with his pen, changing his grip on it as if he were grasping a chisel, then a small saw, then a screwdriver.

"I began looking around for a replacement for my stolen guitar," he continues, "and I fell in love with an Epiphone Texan at a local store called Union Grove Music, but I didn't have the money for it so they sent me to Beneficial Finance down the street. When I explained to the loan officer what I wanted the money for, he mentioned that he built guitars as a hobby. Right then I told him that I would be by his house once a week and that he was going to teach me what he knew. I asked him what day of the week would be good for him, and I think he was amused by my audacity, so he said, 'Sure.' That was how I met Bruce McGuire, who became my mentor and helped get me started as a luthier."

Bruce McGuire was an amateur classical guitar maker who learned his craft from Art Overholtzer, a guitar-making teacher at California State University, Chico, in the late 1960s. Hoover had already started making a guitar but his

effort had stalled, so McGuire helped him complete it and then coached him in the fundamentals of guitar making. McGuire also introduced Hoover to another amateur builder named Jim Patterson, who made steel-string guitars in the Martin tradition.

"Both Bruce and Jim were extremely helpful when I was starting out," Hoover says. "Bruce introduced me to the basic techniques of guitar building, and Jim showed me how to refine what I was doing and helped me learn to do things like make dovetail neck joints. I owe both men a lot and I'm extremely grateful they took the time to show me what they did."

After Hoover had built a few guitars, he set up shop as a repairman and luthier. "I used the name Otis B. Rodeo on my guitars and had a cowboy on a bucking bronco as a logo," he says. "That was my stage name when I performed. I built a few dreadnoughts in the Martin style, but I didn't make much money doing it."

Hoover traveled around town by bicycle, which led to an encounter that would later have a huge impact on Hoover and the Santa Cruz Guitar Company. "I was riding by an old Victorian house one day in 1974 and I noticed some mandolin parts hanging up in a window," he recalls. "I was really curious so I knocked on the door and it turned out that Darol Anger and David Morse were making f-5 style mandolins there, complete with 'The Gibson' inlay on the peghead. I rushed home and brought back a completed guitar and one that I was still working on, and they were impressed enough with me that they invited me to join them in their mandolin building cooperative. We all had too much beatnik in us to actually pay ourselves, but we sold so few instruments, we eventually had to split up. I remember when I left I had the choice of taking a mandolin or \$200. Man, I spent that money fast."

By 1976 Richard Hoover had become a well-known figure in Santa Cruz's growing music scene. That year two repairmen



from Union Grove Music, Bruce Ross and William Davis, approached Hoover with an offer to invest in his small business, and in exchange, he would teach them to build guitars. Hoover was amenable to the idea. Since their investment was quickly spent on wood, tools and rent, they found an attorney who was a guitarist and was willing to do the partnership's legal work in exchange for their first guitar.

"One of the first things we had to do with the lawyer was to come up with a name for the company," Hoover says. "Since there were three of us, it didn't seem right to use just one of our names. It was the early '70s, a time when we are all supposed to be letting go of our egos, so it seemed like the thing to do. We thought about all kinds of names – I remember Soquel Guitars, Chinquapin Guitars and Banty Guitars were all contenders – but we couldn't agree on anything. Our lawyer said we needed to put something on the partnership document and wrote in 'Santa Cruz Guitar Company' with the understanding we would change it when we thought of something better. Well, we obviously didn't."

D

Now that the young luthiers had a company, they needed a guitar to sell, but coming up with their first model was difficult. They knew they didn't want to do a straight Martin or Gibson copy, but the music scene in 1976 didn't offer many clues as to what would sell. One problem was that the pop mainstream was going through one of its periodic bouts of aimlessness. A couple of years earlier, singer-songwriters routinely made the charts, and it was possible for musicians like James Taylor, Harry Chapin, Don McLean, Melanie, John Denver and Jim Croce to score Top 10 hits armed with little more than an acoustic guitar.

In 1976, however, mainstream pop seemed to consist almost entirely of novelty songs like C. W. McCall's "Convoy" and Rick Dees' "Disco Duck (Part 1)," disco hits like "Love Rollercoaster" and "(Shake Shake Shake) Shake Your Booty" and weaker efforts by formerly reliable stars like Paul McCartney's "Silly Love Songs" and Rod Stewart's "Tonight's the Night." There were rumblings in the acoustic underground, though. Small labels like Kicking Mule and Takoma were releasing a steady stream of recordings from artists like Leo Kottke, John Fahey, Dale Miller, Duck Baker, Robbie Basho and Peter Lang. These records sold very few copies, but it seemed like every copy sold triggered a new player to take up the acoustic guitar.

