

Don Edwards Cowboy Singer Guitar

By Charles Sauflay

Santa Cruz
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HANDMADE, HANDED DOWN.

The all mahogany-bodied, 12-fret, 00-sized Don Edwards Cowboy Singer perfectly embodies the balance between organic and exacting.

It's nice to imagine that a little bit of every guitar's creator comes out in the instrument itself. But that notion is entirely more believable when you play a Santa Cruz. Richard Hoover, who co-founded the company in 1976 before taking over in 1989, is a big-hearted dude with a deep love of guitars, good Mexican food, and a great tune. He's also an unwavering stickler for detail. Not surprisingly, his instruments walk the line between living, breathing things and precision equipment like few guitars can. And pickers from Tony Rice (who is honored with his own signature model dreadnought) to David Crosby count Santa Cruz guitars among their tools of choice.

The all mahogany-bodied, 12-fret, 00-sized Don Edwards Cowboy Singer— one of the latest signature creations from Santa Cruz— perfectly embodies the balance between organic and exacting. It's a guitar of obvious and uncompromising quality that looks timeless just sitting in its denim-and-leather case. But as a single strum reveals, it's an uncommonly lively and harmonically even instrument that also barks with an authority that belies its small size.

A Cowboy's Tale

The Cowboy Singer's namesake and inspiration, cowboy balladeer Don Edwards, could rightly be called a legend. He may be best known to contemporary listeners for his lament "Coyotes," which closed Werner Herzog's 2005 film *Grizzly Man*. But his signature Santa Cruz celebrates his 50th year as a keeper of the cowboy-song tradition. And while Santa Cruz could have slapped Don's name on just about any guitar and done his legacy justice, the full-spectrum voice of this signature model is particularly well-suited for performers who, like Edwards, rely on the simple combination of voice and guitar or even 6-string alone.

Hoover and Santa Cruz worked from a proven template when designing the Cowboy Singer. It's clearly inspired by Martin's enduring 00 shape, which dates back to the 1870s. But it's likely more specifically modeled after the 00-17, a gloss-finished, all-mahogany version of the 00 that Martin sold during the Great Depression.

While the Cowboy Singer looks understated in the tradition of those instruments, it is certainly not austere. The buffed nitrocellulose finish is absolutely glassy and flawlessly applied. That's a wonderful thing, given the gorgeous grain of the mahogany and the beautiful cocoa-hued sunburst.

Elsewhere on the Cowboy Singer, things are equally luxurious and low-key. Mahogany body binding subtly but effectively highlights the Cowboy Singer's classic lines and proportions. A small tortoise pickguard is a nod to Martin's early mid-century 00 and 000s, as is the pyramid bridge. The slotted, ebony-capped headstock—which is festooned with Waverly tuners topped by snakewood knobs—could also be an homage to Martin's 00s, circa 1930. But Hoover is also a fan of the sonic properties of slotted headstocks, citing an improved resonance that certainly seems part of the Cowboy Singers voice and sustain.

The fretboard is practically naked save for a lone star at the 5th fret (a nod to Edwards' Texas roots) and Edwards signature inlaid at the 19th fret. And the shallow-V neck with a 1 13/16" nut width gives you a spacious expanse for fingerpicking and chording.

Mellow and Bright as a Texas Sunset

The Cowboy Singer defies a lot of assumptions about how an all-mahogany guitar should sound. To be certain, there is a pleasing warmth and mellowness to the attack that is typical of a mahogany top. But the Santa Cruz has a dimension, brightness, and crystalline tone that you could safely call uncommon for this tonewood recipe.

That Santa Cruz gets such a wide spectrum of sound and projection out of a small-bodied mahogany acoustic speaks volumes about Hoover's extra-mile manufacturing methods, which include thin nitrocellulose finishes and time-consuming, tap-tuning of tops. And in the Cowboy Singer, the payoff comes in the form of an extremely dynamic, touch-responsive guitar that can gracefully accommodate stylistic shifts.

Fingerpicking a set of familiar, first-position folk chords is all it takes to hear the Cowboy Singer's dynamic range. Many mahogany-topped guitars have limited headroom, and really attacking them when chording will blur overtones. The Cowboy Singer, in contrast, feels limitless.

It's odd to describe an acoustic other than a dreadnought or jumbo in terms of horsepower, but in its own controlled way, the Cowboy Singer feels like it has the stuff in spades. You can move from nuanced upper-register picking to more vigorous chord strumming without sacrificing any harmonic detail. And in the hands of a skilled singer and fingerpicker, the shift can be startlingly effective and prompt a lot of musical drama and moods. In that respect, it's easy to see why Edwards—a performer who relies almost entirely on the sound of his voice and guitar—arrived at this design.

One of the merits of 12-fret guitars (which have their neck joint at this point, rather than at the standard 14th fret) is that the increased distance between the bridge and soundhole can make a body less stiff and, in some cases, capable of producing richer tones. It's hard to know how much this factors into the voice of the Cowboy Singer, particularly given how bright it can be for a mahogany guitar. But you certainly get the sense that the 12-fret configuration of the Cowboy Singer has a lot to do with how deftly the guitar balances rubbery bass tones and bell-like trebles. The balance becomes even more remarkable when you use a capo on the Cowboy Singer. Typically, playing with a capo trades low-end oomph for high-harmonic zing. But even with a capo at the 5th fret, the Cowboy Singer has plenty of thump for thumbpicked alternating bass lines (though its wide string spacing means a lot of capos won't fret all six strings at the 5th fret or higher).

Open tunings showcase the Cowboy Singer's remarkable combination of girth, chime, and resonance, and reveal the guitar's lively energy. Variations on open G and DADGAD that are heavy on octaves lured me into playing fewer notes—more slowly—so I could relish the even, ringing sustain and the surprising multitude of overtones you can coax out of the Cowboy Singer's compact body.

The Verdict

Just about any guitar from the Santa Cruz factory is bound to be some measure of exquisite. And even by the company's lofty standards, the Don Edwards Cowboy Singer is soulful and extraordinarily beautiful to look at and play. With its wide string spacing, the fretboard is ideal for peppering fingerstyle work with pull-offs, hammer-ons, and bends. But it's the Cowboy Singer's broad and multifaceted sonic signature that makes this Santa Cruz special. It has superb and unusual balance and dynamic range for an all-mahogany body—a distinction that's certainly attributable to Richard Hoover's holistic and exacting approach to guitar building. And if you're a fingerstylist who digs the feel of a 12-fret neck, or a singer and picker who looks to the guitar for texture and nuance, it's hard to imagine a finer slab of wood and wire for the job.



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