

## Inside The Trojan Horse: Santa Cruz Guitar Company

By Jake Kelly September 1st, 2011

There are those that believe acoustic guitar design was perfected before World War II. But for the last 35 years, the Santa Cruz Guitar Company has been improving on the designs of the past and fine tuning them for each individual instrument that leaves their shop.

“We do a lot of Trojan Horse, stealth stuff,” company founder and owner Richard Hoover says. “The dangerous stuff is on the inside where you can’t see it.”

These refinements often advance the capacity of the guitar beyond what some thought possible; unbridling the tone, as if removing a blanket that was hindering the true sound of the instrument.

While the emphasis is on tone, consideration is placed into other aspects of the guitar, such as projection, volume, strength, durability, and aesthetics.

Most people are unaware that they’re already familiar with the sound of some of Santa Cruz’s guitars. Nashville session ace Mark Casstevens and his SCGC Vintage Artist model are predominately featured on Brooks and Dunn’s “My Maria” and Lee Ann Womack’s crossover hit “I Hope You Dance.” Casstevens also used his Santa Cruz guitar as his primary acoustic on the eight Garth Brooks albums.

Anyone who is unfamiliar with those songs is still likely to have heard Santa Cruz guitars, as the list of players ranges from behind-the-scene studio cats such as Casstevens and Richard Bennett to high profile artists like Eric Clapton and Elvis Costello.

The classic look of the Santa Cruz line is borrowed from the instruments of the classic era of American guitar manufacturing such as Martin’s dreadnought D-28, 00-18, and OM-28; and Gibson’s sloped-shoulder dreadnought J-45, Nick Lucas and J-185. Sometimes the external differences from the instruments that inspired them are so subtle that only the astute guitarist would notice: lack of dot inlays on the fingerboard, a different ornamentation not usually found with a guitar made of a given tonewood, and, of course, the name (or in some cases, just the initials) on the headstock.

However, Hoover believes that through the years some aspects have changed regarding what musicians require from their instruments. For example, the dreadnought’s size was developed in a quest for volume in order to compete with other louder acoustic instruments, where now that

problem can be solved by stepping up to a mic or plugging the guitar in. So instead of just trying to obtain more volume, the emphasis of the design can be for tone.

Conversely, development of newer designs and understanding of materials allow smaller instruments to produce a wider range of tone at a greater volume.

Santa Cruz’s 12 craftsmen produce about 700 guitars a year, which is what the major U.S. guitar companies produce in a week, according to Hoover. Since the production emphasis is on quality and not quantity, only the finest available tonewoods are sought out and used on SCGC’s instruments.

“In true lutherie, the material is essential to the quality of what you do, and you can’t get sophisticated sound without the proper treatment and choice of wood,” Hoover says.

The search for old harvest traditional tonewood spans the globe, but sometimes the search is made easier because of Santa Cruz’s reputation. “What’s neat about this is wood now finds us,” he says.

Some instruments have an interesting history before they’re even built. There’s a source of Brazilian rosewood from a defunct knife company in Sweden that used to use the wood for handles; there’s a stash of wood that was recently discovered that had been stored away by a Spanish cabinet maker who had passed away some time ago; and Hoover recovered a beam made of Adirondack spruce from a building that was erected in 1897.

But Santa Cruz also uses new stock of responsibly harvested wood as well. Hoover states their green philosophy extends from the company’s beginning, long before it became fashionable to wave that flag.

“In the last couple of years some influential people convinced me that it’s an important story to tell because it helps people realize they can get the best stuff out of responsibly harvested material.”

It wasn’t long after the California-based company’s founding that their ultra high-quality, fine sounding guitars attracted the attention of great players and artists. Many of these players not only turn to Santa Cruz to duplicate or replace their prized vintage instruments, but to improve upon them as well. An early example of such work was a instrument commissioned by virtuoso Tony Rice, which

was modeled after his Martin that was once owned by legendary picker Clarence White. That guitar served as the inspiration for the Tony Rice model, which some consider the flagship of the Santa Cruz line.

While the company does have a set line and catalog of instruments, they are small enough to do such custom orders along with their regular production. Hoover estimates that sixty-five percent of the guitars they manufacture are custom order instruments.

Santa Cruz custom guitars are often designed to address problems a musician might have had with other instruments, fulfill a player's specific needs, or make a visual statement befitting of the artist. In some cases, this collaboration between player and builder leads to a signature instrument.

Renowned cowboy singer and western music historian Don Edwards bought his first Santa Cruz after becoming aware of them through labelmate and prominent flatpicker Norman Blake.

Edwards had garnered attention from a few different circles and was even offered an endorsement from one of the major guitar manufacturers. "There's lots of great guitars out there, a lot of great builders. But I like the rapport I have with Richard," says Edwards. "What I like about Santa Cruz is they are a hands-on company."

When talking about the creation of the signature model, Hoover asked Edwards what he thought was a real cowboy's guitar. "I said probably an all mahogany guitar. What they might play around a campfire or something," Edwards recalls telling him. (Martin referred to their original all mahogany guitar as one for "general knock-about use.")

Santa Cruz had already introduced a series of all mahogany guitars called 1929, a straight-forward line of unadorned instruments, based off the Martin 0 and 00-sized (and 000, to complete Santa Cruz's series) guitars which were introduced in 1929-30. The lack of ornamentation originally made the guitar more affordable to the cash-strapped masses; however, some believe the tone of the originals was less than inspiring.

"I've always wanted to make an all mahogany guitar. The tone of mahogany is exquisite, and most players haven't had the chance to experience an intelligently made all mahogany guitar," says Hoover.

The collaboration between Hoover and Edwards yielded The Cowboy Singer, an understated, yet deluxe, model based on the SCGC 1929-00 guitar. It is distinguished by its antique sunburst finish, natural wood binding, slotted headstock, an inlaid 'lone star' at the fifth fret, and Edwards' signature on the fretboard just above the soundhole.

The guitar was very well received upon its introduction at the NAMM trade shows in Nashville and Los Angeles. "I just can't believe the kinds of accolades the guitar has got," says Edwards. "My guitar got better reviews than I ever got."

The ability to produce custom guitars also gives Santa Cruz dealers an edge. Rick Fagan, of Rick's Guitar Shop in San Diego, California, is able to order custom instruments that he believes have an appeal to his clientele.

Walking through the shop, Fagan points out custom-ordered guitars and the features and variations he requested based on his customers' preferences.

"Sometimes customers may have different playing options," says Fagan. "Somebody says, 'I really like this OM model, but the 1 1/4" neck is just a little too narrow for me.' So, I'm happy to custom order the guitar with the wider neck."

"Sometimes people come in, and they would like to add special inlay, maybe an abalone top. So, there are two things: the performance option, and the more visual," Fagan says.

And while Santa Cruz's catalog mostly features guitars with what Hoover describes as "simple elegance," he is willing to indulge any request for opulence and ornamentation. But, Hoover adds, "The important thing is, we put the same body of knowledge, skills and talent in our plainest guitars as we do in our fanciest."

Even more revered than the visual appeal of Santa Cruz guitars is their sound. They have a reputation for being highly resonate and having a complexity of overtones, thanks to the highly resonant tonewoods of the body and the finely tuned braces hidden beneath the top.

So what's on the horizon for the next 35 years? Will Santa Cruz Guitar Company be swallowed up by one of the larger music conglomerates? Sold off to the highest bidder?

Hoover is quick to squash such ideas. "I'm doing exactly what I want to do. What price would you put on that?"

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