CALIFORNIA DREAMS

INSIDE THE SANTA CRUZ GUITAR COMPANY

By Teja Gerken

Santa Cruz Guitar Company
Handmade, Handed Down.

Founded 30 years ago, Santa Cruz Guitar Company has been a pioneer of modern American lutherie. Fusing tradition and innovation, the company has grown to be a leading manufacturer of custom instruments. Acoustic Guitar talks with cofounder Richard Hoover about his company's past, present, and future. Includes extended slideshow of our Santa Cruz shop visit.

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See extended slideshow of our Santa Cruz shop visit. In the relatively brief history of American custom guitars, the Santa Cruz Guitar Company occupies a very special place as a trailblazer, champion of quality construction and tone, and launchpad for several of today's hottest individual luthiers. Although Santa Cruz was preceded by companies such as Gurian and Mossman, it quickly came to play an integral role in the development of a new breed of guitar shop–one that merged a hippie spirit of sharing information with old-world craftsmanship and a desire to innovate.

Richard Hoover Shop TourA native of California's Central Valley, Richard Hoover had been tinkering with and playing guitars–with the stage name Otis B. Rodeo–for several years by 1972, when he arrived in Santa Cruz, California, a coastal town known for its great surf and University of California campus. When his Martin D-28 was stolen, Hoover, lacking the cash to buy another, sought out Bruce McGuire, an amateur builder of classical guitars, to learn guitar-making basics. He soon began building and repairing instruments, and before long he became a partner in a mandolin-building venture that included luthiers David Morse and (future violin star) Darol Anger.

The seeds for the Santa Cruz Guitar Company were planted in 1976. Begun as a partnership between Hoover, William Davis, and Bruce Ross (Davis and Ross both repaired guitars at a local music store), the young company was fueled by the three men's desire to build guitars for a new generation of steel-string guitarists then emerging–among them Tony Rice, who was about to revolutionize flatpicking, and a whole gaggle of fingerpickers (including Duck Baker, Dale Miller, and Will Ackerman) who comprised the rosters of the Kicking Mule and Windham Hill record labels.
At a time when the steel-string flattop market was dominated by large factories (essentially, Martin, Gibson, and Guild), the prospects for an unknown company offering custom instruments were slim at best–a challenge made greater by the company's initial design choices. For example, even though Santa Cruz's first model was a dreadnought, Hoover and his cohorts chose to build it with koa back and sides, a style familiar only to players who knew vintage guitars; initial response was mostly skeptical. However, the 1970s were a low point in terms of overall quality (and certainly, innovation) for virtually every American guitar factory, so players seeking excellent tone and custom-made instruments eventually realized that a familiar name on the headstock wasn't a guarantee of satisfaction.

Although the partners' combination of hard work, original ideas, and an ability to attract great players resulted in steady growth, profits remained meager in the early years. In 1978 Davis decided to try his luck in other fields (he eventually ended up at George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic), leaving Hoover and Ross to lead the company as a duo. While they continued to tweak and customize the original dreadnought design, they also began crafting new models. The H model, named for Santa Cruz–area luthier Paul Hostetter (who suggested making an instrument based on Gibson's small but deep-bodied Nick Lucas guitar), was the company's first foray into non-dreadnought shapes.

Although custom options (choice of woods, appointments, cutaways, neck-dimensions, and more) would allow for numerous variations with just these two models, Santa Cruz spent the following years building up a catalog of instruments that is now as extensive as any other. While its OMs and 12-fret 00s, 000s, and dreadnoughts pay homage to the Martin tradition, instruments such as the Vintage Jumbo, Vintage Southerner (reviewed in Acoustic Guitar July 2006), and RS were designed with a keen eye to Gibson's rich

history. But some of the coolest Santa Cruz designs are found in the models that don't come in a familiar-looking package. The company's F and FS guitars signaled the trend toward small-jumbo fingerstyle guitars; the PJ is a true parlor guitar with a huge voice (which recently got in-house competition from Santa Cruz's new Firefly travel guitar); and signature models for Tony Rice (dreadnought), Janis Ian (14-fret parlor), SONiA (based on the H model), and Bob Brozman (baritone) demonstrate the company's commitment to tailoring guitars for specific artists (and its ability to do so). Primarily known for flattops, Santa Cruz also offers archtops with 16-, 17-, or 18-inch wide bodies, and players looking for something completely different may want to check out the company's unique dreadnought mandocello .

After 30 years in the business, Richard Hoover can rightfully claim membership in a small club of guitar makers who set out with idealistic goals, weathered a few storms, and ultimately changed the landscape of high-end acoustic guitars by setting a new standard of tone and craftsmanship in new instruments. Now Santa Cruz's sole proprietor (in 1989 he bought out his remaining partner, Ross, who is still active in the industry as a wood broker), Hoover has seen his youthful dream exceed all expectations, and continues to do everything from answering the phones to working in the shop to traveling the planet in search of wood, or to educate players and dealers about his instruments. In this interview, Hoover reflects on three decades of life as a luthier, growing a business, observing trends, and looking toward the future.

