CALIFORNIA

Four decades into building his unique custom guitars, JAMES GOODALL is making his most refined instruments ever.

By Teja Gerken

DREAMS

JAMES GOODALL—TEJA GERKEN; GUITAR PHOTO COURTESY GOODALL GUITARS

LUTHIER JAMES GOODALL was part of the early wave of American custom guitar makers who began building in the early 1970s. From the start, his guitars had their own look and sound. Rather than copying the Gibsons or Martins that were popular at the time, Goodall came up with original variations of standard shapes, a distinctive wing-shaped bridge, and a tone that put clarity before boom.

Through the years, one thing has remained constant: Goodall guitars are more about refinement and pure tone than radical innovation. Let's take a look at what makes Goodall guitars special and the journey his company has taken, from its beginnings as a single-luthier shop in Southern California to his small factory in Kailua Kona, Hawaii, to his company's current incarnation as a small family business on the northern California coast.

GOODALL MODELS

For many years, Goodall offered just three body sizes: a grand concert, the dreadnought-inspired Standard, and the Jumbo. But in the late '90s, Goodall not only designed two more original body styles (Parlor and Concert Jumbo), he began building a more traditional, Martin-inspired design: the aptly named Traditional series, which is available in 12-fret 000, OM, 12-fret dreadnought, and 14-fret dreadnought versions. In addition, Goodall also offers 12-strings as options on most models, a baritone design, a nylon-string crossover, and a classical guitar.

Since Goodall is now exclusively a custom shop (with prices starting at $4,700), most guitars are

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An all-koa body Jumbo model with "Royal Hawaiian" inlay.

GOODALL GUITARS

1. Luke Goodall works with a body mold in the shop's main assembly area.
2. Binding is applied to a body.
3. The rims of a body are sanded to a precise radius.
4. Goodall's gallery-like show room.
5. Jean, James, and Luke Goodall.
6. Several of Goodall's CNC-machined neck blanks.
7. A small portion of Goodall's wood storage.


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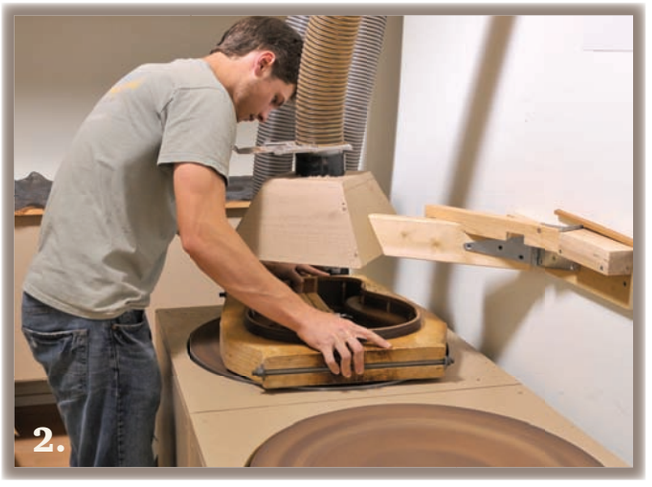
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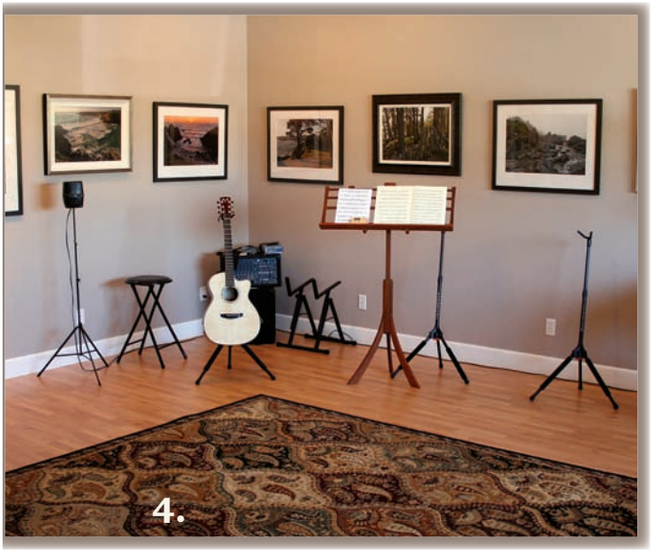
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TOP THREE PHOTOS COURTESY GOODALL GUITARS; BOTTOM PHOTOS—TEJA GERKEN

SAN DIEGO BEGINNINGS

A quintessential Californian, James Goodall grew up in San Diego, where surfing was (and continues to be) a part of his everyday life. One of Goodall's early attempts at starting a business was shaping surfboards out of foam and fiberglass while still in high school, in the mid-1960s. But, influenced by his mother, Helen Goodall, an artist with a gallery in San Diego's Balboa Park neighborhood, Goodall became a skilled painter of seascapes, and by age 19, he was making his living interpreting the California coastline on canvas. Coincidentally, Helen gave art lessons to two other future guitar luminaries, Kim and Larry Breedlove (now of Breedlove and Taylor Guitars, respectively).

