

Santa Cruz Guitar Company founder Richard Hoover exists in a depth of technicality that I find, frankly, overwhelming—and I've played guitar for 25 years. Where I see an unfinished fretboard, Hoover sees a piece of mathematical precision. Where I see a piece of wood, Hoover sees a potential guitar top, and taps on eight or so spots to hear the different tones the wood creates. He can hear that the tones are in harmony with each other.

On a tour of his shop, Hoover talks to me at length about different kinds of woods, and explains that the room we're in is "middle of the world" temperature and humidity. Those conditions, he explains, give his guitars the best chance of keeping their finely crafted integrity intact when they're shipped all over the planet.

"Wood is a big deal for us," he says, as he launches into the details of the polymerization and crystallization of resins that settle into the cells of the guitars. He takes pride in the fact that Santa Cruz Guitar Company, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this month, only sources responsibly harvested wood from family operations, and is transparent about its sources. The company also repurposes wood from a variety of unexpected places. The wood that "found us," as Hoover puts it, includes an old redwood dining room table, mahogany from a boat that sank off of New Orleans, and spruce from Alaska that had washed out to sea.

He holds up a piece of cedar that was found in an excavation on Orcas Island and gives it a thump with his finger.

"Lovely tone," he says quietly. "Just like a bell. It could be 1,000 years old."

There are no assembly lines, there are no mass-produced parts, there are no tuned-out workers mindlessly putting in hours. Instead, the shop is full of focused craftsmen—the dozen or so that I meet are all men—working on one aspect of one guitar with great care.

Hoover brings me up to speed on the cellular composition of wood, sugars, moisture and dehumidification and assures me that he doesn't expect me to remember everything. As I nod, I walk over to look at the wood against a wall. There's a chest-high stack of gorgeous Indian rosewood that was reclaimed from a forest floor. The idea that it will be expertly transformed into guitars is thrilling.

As we admire the rosewood, Hoover explains that there are now dehumidifying machines, but that the stabilizing process for wood used to take many years of being left outdoors. Master violin makers would acquire wood, not for themselves, but for their future students.

"Pretty noble," Hoover says, as he runs his hand across the top piece. I get the sense that his own students would say the same about him.

THE DISASSEMBLER

At age 16, Hoover wanted to know how guitars worked, so he did the unthinkable—and yet obvious—thing, and took one apart. He then faced the task of putting it back together. His mom, who was a research librarian at the local library, encouraged him to find a book on the topic. In doing so, she unknowingly set her teen on a course that would define his life's work.



Richard Hoover, founder Santa Cruz Guitar Company, with guitars

BODY OF WORK Richard Hoover, founder of Santa Cruz Guitar Company, in the company's workshop. PHOTO: KEANA PARKER

Unable to find information about guitar-making, Hoover settled for books about violin-making and became a student in an age-old lineage of artisans. At a time when guitars were being built in factories, not woodshops, Hoover set out to become a master guitar maker. Four decades later, he has unquestioningly reached mastery, and his company, Santa Cruz Guitar Company, is widely regarded as one of the finest guitar making outfits in the world. For Hoover, sharing his passion and depth of knowledge is a

way of demonstrating the care and craftsmanship put into his guitars. He's supremely confident in his team and the guitars they build. He guarantees musicians that his company can get the exact sound they want, and then delivers.

Big guitar factories pump out a million guitars per year. In that time, Santa Cruz Guitar Company makes around 500 guitars, 70 percent of which are custom built. Each one is crafted with unwavering attention to detail.

The workplace we're standing in is a woodworking shop—not a factory. There are no assembly lines, there are no mass-produced parts, there are no tuned-out workers mindlessly putting in hours. Instead, the shop is full of focused craftsmen—the dozen or so that I meet are all men—working on one aspect of one guitar with great care. Behind us, the rhythmic back and forth of sandpaper being used to get the perfect feel on a guitar neck is, for a moment, the only sound in the room.

Working in the shadow of great artists, under the watchful and caring eye of Hoover, the company's craftsmen are becoming masters. When asked how many of them play guitar, Hoover looks surprised and says, "Well, all of them." Then he adds with a smile, "But it's not a prerequisite."

CRAFTING A REPUTATION

Hoover considers his role of teacher and coach his legacy. When he started building guitars he found mentors in Santa Cruz-based hobbyist guitar makers James Patterson and Bruce McGuire who took time out of day jobs to teach Hoover the craft. He works to pay their generosity forward.

As Hoover began making his own guitars, he found that the handcrafted approach to guitar making was slow-going—he was only making three to four guitars per year. To speed things up, he embraced an open source ethos—which the company holds to this day—and opened up his process to others who wanted to learn. Within two weeks, two locals, Bruce Ross and Will Davis, approached him about making the "best possible guitar, without compromise." Together, the three established the Santa Cruz Guitar Company. Ross and Davis have both moved on, but Hoover gives them a lot of credit for the company's success.