What have been some of the highlights in Santa Cruz's history? I'd say the association with Tony Rice, but that's not the only connection we've ever had. Tony and Eric Clapton were simultaneous. We ran a postage-sized ad in Frets magazine, there was really nobody like us in there at that time, and we got a letter from Eric Clapton. It said something like, "I saw this beautiful guitar in Frets magazine. How do I make arrangements to get one in the flesh?" We didn't even know how to make an international call, but we figured it out, and we ended up building him three guitars. It was probably '77 or '78. And that put us on the map. We could tell bluegrass players "Tony," and other players "Eric Clapton," and it was like "OK, you must know what you're doing."

Most of your models are based on other existing instruments–including Martins and Gibsons–but none of them are straight copies. How would you describe the differences? I didn't ever want to make copies. What I wanted to do, though, was to make innovations, and I felt like if we could put innovations in a familiar-looking body like a dreadnought, OM, or our H model, people would try it out. If it looked too odd, they might not be interested in it. Rather than designing completely new body shapes, we decided to go with the flow and work on the inside. Bracing When I built on my own, I hit on some really important things that we used as a team. The three original builders came up with some neat stuff that we still use today, as far as bracing, etc. The only information I'd seen on musical instruments–I hadn't even seen the Irving Sloane book [Classic Guitar Construction] yet–was violin stuff. Those allowed more control over the sound of the instrument than a steel-string guitar, which had been in the realm of factories forever. By voicing and tuning, and working with the top and the back airspace, the taper of the body, size of the sound hole–all of those give you a great deal of control over how the guitar is going to sound.

How would you define the Santa Cruz tone? I'm also curious whether it has changed over the years, or whether your original vision is still what you're going for? Here's a really important lesson I learned: There isn't one guitar that you can convince everybody is right. By developing this range, which I refer to as "bright to dark for the tone, and "bass to treble" for the balance, we can make a lot of different tones, and a lot of different balances to meet players' needs. By voicing and tuning the braces, back, sides, and airspace, you can develop a really complex series of overtones, and you also get sustain. Since the guitar is tuned to itself, the airspace is tuned, and that's where it develops the sustain and complexity of overtones to be really rich and full. Our hallmark, throughout all our models, is really good sustain, and development of overtones around the fundamental.

How do you make sure that a custom guitar meets the expectations of the person placing the order? If you wanted to make absolutely sure that you got a guitar you liked, wouldn't it be better to just find a guitar that's already made, and that you can play? I'd say yes, in general, but not with Santa Cruz. I know that sounds boastful, but there are very few people who are doing this voicing and

tuning, and who have the background. There are a lot of people tapping on tops and so forth, and they're learning, but until they're experienced, they can't guarantee that [satisfaction].

How do you go about selecting woods?
Simply by resonance, and by experience, and there's also a body of information out there. Rosewoods are darker and warmer, mahogany has a little more brightness and some more clarity, and maple is really bright and clear. Different woods make different contributions to tone, and that is bright or dark.
I would like to mention the "green" nature of our business. We use a lot of sustainable-yield materials, like Indian rosewood that's grown like a plantation. With Sitka and European spruce, it's really important for us that we get really old stuff. One of the reasons that older guitars sound better than new ones is that the wood cures on the guitar. It's not moisture, because that's easy to get out; it's the crystallization of the resins. You can imagine that crystal sounds much better than tree sap! We take advantage of that by starting with old stuff.

Do you have a personal favorite Santa Cruz Guitar and wood combination? It's an H-13 in spruce and mahogany. I put a European spruce top on mine, because I like a little more clarity to the tone.

Your guitars are traditional in that they have dovetail neck joints and nitrocellulose finishes. What do you think the importance of those elements is? The dovetail joint is of course very traditional; it's also easy to do, and it makes the neck very integral to the body. The reason is that the more mass we put in the neck through large pegheads, big gears, or dense wood, the more focus it gives the guitar, which would then be great for jazz or fingerstyle. Having less mass in the neck–like with a slotted headstock and open-geared tuners–makes the guitar more open-sounding and user-friendly. The mass in the bridge also affects that. The dovetail joint allows us this trick [of playing with the mass], which just wouldn't transfer [vibrations] correctly from the neck to the body otherwise. We use the nitrocellulose finish because we can get it really thin, so that it doesn't hamper the resonance of the guitar, and we can also repair it if it gets broken. There's an art to that, but we can make finish repairs look like new. It's probably not a question of if but when something else will come along that serves those needs, but right now, I haven't had anything else that I really liked.

What are the different steps involved in the individual voicing and tuning that you do? The first step is the tuning of the braces and the top so that they're in harmony with each other. It's done by tapping and listening, but also by feeling the flexibility. Then there's a secondary tuning, after the guitar is assembled, where the top is tuned to the airspace by sanding around the perimeter of the edges.