Goodall's desire to build guitars can be traced to a Sunday morning in 1972: "I was in a church that had an incredible music team," he says, "and just overnight I got the desire to make and play a musical instrument." Although he had no previous experience with the guitar (he had been playing Baroque flutes and recorders), he took one of his seascapes to San Diego's American Dream music store (which would soon be the birthplace of Taylor Guitars) and traded it for a set of tonewoods. The store's owner, Sam Radding (an early partner in Taylor Guitars who today builds Go Guitar travel guitars), set Goodall up with some general advice. "When James first came into the American Dream, he brought a wooden flute he had made," Radding says. "It was quite well done, and very clean looking. He was interested in learning how to build guitars and, I think, working at the Dream. At that point, all of the benches were filled, and there just wasn't enough room for another permanent person. The best I could do was to offer him two weeks' time in the shop to watch and ask questions." Goodall took a close look at American Dream's jumbo shape, which he decided to modify slightly and use for his first instrument. "I built it partly at my father's—he had a band saw, a table saw, and router, so I borrowed his tools," Goodall says. "And part of it was done in the basement of the house I was renting."

FROM BRUSHES TO CHISELS

This first effort turned out surprisingly well, as did Goodall's plan to teach himself to play on it. He kept building, constantly trying to improve his skills, and eventually had offers to buy his instruments. "There were a number of people in the church I was in who wanted me to make them guitars," says Goodall, who was still making a living as an artist. "I kept occasionally getting an order, and eventually I had to make a decision whether to change vocations from being a seascape artist to making guitars." In about 1975, Goodall decided to switch from wielding brushes to handling chisels full time, setting up his first dedicated shop in his newly purchased house. "The carport area was enclosed and made a pretty nice workshop," he says.

Goodall faced all the challenges that other pioneering American custom luthiers were experiencing—few available resources, no specialized suppliers of tools and materials, and a customer base that was skeptical about a guitar that wasn't a Gibson, Guild, or Martin. But he benefited from the fact that the lutherie bug had spread with uncommon ferociousness throughout San Diego County, leading to a small but ultimately influential band of idealistic instrument makers. "It was kind of a small community, with the Breedloves, Greg and Janet Deering (of Deering Banjos), Geoff Stelling (of Stelling Banjo Works), and Bob Taylor," Goodall says.

While continuing to fulfill orders from his community of friends and church members, Goodall began selling his guitars through a network of dealers. Some of these shops, such as McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica, California, which signed on in the 1970s, continue to value Goodall's creations. "He wasn't copying anybody and he had his own vision," says McCabe's Nancy Felixson, who adds that several of the store's employees own Goodalls and that they've sold Goodalls to such well-known players as Walter Becker, Don Henley, David Lindley, and Keb' Mo'.

THE GOODALL SOUND

Goodall's first guitars were jumbos, but he quickly created a second model, which he called the Standard. A surprisingly original-looking interpretation of the dreadnought shape, Goodall's Standard body has rounder curves than the Martin dreadnought, as well as an original bridge shape. Although Goodall's line now includes ten different body styles (see "Goodall Models"), every Goodall guitar is built to fit the luthier's tonal ideal, which he describes as having "lots of complexity, but very lyrical sounding." Goodall also says that he tries to avoid the "metallic" string sound from becoming dominant, aiming instead for the sound to come more from the wood. Felixson says, "His background in listening to and playing classical music [on the flute] makes him go for a more open tone." Fat-sounding trebles and excellent balance are other trademark qualities that Goodall fans cite when asked about their guitar's tone.

Grammy-winning fingerstylist Doug Smith, who owns a 1990 cutaway Jumbo built with Indian rosewood and Sitka spruce and a 2004 Concert Jumbo built with koa and Engelmann spruce, says both of his guitars

Models *(continued)*

models in body size only—woods, appointments, scale length, and neck dimensions can be individually chosen (a complete list of options is available at goodallguitars.com). One exception to Goodall's à la carte approach is the Aloha model. Conceived as a more affordable instrument, the Aloha is built with koa or mahogany back and sides, a Sitka spruce top, and minimal appointments. Available in Grand Concert, Concert Jumbo, and Standard sizes, the Aloha models start at $4,000.

