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Artisan turns vintage wood into treasures

By Bruce Newman San Jose Mercury News/MCT | Posted: Friday, July 29, 2011

Santa Cruz
GUITAR
COMPANY

HANDMADE, HANDED DOWN.

SANTA CRUZ — The philosophical riddle is posed so often it has grown mossy with cliché: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? It turns out the answer is yes, it makes an amazing sound, although the eruption of this joyful noise may not occur for centuries, when it is sliced into pear-shaped tones at the Santa Cruz Guitar Company.

Just as Michelangelo believed every block of stone had a statue hidden inside, craftsmen in Santa Cruz who make artisanal acoustic guitars crave fallen timber for its distinctive timbre.

“Flavors, colors on an artist’s palette, that’s what we’re creating,” says Richard Hoover, whose groundbreaking guitar company is preparing to observe its 35th anniversary.

By harvesting rare rosewood from Brazilian forests cut down in the 1920s, and 100-year-old mahogany planted for Britain’s Royal Navy — a reverberating echo of empire — Hoover has indulged the “scientific romance” of a boutique guitar-making movement that he himself carved out.

For the company’s birthday celebration, Hoover is making plans for a series of guitars using locally grown wood that give new meaning to the term “vintage.” He has a piece of California sycamore — now a 6-inch thickness of board, just 30 inches long and 10 inches wide — that fell into the San Lorenzo River and washed downstream to Santa Cruz. During a recent excavation for new townhomes, the log was unearthed from 30 feet of silt, where Hoover believes it was buried 5,000 years ago.

“We’ll probably make five guitars from that,” he says.

The company produces fewer than 700 handcrafted acoustic guitars a year. The company’s breakthrough came in the early ‘80s, when guitar god Eric Clapton saw a small ad for Santa Cruz Guitars in a Cupertino-based enthusiasts’ magazine called *Frets*, and ordered one. “You bypass years of trying to establish credibility when Clapton plays your guitar,” Hoover says.

At 60, with ponytail, full beard and glasses, Hoover bears the unmistakable markings of a man who chose to come to Santa Cruz, which happened after he ran away from home once, then left for good at 17. He picked up the guitar himself when he was 13. “To impress a girl,” he says. “That’s why we all picked up guitars.”

The first time he took one apart, there was no written information on how to build one by hand, so Hoover consulted texts on violin-making, and became a self-taught luthier at 16. That taught him how to use the wood to manipulate sound. “It’s almost like composing a chord on a piano,” he says, sniffing at bigger competitors such as Martin and Taylor Guitars that make as many guitars in a day as his shop turns out in a year. “Making pre-sized components is like throwing rocks at a piano. You don’t know what kind of sound you’ll get.”

About 65 percent of Santa Cruz guitars are custom-made, and despite an average price of \$5,000 — some of the rare-wood instruments range as high as \$10,000 — if you put your order in today, the wait will be a year. Hoover and his team took 2.5 years to get the company’s 30th anniversary showpiece just right, producing an instrument of such sculptural artistry that it is valued at \$240,000.

Santa Cruz doesn’t sell directly to the public, but Hoover welcomes pilgrims to his sawdust seraglio, where a 1-year-old coyote mix named Maria lopes warily past black guitar cases with people’s names taped to them, which are everywhere.

“Richard still keeps it very small and personal,” says Mike Sparber, manager of Sylvan Music, a local dealer whose shop carries about two dozen Santa Cruz Guitars. “I don’t think there’s many companies where the owner will show you around, and tell you about the process from log to guitar. It’s something amazing that he’s created.”

Rich and Robin Nourie came all the way from Philadelphia last week to see the fountainhead from which so much of their musical delight has flowed. Rich got his first Santa Cruz guitar nearly seven years ago, and says he never goes

anywhere — anywhere — without it. “In that respect, it’s spent more time with him than I have,” says Robin, who recently gave her husband a second Santa Cruz for the couple’s 25th wedding anniversary.

“It’s very responsive, very sensitive,” Rich says of his wooden sidekick. “It comes alive in your lap. And it’s not the typical tone signature that you’d expect from a mahogany guitar. With all the skill, devotion and real love that goes into making an instrument here, this is just the beginning of their lives. Then they go out into the world, making music and bringing people together. For me, every night it’s sitting down and having this wonderful experience of my day disappearing into peace.”

Hoover is never sure where the trail he blazed will lead next. Right now, there’s a brownstone in the Bronx that’s full of mahogany, and a huge wine vat made of old-growth redwood just reclaimed near La Honda. Hoover believes the wine barrel would make spectacular guitar tops, producing tasty notes of berries, vanilla and Dylan, with a finish that is totally unplugged.



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