

Reverb

Santa Cruz Guitar Company at 40: Richard Hoover Reflects

By McCoy Tyler: February 21, 2017

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HANDMADE, HANDED DOWN.

Over the past few decades, the boutique acoustic guitar world has blossomed into a market all its own. Companies of all sizes and builders from all over the world have thrown their hats into the ring, steadily producing some of the most beautiful and innovative instruments ever made.

Santa Cruz Guitar Company has been there from the start. Their work remains one of the purest representations of the word boutique when it comes to acoustic guitars.

Founded 40 years ago by Richard Hoover, the company has carved out its own niche: small-scale and sustainable, with a focus on creating gorgeous, sophisticated-sounding instruments.

I had a chance to spend a rainy morning at the SCGC shop, talking with Richard Hoover about how he got started, how the company has evolved, and his thoughts on the market as a whole.

What initially inspired you to begin building guitars?

I was sitting on a curb, playing guitar and waiting for my girlfriend to come home. Suddenly I thought, "Wow, somebody makes these..." and decided to take my old Harmony apart. That's how it all started.

My father worked in all different mediums – wood, plastic, glass – so taking something apart and putting it back together wasn't new to me. And my mother was a reference librarian, so she got me the books on how to put it back together. But the only reference available at that time was for violin making.

The violin tradition, which is very different from the steel string guitar, is really still our foundation today. The violin is a very sophisticated instrument in a solo or orchestral context, so it requires more sophisticated building strategies.

Stradivarius's big secret was that his instruments were built in-tune with themselves. The components (composed of frequencies) allowed the instrument to resonate as a chord, rather than as random frequencies. It worked in unison, it gave sustain, and it had complex overtones within that harmony. And that's the strategy that we apply today.

What was the impetus for starting Santa Cruz Guitar Co.?

Well, I couldn't learn fast enough on my own. There was still a lot of discovery involved at that time because the network hadn't developed yet. There were people out there – pioneers like [Jean] Larriveé and [Michael] Gurian (and they were just the tip of the iceberg) – but I wasn't aware of them at the time. I wouldn't get to meet those guys for years.



Stradivarius's big secret was that his instruments were built in-tune with themselves. "Trying to do this on my own required adhering to the scientific method. If you want to experiment, you only change one factor of something you know already works. If you change two things, suddenly you're lost and don't know what the effect was.

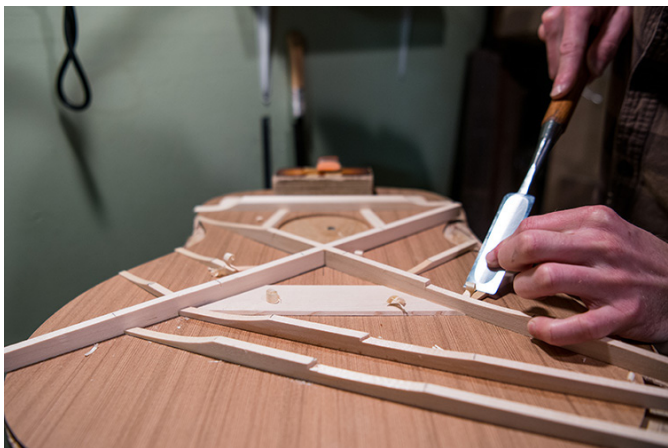
So think about that as an individual making guitars. It would take forever to really refine that and to understand what those violin makers were talking about. Because of this, I wanted to pitch in with people and work as a team. Being able to learn faster meant being able to make more instruments and to experiment more.

I started with two partners in the early '70s. Today, 40 years later, here we are with about 16 builders in our shop.

So the team aspect has been there since the beginning?

Oh, yeah. I fiercely defend that. Nobody here has ever made a Santa Cruz guitar on their own.

In what ways has the boutique guitar market evolved throughout the years, and how does it inform your current approach?



Well, I don't mean to sound arrogant here, but we've always worked independently of the market trends. When we started out, there wasn't a boutique guitar business. That's not to dismiss people's individual efforts at that time. I just didn't know who they were.