That same year, David Grisman formed the first version of his influential quintet with Hoover's former mandolin building partner, Darol Anger, and flatpicking guitar genius Tony Rice. William Ackerman also released his first LP, *In Search of the Turtle's Navel*, an event that was barely noticed at the time. A few years later, though, Ackerman took his brand of gentle acoustic-guitar music to the masses by launching his Windham Hill record label and, with it, the New Age music movement, which was a significant event in acoustic-guitar history.

All of this stirring underground caught the attention of the luthiers in Santa Cruz. "We had noticed that there was a change in the way people played acoustic guitar," Hoover recalls. "There were flatpickers like Clarence White, Tony Rice and Dan Crary, who were mixing jazz and other styles with fiddle tunes; fingerpickers like Kottke and Fahey doing

wild things with open tunings; and singer-songwriters like James Taylor, Stephen Stills and Joni Mitchell, who were doing very sophisticated musical things on flattop guitars, stuff that had never been heard before. We saw there was a need for a guitar that wasn't just a big booming dreadnought, something that could record well and could be played fingerstyle as well as flatpicked."

And so the D was born. "The D model was going to be the one guitar for everybody," Hoover says. "Luckily for the growth of the company, I later learned that making only one model wasn't such a good idea. Anyway, the concept was that our D would be voiced to have a more balanced tone, with equally good bass and treble response. Our D also had a flatter radius to the fretboard, a 113/16-inch width nut, and a wide, 1/8-inch saddle for good intonation. The D wasn't braced like a new Martin, which at the time had straight braces, or an old Martin, which would have had scalloped braces. The braces on our D tapered from the center of the X out towards the sides, which gave us the balanced bass-to-treble response we were after."

Another unique feature of the D was the use of koa for the sides and back. Today, practically every luthier of note uses koa, but back then it was a very unusual choice. Koa had been used fairly regularly in the early part of the 20th century, particularly for ukuleles and Hawaiian steel guitars built by makers like Martin, Knutsen and Weissenborn. But when the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, the interest in all things Hawaiian faded and the fine sound of koa wood was forgotten.

Hoover, Ross and Davis were searching for a tonewood that had a unique character both sonically and visually, and koa fit the bill admirably. Koa also seemed to solve a marketing problem that was bedeviling the fledgling company. "I prefer the tone of mahogany to rosewood," Hoover explains. "Rosewood has a warm, round tone, but it doesn't have the articulate sound, the snap and clarity of mahogany. I wanted to build mahogany guitars, but the problem was that, at the time, mahogany was positioned in the market as the blue-collar sister of rosewood, the cheaper alternative to rosewood.

"We were out to change the world with our guitars and we may have been naïve about a lot of things, but we were smart enough to figure out that the world wasn't ready for a premium mahogany guitar. Bruce and Bill had played a couple of 1920s Martin 00s that were made of koa and we thought that it would be a good alternative. It had a similar tone to mahogany and it looked so nice. In retrospect, the choice of koa may have slowed our progress in the market, because it was just one more new thing that we were offering, and perhaps it was one thing too many. We were just about the first company to start using koa in the 1970s, but, as we discovered back then, first isn't always the best place to be."

H

The year 1978 was an important one for the Santa Cruz Guitar Company. After two years of building guitars, William Davis discovered that he couldn't live on the meager amount of money that was trickling in. "Youth, good health, a very supportive sweetheart and the ability to live on nothing helped me to survive in those days," Hoover recalls. "Bill felt he needed more money, so Bruce and I bought out his share.

Bill had a great sense of design and he was instrumental in coming up with the look of our early guitars. He later got a job with George Lucas at Industrial Light and Magic, so he was able to use his considerable talents in a new way.”

That same year, SCGC – as musicians began to call the company – introduced their second model, which they dubbed the H. The idea for the guitar was brought to them by Paul Hostetter, a musician, artist and luthier who’d moved to Santa Cruz from Chicago in the 1960s. Hostetter had always loved Gibson’s Nick Lucas Special, a model that Gibson made in various configurations from 1928 to 1941. Hostetter felt that the iteration from around 1930, which featured a slope-shouldered 00 silhouette, a nearly 4 1/2” body depth and a 13-fret neck, was the best-sounding -version.