TRADITIONAL SERIES

Goodall's Traditional series guitars (which start at $5,000) fuse the signature Goodall voice with a good portion of vintage flattop tone and a look that doesn't hide its Martin influence. With redesigned bridges, headstocks, Waverly tuners,

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A Grand Concert–size Aloha model with a spruce top and koa back and sides.

GUITAR PHOTO COURTESY GOODALL GUITARS

are "very even in tone and volume across the strings, which makes it easy to control melody, bass, and middle voices." Smith says that the brighter tone of the Concert Jumbo makes it work well in the studio, but he really likes the Jumbo's darker bass. "It has a bass I can really dig into when I want it," Smith says. "That's the guitar I usually play in concerts." Slack-key guitarist Patrick Landeza feels so connected to his Hawaiian-made Indian rosewood and cedar Concert Jumbo model that he'd "feel like cheating" if he played another guitar. He also says that the guitar's tone works so well for slack-key—both strummed and fingerpicked—that "everyone asks to play my guitar."

Goodall achieves his lofty sonic goals without using any particularly radical recipes. His guitars are contemporary in that they use bolt-on necks and original body shapes, and he avoids building clones of classic instruments. For the most part, Goodall tapers his braces, rather than using the traditional scalloped shape found on vintage Martins, a factor that is likely to contribute to the guitar's smooth tonal balance. "We're just trying to make our product as perfect and as excellent as possible," Goodall says, "refining things to a point where it's more of a timeless thing, like the violin."

ON THE MOVE

In 1984, Goodall and his wife, Jean, who runs the business side of Goodall Guitars, decided it was time for a change from San Diego and set up shop in Fort Bragg, a small northern California town on the picturesque Mendocino coast. "It was mostly just a physical change," James says. "I kept working with the music stores and brought all my tools from San Diego up to Fort Bragg and made guitars by myself." Goodall had reached a level of efficiency where, without being aided by modern tools such as CNC machines, he was building an average of 35 guitars a year—easily twice that of many solo builders. "Back in the earlier days when I was building by myself, I was actually doing it considerably faster than we are now," Goodall says. "Over the years we've added refinements to our guitars that take considerably longer." He estimates that while it once took him about 40 hours to build a guitar, there are now around 65 hours (including Jean's time) in a typical guitar. "It's not magic," he says. "It's a lot of hard work, but we are efficient because of all the tools and jigs and fixtures, some that I've made, and every little step has its own station and jig and fixtures."

In 1992, the Goodalls got the itch to move again, this time to Hawaii. Settling in Kailua Kona, on the dry side of the Big Island, Goodall moved into a former cabinet shop in a small industrial park. Having reached the point where he was unable to meet the growing demand for his instruments, Goodall began island life with the goal of significantly growing his production capacity. "I was beginning to warm up to the idea of having a few employees," he says. By the late '90s he was running a mid-level production environment with a team of luthiers building "up to ten guitars a week" and maintained that level of production for the next decade. Part of his expanded production staff included his then-teenage son, Luke, who not only took a keen interest in his father's work, but proved to be a highly capable craftsperson.

No longer the only person involved in the building process, Goodall had to further refine his methods and find ways to adhere to his high standards. He considered acquiring a CNC machine to increase his shop's efficiency and even hatched a plan for a custom-made machine with former Flatiron Mandolins founder Steve Carlson, who had started a company (NC Solutions) dedicated to building custom CNC machines for the guitar industry. "Steve said, 'Send me your parts—your neck, bridge, and fretboard—and I'll reverse engineer them and do the programming for you. Then, when I finish your machine, you can make your own parts.' But he did such a good job making the parts that I just continued to have him make them for us," Goodall says. As a result, rather than investing in his own high-tech machinery, Goodall began outsourcing rough-shaped neck blanks, bridges, fingerboards, and some inlays.

Building several thousand guitars over the course of a decade, displaying at the annual NAMM shows, and working with international distributors gave Goodall much more visibility than he had as a solo luthier. And working in a larger production environment allowed him to experiment, compare guitars, and track results in ways that would be impossible for someone who only builds a few guitars each year. "What's amazing about Goodall is that even when he was building all those guitars in Hawaii, the quality was the same as when he was building by himself," Felixson says.