For us, it wasn't about growing into the next Martin Guitar Company, it was about doing custom lutherie as a small team. And that's as good a definition of a boutique builder as I could give.

What's different today is that the knowledge needed to build a guitar is ubiquitous." Some of the builders of my generation fully intended to be the next Martin, and there were others who weren't even that interested in doing business. So we never had a need to respond to what other people were doing because we already had our own niche.

Though being inspired by and learning from those builders is a different story. We've had a rich history of sharing with others and being open-source about what we do.

In the boutique world, there is some very sophisticated stuff being built. New people come along all the time, and there are still some people vying to be one of the big players.

What's different today is that the knowledge needed to build a guitar is ubiquitous. If you can sort through the nonsense on the internet, you can learn how to build a credible instrument. And if you have naturally good hand-eye coordination and a high enough limit on your credit card, you can be a player in the modern scene.

Do you find that accessibility of knowledge frustrating in any way?

Do you mean, is it annoying? [Laughs] Well, we rolled up our sleeves and hacked through the jungle for years and years with a machete to get to the source of that knowledge only to look behind us and find people with hotdog carts and SUVs.

But all of that knowledge has propelled the craft to higher and higher levels of workmanship, so ultimately, it's great for the player.

On the other hand, though, now it's also possible for somebody to make a very credible-looking guitar out of really expensive woods with really reasonable craftsmanship without building any differently than Taylor does, for example.

As a friend of mine told me, "Steel string guitars are loud enough – marketing takes care of the rest." Just because somebody is spending lots of money on materials and doing exquisite craftsmanship doesn't necessarily make for a more sophisticated-sounding guitar.

The idea that there's something for everybody is also a bit nonsensical. Things like sustain are quantifiable. Complexity of overtones, likewise. Everybody wants those two qualities. The subjective nature of guitars would be the things you can manipulate on your sound system – volume, EQ, or tone.



What role does the player have in your concept of building?

When I started building in the late '60s, nobody played anything but a dreadnaught in response to guitars getting louder and louder, bigger and bigger. Even an OM was something that only a retired music teacher would play. If you were serious, you played a dreadnaught.

As the average player has become more sophisticated – perhaps going from simple strumming and vocal accompaniment to open tunings etc. – they've noticed the limitations of a big, boomy, predominantly bassy guitar.

How good a guitar sounds is talked about in ad copy all the time, but I think of it as a player."

I would say that the trend for smaller guitars made by big companies started in the mid-'80s and that we were influential in that trend. Our OM and H model were our earliest small-bodied designs.

With smaller bodied guitars you can achieve a more even EQ and the nuance and sophistication of your playing can be expressed without being overpowered by bass frequencies. That's a huge trend that we have recognized. And ultimately, the players were the ones who drove that, not the manufacturers.

What makes SCGC unique?

I would say our ability to manipulate and control sound. How good a guitar sounds is talked about in ad copy all the time, but I think of it as a player. As you codify chord shapes into your DNA, you can begin to improvise. And though you can get pretty far out there, you always know your way back home.

We do the same thing when we build guitars. By using different woods, bracing, air spaces, and in fine tuning all of these factors, we truly can manipulate everything you could do on a high end sound system and assure the sustain and complexity of overtones that we all love.

A lot of players have never heard a guitar that is sophisticated sounding. If you go into a store, there are plenty of instruments that sound loud and are great in their functionality, but if you want something that will allow you to be inspired and creative and never get bored, well, that's a different story.

It's expensive to build this way because it's not efficient. But we value sophistication of sound over efficiency.

What role does sustainability play in your craft?

Well, it's not a role as much as a foundation. One of the joys of building guitars is that we are doing something of value, we're helping people to be creative and sensitive, if you will. And we get to hang around people who are a lot more pleasant to be around than in many other businesses.

To carry that concept through to our sourcing, everything we use is sustainably harvested – reclaimed or sustainably yielded. It's not that difficult to do, but then again, think of



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our size. We're making 500 guitars or less a year as opposed to 120,000 to 1,000,000 like the bigger companies. So we can set an example by doing the right thing.