Hoover and Ross were intrigued by the idea, so working with input from Hostetter they built the first H, which took its name from the initial of the man who suggested it. On the first H, the top, back and sides were made from highly figured koa, the neck joined the body at the 13th fret, and it had a slotted headstock. The guitar was given the serial number H-1, which started the policy of giving each body shape its own number sequence.

“The H had a rich tone, lots of volume and an overall sweet tone,” Hoover says. “We always felt that the 13-fret-neck configuration on that body shape put the bridge in exactly the right place on the top, and there’s no denying that those guitars sound magical. But it was also a crashing failure in the marketplace. It was too small for the time – men just wouldn’t buy smaller guitars, which were perceived as “girly” – and the 13-fret neck was too confusing for most players.”

Rather than abandon the H altogether, Hoover and Ross made some adjustments to the overall design. They built the guitar with a 12-fret neck, made the body a little shallower and switched to a solid peghead. (At the time, the only way to acquire good tuning machines for a slotted-headstock steel-string guitar was to rob a set from a vintage guitar. In those pre-Waverly days, SCGC sometimes waited for months until a suitable set of gears turned up.) A little later, the H was also offered with a 14-fret neck.

Ironically, the early 13-fret H has become something of a collector’s item, and many players feel that it is the best-sounding model SCGC ever made. In 2003 SCGC again teamed up with Paul Hostetter to make a limited run of 15 custom 13-fret Hs. The series was so well-received that in 2004 the model was reintroduced under the designation h-13 and it is now part of the standard line.

F
In 1978 SCGC also introduced the FTC (numbered FTC-1), which had a flat top and a carved, arched back. The new guitar had a body silhouette based on the Gibson J-185, which was a small jumbo that was built between 1951 and 1958. “We made the early ones with maple back and sides and added a cutaway,” Hoover recalls. “The idea was to come up with a guitar that had the clarity and punch of an archtop and the warmth and sustain of a flattop. During the early stages of design, the cutaway was so asymmetrical that it looked weird to us. That’s why we came up with the asymmetrical headstock and the deco inlays that were sort of

scrunched up in the left-hand corner of the fret pane: to balance the look visually. I still think this is our best design. It was a really good guitar for jazz and sophisticated fingerstyle playing, but it worked well for blues and some of the earthier music as well.”

Unfortunately, the idea of a flattop guitar with a carved back proved to be too difficult to market, so, as they did with the H, the SCGC crew redesigned the guitar. They switched to a flat back, offered a plainer fretboard and made the cutaway an option. They also changed the name from FTC, which stood for Flat Top Cutaway, to the simpler F. The image of the FTC lived on for much longer than the guitar did. For years it was featured on the cover of the SCGC catalog and in their ads. In fact, the ad was so enticing that Eric Clapton called up after seeing it in a guitar magazine and ordered an FTC of his own.

From the start, the guitars of SCGC exhibited an almost maniacal attention to detail. “We wanted the guitars to look good, now matter how closely you examined them,” Hoover says. “I had worked with a Swedish finish carpenter before I met Bruce and Bill and learned a number of cool techniques that I was able to transfer to guitar making. I had also studied a number of books on violin making, which gave me the idea of starting a different tradition of steel-string-guitar building. The American steel-string guitar was born in a factory and companies like Martin, Washburn and Gibson were set up to produce guitars in high numbers. Many of the builders who started around the same time we did tried to emulate that style of building and, in the case of Taylor, Larivee and a few others, have become very good at it.

“But I wanted to build steel-string guitars in the same kind of small-workshop setting that Spanish guitars or violins were built in. That way, I felt we could maintain greater control over the final product. I wanted a workshop where we could take each particular piece of wood and voice it so it sounded as good as possible. It took a while at first to work out the system, but today I think we do an excellent job of building guitars that sound the way we intend them to.”