BACK TO FORT BRAGG

Living and working in Hawaii may seem close to paradise, but the isolation of an island also comes with challenges. Not only did an increase in volcanic smog emissions ("vog") affect the Goodalls' quality of life, but being on an island required the company to have virtually every bit of material shipped from the mainland. Coupled with the cost of air-freighting the finished guitars back off the island and a slumping economy, doing business in Hawaii became incredibly costly, so James, Jean, and Luke decided to move back to California and change the company's business model while they were at it.

Returning to Fort Bragg in January 2009, Goodall found himself in the unique position of starting from scratch with almost four decades of experience and close to 6,000 guitars behind him. He decided to return Goodall Guitars to its roots as a family business, building guitars with Luke, while Jean continued to run the office. Goodall purchased a commercial building—previously home to a woodworking school—near the historic center of the former logging town and began building what can only be called a dream shop.

GOODALL FOUND HIMSELF IN THE UNIQUE POSITION OF STARTING FROM SCRATCH WITH ALMOST FOUR DECADES OF EXPERIENCE AND CLOSE TO 6,000 GUITARS BEHIND HIM.

At the time of my first visit to the Fort Bragg shop in May 2009, I found James, Jean, and Luke hard at work, but, to my surprise, they weren't building guitars; they were literally building their shop. Even though he had scaled his operation down a few notches, Goodall kept the dedicated workstations that go with higher production, having shipped more or less the entire Kona shop—tools, workbenches, jigs, and fixtures, etc.—to his new facility.

Fast-forward to summer 2010, when I visited the Goodalls again. The walls of the hardwood-floored showroom are filled with Goodall's seascapes, creating an atmosphere more akin to a gallery than a woodshop. An office and a photo studio adjoin the entrance room, and the actual workshop is at the rear of the single-story building. And what a workshop it is! Divided into four distinct sections—wood storage, a "dirty" machine room, a humidity-controlled storage and glue-up room, and a large assembly area—the shop has clearly been designed with a specific workflow in mind.

Using essentially the same building process developed in the Kona shop, but at a slower pace and smaller scale, James and Luke tend to divide their responsibilities. James typically chooses the woods, handles details, and does final assembly and setup, while Luke builds the guitars' bodies and necks. Goodall continues to use rough-shaped CNC necks, bridges,

and fingerboards supplied by NC Solutions, and rather than setting up an in-house spray booth, outsources finish work to a local expert, Joe Amaral (woodfinishservices.com), who uses catalyzed urethane on the guitars. "We're really fortunate to have found such a talented finisher in a small town like this," Goodall says. "He does all the spraying, so when I get the guitar, it's ready to set the cure, and then I do the four stages of sanding, the buffing, and all that."

WOODS UNLIMITED

Like most luthiers, Goodall is a wood freak, and as such, he shipped all the woods that he had intended to use in the Hawaiian shop's much larger production capacity to Fort Bragg. The result is a stash that would be the envy of any builder. As I walked through the shop, carefully arranged stacks of wood were omnipresent, and Goodall proudly showed me random samples of spectacularly figured koa, old-growth Brazilian, beautiful European spruce, and many other species.

When asked whether he has a favorite combination of tonewoods, Goodall was stumped. "I really don't have a favorite," he says, adding that it depends on the model and the player. "On our classical, we like to use palo escrito from Mexico, because it's lightweight and has a nice quick response. Yet we also love to use some of the rare and precious traditional woods, like Brazilian rosewood. When it comes to some of our bigger models, we'd go to something entirely different, a heavier Honduras rosewood, possibly, with a German or Italian spruce top. Then there are people [for whom] cedar is the ultimate, you know, [for] fingerstyle or very light flatpicking." Goodall says that ideally he will have a conversation about wood choices and playing styles with the customer, and he encourages clients to visit the shop to pick out the exact materials to be used on their guitars.

FULL CIRCLE

After almost 40 years as a guitarmaker, Goodall is in an enviable position. He is working with his family, lives in a beautiful part of the world, finds time to paint once again, and builds guitars for appreciative amateurs and seasoned professionals alike. Having gone from solo building to large-scale manufacturing and back to a scaled-down approach gives him a unique perspective. He's one of the few makers who not only exhibit at the annual NAMM show and sell their guitars through an international dealer network but also display their wares at small guitar shows such as the Healdsburg Guitar Festival and cherish an opportunity to invite customers to personally pick out the woods for their dream guitar. AG

GUITAR PHOTOS COURTESY GOODALL GUITARS

Models *(continued)*

and other classic appointments (including herringbone purfling), the guitars are visually clearly distinguishable from other Goodalls, and while not exact tracings, the Traditional series' body shapes resemble other brands' similar designations. The guitars include partially scalloped bracing rather than Goodall's usual tapered bracing, and they're more likely to be built using classic wood combinations such as Indian rosewood or mahogany and Adirondack spruce than some of the more exotic choices that Goodall has become known for.