What can you tell me about your bench-style building process? Does it basically mean that people are involved with more steps on the guitar than they would be on an assembly line? That's right. Instead of one process, people carry on a logical series of processes. An assembly-line situation is very efficient, but you don't always get what you want. You get a lot of variety and inconsistency in the sound, because each piece of wood is different. If it's not treated just so, it will have different characteristics, and they may cancel each other out. What's your day-to-day involvement with the company today? I do a lot of promotional stuff: I do workshops in stores, I go to all the major trade shows, even machine shows. I also do wood buying, things like that. As far as hands-on in the shop, I sometimes work on guitars, but I can't have a daily duty; I couldn't keep up my obligation.

You once told me that every now and then you build a prototype all by yourself. Is that something you enjoy doing? Yes! However, I wouldn't complete the whole thing. I'd do my specialties and then get it finished and set up by the regular crew. A strong focus in your shop seems always to have been that you believe in the strength of a team doing better work than a single luthier. I do indeed. In fact, the reason I left my own shop was that I thought I was going to take 20 years to figure this out. By working with other people, we could really accelerate the process. There are about 15 builders in the shop now, many with credentials from guitar-making schools in the United States or Europe.

What are your thoughts about using CNC (Computer Numerical Control) in your shop? CNC is wonderful. It's just another tool. The embryonic technology for that goes back to the early 1700s, in textile mills. Instead of a big board with holes in it to set up the loom, we've got digital commands. In fact, the CNC, when it first came around, had paper tape

with holes. Here's how we work it: A machine can never dictate our design. We know what's right and what's supposed to be there. Our designs dictate what we do on that machine. The voicing and tuning, CNC is not the tool for that job. It's best for things like making fret slots. Humans can get good enough to do fret slots, but you don't want the mark of the craftsman there.

And you were an early adapter of CNC, right?
Yes. We didn't own one, but being near Silicon Valley, there were a bunch of people who did that kind of machining, and so we did inlays, bridges, and some other stuff [with CNC] in the '80s. Then came Hartley Peavey (of Peavey Electronics), Tom Anderson (of Tom Anderson Guitarworks), and Bob Taylor (of Taylor Guitars), and we saw how those guys would work it and get the bugs out.

What do you think are the most important trends that you've seen in your 30 years in business?
People realizing that some of the biggest names aren't necessarily the best guitar. Also that they began accepting some more exotic woods. We were trying to sell koa dreadnoughts [when we first got started], and people went "Koa? What's koa?"

Shop TourHow about the future? Are there new challenges that you didn't used to have?
The acquisition of materials will be getting harder, and we will see some of them dropping off the radar. Indian rosewood, I think is probably not far off. And mahogany, it's not if but when that will go on the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) list with Brazilian rosewood and become difficult and very expensive to get. We've already seen some of this in the price of the guitars–they're going to cost more if you want the really good stuff.

I have some designs left in me that I'm looking forward to doing. With our experience and our refinements, we can do some really fancy stuff. What I also see is a plethora of individual builders, so it's going to be really competitive. I think for us, at least for my working career, we probably won't have to worry, because [the market] is red-hot right now. All of the boutique companies have great backorders, and there have been times when everyone who'd wanted a guitar already had one. I think mostly the marketplace is going to be really fascinating. I'm 55, and a large part of our demographic is my age. But I started building for those same people when they were 19 and 20. What we've seen is not only our ability to get way better, but their ability to get better and make some money, so that our work can be afforded. AG

HOOVER'S DISCIPLES
Besides having created a successful and lasting custom-guitar business, Richard Hoover trained several of today's most in-demand individual luthiers. As a matter of fact, it is fair to say that there is a Santa Cruz "school" of luthiery, a legacy that few other contemporary guitar makers can claim (Michael Gurian and Jean Larrivée come to mind). Among Hoover's star apprentices are Jeff Traugott and Michael Hornick (of Shanti Guitars); their success reflects his willingness to give back to his craftspeople. "Jeff and Michael came to me and said, 'I want to learn how to make guitars, so that I can make them under my own name.' That's fair enough," he remembers today. Other builders who got their start at Santa Cruz include Roy McAlister and Bill Hardin (of Bear Creek Guitars). Even South African luthier Marc Maingard came to the company to learn about the craft. More recently, former Santa Cruz employee Addam Stark set out to create his own specialized guitar-finishing business, and his services are used by a great number of individual luthiers who appreciate his skills with a spray gun.
Traugott recalls his reason for wanting to work at Santa Cruz. "I had a friend who owned a '70s koa Model D, and I remember thinking, 'Man, this guitar is so clean inside and out, and it sounds great'; it affected me in a very deep way." And although Hardin's own business–building primarily Weissenborn-style slide guitars in his one-person shop–is fundamentally different from Santa Cruz, Hardin fondly remembers his time in Hoover's shop. "Richard went out of his way to include the luthiers who worked for him in the direction he was taking Santa Cruz towards," he recalls, "and I always felt a sense of being a part of company that was committed to making the best."