TR

As if losing a partner and launching two new models weren’t enough to keep Hoover and Ross on their toes in 1978, they also began a relationship with Tony Rice that would have a major impact on the company’s fortunes. “Darol Anger had kept in touch after the mandolin project and he brought Tony to my house a couple of times to show him what we were doing,” Hoover says. “Tony had been playing his 1935 D-28, the one that Clarence White had once owned, and he asked us to make a modern version of it. He didn’t want a replica, a copy or a direct replacement, but rather an instrument that was a complement to his old Martin. That D-28 has a very bassy, almost tubby tone. Tony wanted a -guitar with slightly more treble and midrange that would work well in the studio for the more modern stuff he was doing. Also, he wanted something that could be easily replaced because his old guitar was irreplaceable.”

Rice let SCGC have the d-28 for a while so they could take measurements and clean it up. The D-28 had seen some hard times and some dubious repair work. The most noticeable changes were the enlarged soundhole and the replaced, bound fretboard. Nobody is really sure why the soundhole was enlarged, but the most likely theory is that the top had become badly worn around the hole’s edges, and someone

just cut away the undamaged portions to give the hole a symmetrical appearance. The new fretboard is also something of mystery. The fretboard is narrow at $1\frac{5}{8}$ – the original nut width on the D-28 would have been $1\frac{3}{4}$ – and was not made by Martin. Some people who have examined the guitar believe Gretsch made the fretboard, and since it had 21 frets instead of the 20 frets common on most acoustic guitars, it may have actually been made for an electric model. The new fretboard, which was probably installed in the late 1950s, slightly shortened the D-28's scale length from 25.4 to 25.25, which lessens the string tension and gives the guitar a slightly "looser" feel.

After measuring the d-28 inside and out, SCGC built what they believed was the perfect guitar for Tony Rice. "He wanted a guitar that was all bass, at least compared to what we were making," Hoover says. "Tony said he would take care of the treble with his picking technique. We thought we knew better and made a guitar for him that was as balanced as what we usually did. It was also the first rosewood guitar we ever built, by the way. We were really pleased with it and we took it up to Tony in Marin County. He had a cold at the time so his ears were plugged up and he couldn't hear it very well, so we left it with him.

"A few days later he called up and said the guitar just didn't have what he was looking for. So we drove back up to pick it up and on the way back we stopped by Gryphon [Stringed Instruments in Palo Alto] and put it on consignment. I think Richard Johnston sold it the same day. I'm pretty sure that the guy who bought it never knew that he had the prototype of what became the Tony Rice Model."

Hoover then set about making another guitar for Rice, but this time he made sure the guitar had as much bass as possible. "We looked at what we had done to make our Ds sound balanced and then we undid it all," Hoover says. The SCGC team was curious to know what effect the larger soundhole would have on the guitar's tone, so they contacted Roger Siminoff, a respected luthier who had studied the acoustics of fretted instruments for years. "He told us about the Hemholtz effect, which stated that the larger the aperture on a resonating chamber, the higher the fundamental pitch will be in that chamber. Or, in other words, the big soundhole accentuated the treble and midrange. So we built the guitar with the larger soundhole, and that was what we heard."

Rice loved his new guitar and promptly began recording with it and playing it on stages across the country. (In a strange coincidence, the serial number on his first Santa Cruz guitar was D-28.) As more players saw and heard the guitar, they began to call up SCGC to order ones just like it. "When we started our company, we had an intense desire not to copy Martin, to make our own mark," Hoover recalls. "So when the calls came in asking us to make a guitar like Tony's, we declined the orders by telling people that it was a custom, one-off guitar and that we didn't plan to make any more. But after fielding thirty or forty calls for that guitar, we finally realized we had something that may have looked like an old herringbone dreadnought, but it was something Martin wasn't doing, and that's why people were asking for it."

In 1981, SCGC finally bowed to public pressure and started offering the Tony Rice Model as part of the standard line. It proved to be an immediate success and quickly became

SCGC's most visible model. Over the years the specs on the guitar would change as Rice's musical style evolved. "Initially we were trying to do a tubby, booming old pre-war Martin," Hoover says. "When we first met him, Tony was playing fiddle tunes and bluegrass songs, but he was also starting to play Coltrane, Django, Grisman's 'Dawg' music and all kinds of other things. Our current Tony Rice Model has evolved along with him, and now we have a guitar that is well-suited for contemporary bluegrass playing, that works well in the studio and on stage and sounds good on lead and rhythm. In a way, the current Tony Rice Model is closer in tone to the first guitar we built for him, the one he didn't think he liked."