Early on, the three would finish a guitar, put it in the car, and drive it to San Francisco to try to sell it to a shop. Hoover experimented with trying to connect with artists backstage to show them the company's guitars, but he quickly learned that was not an approach he wanted to take.

Santa Cruz Guitar Company

TAKING SHAPE Richard Hoover says other companies have tried and failed to bring a mass-market approach to Santa Cruz Guitar Company's craft. PHOTO: KEANA PARKER



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"I did enough of it to know that I hated it," he says, grimacing at the memory. "Nobody's at their best with that."

They got a break in 1980, when British guitar legend Eric Clapton saw a small advertisement for Santa Cruz guitars in *Frets* magazine and sent a handwritten letter requesting a custom guitar. Then, renowned bluegrass guitarist Tony Rice got onboard.

At that point, the shop was already making great-sounding guitars and people were "impressed at their sophistication and substance," says Hoover. But when it came to buying a guitar, people would worry what their friends thought about them spending a lot of money on a Santa Cruz guitar rather than, say, a Martin.

"People didn't have the confidence in their own ear, because we really are highly influenced by the burden of others' expectations," Hoover says. "But with a name like Eric Clapton or Tony Rice, not only did they know it was OK, but it was really a cool thing to tell their friends: 'I didn't buy a Martin, I got a Santa Cruz.'"

The family of Santa Cruz Guitar Company players is an all-star collection of master artists that includes Joan Baez, Janis Ian, Bill Frisell, David Crosby, Steve Earle, Norman and Nancy Blake, Brad Paisley, Ben Harper, Gillian Welch and dozens more.

Jazz guitar virtuoso Eric Skye, who has a signature Santa Cruz model, the OO-Syke, calls Hoover the sweetest, funniest, smartest person he knows. When the two toured the South together—Hoover to talk about Santa Cruz guitars, and Skye to play them—Hoover freely shared his vast knowledge and pocket wisdom with anyone who wanted to talk, including random people they met along the way who hadn't the slightest connection to guitars. As they drove from state to state, Hoover would pull the car over to educate Skye about historical landmarks, such as Civil War battle sites.

"Traveling one-on-one with him is so amazing," Skye says.

“I’ve seen him have conversations in the airport with a paint salesman he just met from Montana, explaining the difference between mahogany and Indian rosewood for the 10 millionth time, like he was just telling it for the first time.”

Skye was drawn to Santa Cruz guitars because of the company’s integrity and the sound he’s able to get from the instruments. After much back-and-forth between Hoover and Skye about what his signature model could be, the prototype was “a hole-in-one.” Skye took one strum and said, “OK, we’re done.” He explains that, unlike a saxophone, which can be as quiet as a whisper or as loud as a car horn, acoustic guitars typically don’t have much dynamic range. Santa Cruz guitars, however, are incredibly responsive.

“I dig in, and it just has more and more and more,” Skye says. “And I pull back and it gets sweeter and sweeter and sweeter. It’s just a whole other thing. It’s a living, breathing thing. It’s not just a guitar.”

THE BIG 4-0

On Sept. 24, Skye performs with Colin Hay, Don Edwards, James Nash and many others, as part of a weekend-long celebration of the Santa Cruz Guitar Company. Festivities include concerts at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center on Friday, Sept. 23, the Rio Theatre on Saturday, Sept. 24, and a Saturday workshop at local Santa Cruz dealer Sylvan Music, a shop that Hoover refers to as “kindred spirits with similar values.” The weekend promises to be a gathering of Hoover’s friends and admirers and a showcase of the brilliance of Santa Cruz Guitars.

As my tour of the shop winds down, I’m struck by its timelessness. The woodworking tools, hanging neatly above a workstation, could be from 100 years ago. The small, curled wood shavings on a table, and larger ones on the floor below, serve as a reminder of the slow, meticulous process of turning raw wood into exquisite musical instruments.

On a cabinet is a faded poster from the 1984 Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Hoover and his team work today with the same care and craftsmanship as when the poster was new—and nearly 10 years before that. I imagine the guitars, being played all over the world, that have been built in that time.

I’m also struck by the attention I’ve received, and am aware that Hoover shares the same information and passion with anyone who expresses an interest—including other guitar makers. The shop offers a schedule of tours and other companies regularly visit to see if they can do what Santa Cruz Guitar Company does—but faster and cheaper.

Sticking to his open source ethos, Hoover is happy to show these would-be competitors around and answer their questions.

“People come in and want to find ways to scale what we’re doing,” he says, “But they can’t. There’s no secret to what we do—it’s mastery. It’s the right training and then countless hours of practice. You can’t scale that.”

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