That's not a marketing thing for us. In fact, I didn't want to talk about it at all for years. But it's truly fundamental to the way we do business, not a trend or a marketing gimmick.

Boy, that sounds snobby doesn't it! [Laughs]

SCGC has amassed quite a list of endorsees over the years, from Tony Rice and Doc Watson to Eric Clapton and Brad Paisley. What has it been like working with some of the guitar greats?

Eric Clapton was just beautiful serendipity. He saw an ad that was about the size of four postage stamps in Frets Magazine, which was the first widely read acoustic music publication. He said, "That's beautiful, how can I get one?" And that was our FTC model.

Up to that time, we could have made the best sounding guitar in the world, but when somebody played it and thought about buying it, they would still have great reservations. What would their friends think if they bought this off-brand guitar instead of a sure thing like a Martin?

But when Eric Clapton and Tony Rice began playing our guitars, it was immediately okay to play a Santa Cruz. They had that kind of credibility.

All of our business with Eric has been done through his guitar managers, Lee Dickson for many years, and Dan Durling who does it now. I've never actually talked to Eric, you know, he's really insulated. But it's been a really good thing for us and drove us to do things that we couldn't do before.

How did Brad Paisley become aware of SCGC?

I've gotten this story secondhand from a dealer in Franklin, Tennessee where the country royalty live. Supposedly Brad had come in and had played every guitar in the store more than once, and kept coming back to the D/PW specifically because it had the sophistication of sound he needed to get his message across.

From that, we developed a design that would work to his specifications, and he then asked us to make his signature model. And what a funny disconnect – we make 500 guitars a year, and Brad is probably one of the best known guitar players on the planet. We wondered how in the world we were going to satisfy that.

How he put it was that people stand in line around the block before and after shows to talk to him, and many times they will come up holding a guitar they bought. Sometimes they not only want him to sign it, but also perhaps to affirm that they made a wise decision.

He has always praised quality over quantity, and he wants somebody who buys a guitar with his name on it to truly get something that will inspire them for a lifetime. And that's our specialty.

You recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of SCGC. Is there anything exciting that you are looking forward to in 2017?

Most definitely. The exciting stuff for us is not like with the bigger companies that have to introduce a new wood, tone concept, or partnership. For us, it's about getting better and better at what we do.

Our custom work (cosmetics, function, sound) continues to be an ever increasing percentage of what we do. Right now it's around 70%. And through that, we have a direct connection with our customers that most larger companies whose business is done exclusively with their dealers don't get. Our NAMM booth this year showcased our custom possibilities and reflected that direct connection to the customer.

We've also found it necessary to extend what we do into cases, strings, and tuning machines, as we weren't able to get the quality that met the standard of our guitars. It's not that manufacturers weren't capable of meeting these standards, rather, it didn't fit their price targets.

What are your thoughts on the rosewood regulations?

I would say that the waters have been very muddled by the politics involved, not to mention pride, and maybe even a little greed. How would you like to be in charge of deciding which wood species we should be protecting and preserving for future generations?

Ultimately, none of us have the wisdom to make those kind of decisions. So we pull people together collectively to do what we hope is the best thing. I support the regulations, first and foremost, but people who have economic pride issues contest them like crazy, so there's a lot of misinformation and fear mongering that gets out there.

The fact that all Dalbergias – which is Brazilian, Indian, Madagascar, all of the rosewoods – should be on this list for protection is really logical. You can argue with how they enforce the regulations, but personally, none of us are smart enough to make those decisions. And for us, it's simply filling out paperwork. It's the cost of doing business – a tax on doing the right thing, if you ask me.

New CITES Regulations For All Rosewood Species

A new regulation takes effect on January 2, 2017 calling for documentation when shipping internationally.

One last question, is a well-groomed beard a requirement for working at SCGC?

Well, let me put it this way: I will be celebrating my 45th wedding anniversary this year, my wife has never seen me without a beard, and she doesn't care to! My beard predates my guitar building, so I don't know – I guess I'm a trendsetter.



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