Today, SCGC offers two versions of the Tony Rice Model. The standard version has Indian rosewood sides and back, a Sitka spruce top, mahogany neck and ebony fretboard. At $4\frac{1}{4}$ in diameter, the soundhole is slightly smaller than the enlarged hole on Rice's famous Martin d-28. The Tony Rice Professional, however, more closely replicates the d-28's features. The sides and back are Brazilian rosewood and the soundhole is the same diameter of $4\frac{9}{16}$. The scale length is also the slightly shorter 24.25, just like the d-28. This is the model that Tony Rice currently plays.

OM

The success of the Tony Rice model alerted Hoover to the fact that there was a market for instruments inspired by the Martin tradition, but that weren't slavish copies of the older guitars. In the early 1980s their Japanese distributor asked SCGC to come up with a model that was based on Martin's OM style from the late 1920s. Guitarist Eric Schoenberg had been championing the model since the 1960s, and by the late 1970s people finally started to wake up to its sonic possibility. In 1978, for example, luthier Nick Kukich released the Franklin OM, and in 1979 Martin opened their custom shop and started making a few OMs on special order.

"The OM was the opposite of the 13-fret H," Hoover says. "It had a wider body than the H, but it was shallower. It had a complex sound that was very versatile. This was a guitar that was perfectly suited to the new fingerstyle players we were hearing. It was also well-suited to singer-songwriters. Carol McComb, Kathy Fink and Marcy Marxer all played our OMs and probably sold more of those for us than Eric Clapton ever did FTCs. In a way, it was the guitar we should have made from the beginning, but it would have been a very hard sell in 1976."

The introduction of the OM marked a turning point for SCGC. Until then Hoover and Ross had been making about 36 guitars a year, of which 85 percent were Ds. "After the OM came out, our sales just started climbing," Hoover says. "Until then, it was still sort of weird to buy a guitar that wasn't built by Martin, Gibson or Guild. But something seemed to change around then, and it got to the point that the two of us couldn't handle the orders that were coming in. We were offering a good range of models and we were willing and able to tackle all kinds of custom work. From the beginning, about half of the guitars we built were custom, and as we increased our output, that ratio stayed the same."

FS

By 1987, Hoover and Ross hired two new employees to help them catch up with the backlog of orders. The first to sign on

was a sheet-metal worker named Michael Hornick, followed a few months later by Jeff Traugott. Both men were clear that they wanted to work at SCGC so they could learn to build guitars and eventually move out on their own. “I remembered how Bruce McGuire and Jim Patterson had helped me get started,” Hoover says. “I thought I should continue that tradition, so I hired Michael and Jeff.”

“When I started building in the early 1970s, there was almost no information on steel-string guitar making. But there were lots of builders across the country in a similar situation, and we started to network and share information. Bob Taylor down in San Diego, Jean Larrivee in Canada, Michael Gurian in New York – all were generous with their knowledge, and I think that’s why we all progressed so rapidly. When one of us found a new tool or technique we let everyone else know, which helped elevate the level of work from all the builders and helped give all of us more credibility in the marketplace.”

Hornick and Traugott quickly proved their worth when they helped design a new model called the FS. It was introduced in late 1987 and was a variation of the F, designed specifically for playing fingerstyle. The new model featured a lightly braced cedar top, Indian rosewood sides and back and a very austere appearance, which set it apart from just about every other acoustic guitar on the market at the time.

“The Tony Rice sort of happened to us, as it were, but the FS was our first attempt to come up with a guitar designed for a specific style from the ground up,” Hoover says. “The FS was also the first guitar we designed collectively. We all got together and talked about the modern fingerstyle playing that was going on at the time and we brainstormed on what we thought the market would want. We thought the F body shape was a perfect place to start, and since New Age guitar was so popular, we tried to minimize the amount of metal and plastic on the instrument to give it a more organic feel.”

The FS had rosewood binding with cobalt blue purfling, no fretboard inlays, a cutaway and a pointed headstock inspired by the innovative guitars of Steve Klein. “We found that the pointed headstock kept the strings in a straighter line than our other headstock shapes,” Hoover says. “This style helped keep the strings from binding in the nut when going into the altered tunings that so many players were experimenting with.” The FS was a modest but steady seller, but its spartan appointments and elegant shape had a major influence on many luthiers. These days so many builders are offering small jumbos with wood binding and a cutaway that it’s becoming cliché. As Hoover says about their early use of koa, “first isn’t always the best place to be.”

000

In 1989, Richard Hoover bought out his partner Bruce Ross, who was ready to move on to other things. Now that he was free to run SCGC on his own, Hoover decided to revamp the line and to update some of the features to meet the needs of contemporary players. “By 1990 we had four different headstock shapes,” Hoover says. “We had the original SCGC headstock, which we used on the Ds and Hs; the square headstock, which came on the Tony Rice and the OM; the pointed FS headstock; and the asymmetrical F headstock. We also had a variety of standard neck widths, and all of it was getting confusing. So we standardized the nut width on the

D, F and H to 1 11/16-inch and switched the headstocks on the D and H to the squared-off style.”

Once the older models were overhauled, Hoover began looking for ways to expand the line. One trend that caught everyone by surprise in the early 1990s was the revival of interest in 12-fret guitars. Prior to the introduction of the 14-fret Martin OM in 1929, most flattop guitars were built with 12-fret necks. While the new 14-fret guitars never completely replaced the older style, practically every serious player went for the longer neck and its easy access to higher frets. In the early 1960s there was a brief vogue for the archaic looking 12-fret guitars among the folk revivalists, but by 1970 they were back in closets and under beds.

In the late 1980s guitarists began to realize that 12-fret guitars were particularly well-suited to fingerpicking. They usually had wider fretboards, which made the left-hand fingering on complex passages easier. The bodies were longer than their 14-fret counterparts, which produced more volume, and the bridge was closer to the center of the top, which increased the bass response and overall clarity of tone. As the prices of vintage 12-frets from Martin and other builders began to climb, modern builders stepped in to fill the demand.

“When people first started asking us to make 12-fret guitars in the early 1990s, I just had to laugh,” Hoover says. “I felt like asking them, ‘Where were you in 1978 when we were making the first version of the H?’ Starting in the mid-1990s we started making a 12-fret 000 and, a little later, a 12-fret 00. We also started making 12-fret Ds, which were just cannons. I was very proud to have Norman Blake play one of our 12-fret Ds on the second record he made with Tony Rice. He’s such a stickler for vintage tone; having him play our guitar was a sign we got it right.”

Along with bringing out new body sizes, SCGC began to offer variations on their standard models. One that was particularly dear to Hoover’s heart was the Vintage Artist. “I always loved the sound of mahogany guitars,” he says, “but by the mid 1990s the cost of mahogany had gone up quite a bit and the prices of old d-18s were really starting to soar. I thought this would be a perfect time to try and build a premium mahogany guitar. So we came up with the Vintage Artist, a pre-war-style mahogany D, but in a dressier package. I hoped to entice more folks into trying mahogany, and it sold well, but not as well as I hoped. We still make it, but it’s not always in our price list.”

Another interesting variation was the Bob Brozman Baritone Guitar, which was based on the 12-fret D body. “Bob Brozman had played a baritone guitar that Martin Simpson owned and decided he wanted one of his own,” Hoover says. “Bob wanted to use a 27 scale and to have the top braced to be tuned down to C and played with really heavy strings. That guitar has an enormous, piano-like tone. It’s designed to be strung up with a .066 sixth string, but we’ve found that we can’t send them to stores strung like that, because players want to tune them up to E. With these massive strings on it, they can do real top damage almost instantly. We’re still trying to figure out that marketing problem.”

Two other signature models that Hoover is proud of were designed for Janis Ian and Sonia, who plays with Disappear

Fear. “Janis Ian had this great little guitar that Lloyd Baggs made for her, back before he started making pickups.” Hoover says. “Janis is a hellacious guitarist, but she’s very petite and wanted a guitar that fit her. It also needed state-of-the-art electronics so she could get her sound onstage. And it had to be black, with a black nut and saddle. We even tried to get black frets, but that didn’t work out. It was supposed to be a one-off, but as she played it on stage we started getting orders for it. She strings it up with .010s and it has very low action, a very short scale length, and a shallow body to help reduce feedback. Because the strings are so light, we can brace it extremely lightly and still have a good sound acoustically.”

“The Sonia H is built for Sonia of Disappear Fear,” Hoover explains. “Her first SCGC was an H with the original D peghead, 14-frets and electronics. She has an intense following worldwide and when she approached us about doing a signature model, we thought it sounded like a good idea. Oddly enough, most of them are sold through her fan club and not as many through stores.”

PW & VS

Almost from the day the Santa Cruz Guitar Company was founded, players have perceived them as expensive guitars. Part of the problem was that their most visible and well-known models, such as the Tony Rice or cutaway F with deco fretboard inlays, are expensive, but many of their other models are about the same price as guitars with similar features from competitors like Martin and Collings. In the late 1990s Richard Hoover decided to offer the PW or Pre-war series. “We came up with a guitar that was much plainer than our other guitars, with simpler trim and so forth,” he says. “By stripping off the cosmetic appointments, we don’t affect the tone, just the time it takes to build them. This lets us sell them at a lower price point. We offer them in rosewood and mahogany in both the D and OM size. At first we were only going to offer them for a limited time, but they were so well-received that we added them to the standard line.”

Another recent addition to the catalog has been a series of slope-shouldered Ds based on the classic Gibson guitars of the 1930s and 1940s. “I’ve always had a soft spot in my heart for sunburst Gibsons,” Hoover says. “They had such a wonderful look that is just so cowboy. Remember, I started out as Otis B. Rodeo, so it was probably inevitable that I would build something like this. We’re building a Vintage Jumbo, which has our standard 25.375-inch scale length and tapered braces. The Vintage Southerner is essentially the same thing, but with a shorter 24.750-inch scale length that makes it a bit easier to play. This guitar is a bit of a conundrum to me because everything I’ve learned over the years about acoustic physics says that a guitar with its bridge placement so close to the soundhole shouldn’t sound as good as it does. But it has a full tone and really shines on blues and earthier styles like that. Another thing that’s interesting about the Vintage Southerner is that it’s one of our first big guitars with a shorter scale. We’re getting more and more requests for shorter scales. Part of it is the sound, which is a little mellower than a long scale guitar.

“But there is another thing I’ve noticed,” Hoover adds. “I’ve always made guitars for people my age. When I was 19 most of my customers were around that age and now that I’m in my 50s, many of my customers are in their 50s. Well, we’re

not 19 anymore. The shorter scales are just more comfortable to play. We find the guys that have played Ds with long scales all their lives are getting stiffer hands and dodgy backs and we’re finding them moving to 000s with short scales out of self-defense. I think we’re going to see more of that in the future.”

A New Generation

In 2006, the Santa Cruz Guitar Company will celebrate its 30th anniversary. For Richard Hoover, it will be 40 years since he first dissected (and rebuilt) his Harmony guitar. In that time Hoover has gone from a struggling journeyman to the leader of a crew of a dozen skilled builders who produce almost 1000 guitars a year. He has designed and built guitars that are played by some of the finest musicians in the world. He has raised the art of steel-string lutherie to new levels and he has trained some of the most accomplished contemporary luthiers in his workshop. Of all these accomplishments, however, he is proudest of the last.

“I think my ultimate legacy will be the builders who came through my shop, learned to build guitars under my direction, and have gone on to carry on the tradition,” he says. “Our first employee was Michael Hornick, who took the job expressly to learn how to build guitars and then went on to build Shanti guitars. Jeff Traugott did the same thing. He came to us and said that he’d give us 110 percent for five years, and then he’d go out on his own. Bill Hardin is building guitars in Hawaii under the Bear Creek name, and Roy McAllister is now up in Washington.”

Richard Hoover sometimes envies the luthiers who have left the nest and are working alone, building guitars one at a time like he used to do more than three decades ago. “Then I remember my initial motivation for working with other people was that I got cabin fever working on my own,” he says. “And I also recall that by working as a team with guys like Jeff, Michael, Roy and Bill, we all learned more together than we ever could have on our own.”

Hoover is very proud of his current staff and admires how dedicated they are to the craft of building guitars. “Veteran builders like Adam Rose and Dan Roberts and the rest of the guys are making guitars that are as good as or better than anything SCGC has ever done. I think this might be the best SCGC team yet,” he says. “I know that some of my current crew will leave and start building their own guitars based on their own ideas, which is a sign that I’ve been doing my job.” Still, he hopes they don’t leave too soon. After all, there are still a lot of Santa Cruz guitars that need to be built.

Santa Cruz
GUITAR
COMPANY

HANDMADE, HANDED DOWN.

SANTACRUZGUITAR.COM - 831.425.0999