000 A 12-fret 000 guitar available with a solid or slotted headstock.

OM A classic 14-fret orchestra model voiced to sound similar to a dreadnought.

DREADNOUGHT 14-fret guitar designed for flatpickers.

LONG DREADNOUGHT 12-fret design with slotted headstock.

ORIGINAL DESIGNS

PARLOR Measuring 14 inches across the lower bout and featuring a medium-length 25-inch scale, the Parlor is available with 12 or 14 frets to the body and either a solid or slotted headstock.

GRAND CONCERT A 14-fret guitar with a 15-inch-wide body.

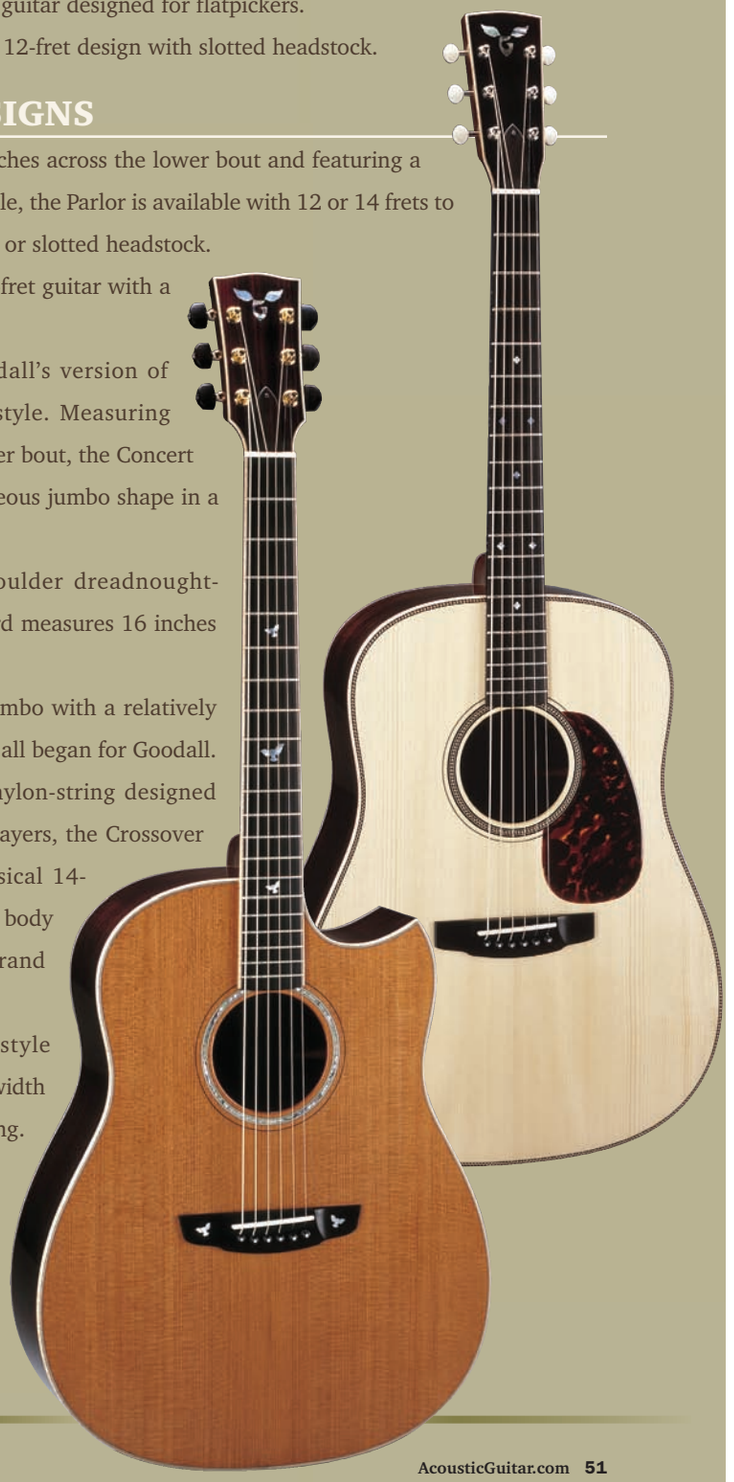
CONCERT JUMBO Goodall's version of the popular mini-jumbo style. Measuring 15⅞ inches across the lower bout, the Concert Jumbo features the curvaceous jumbo shape in a more comfortable size.

STANDARD A slope-shoulder dreadnought-derived shape, the Standard measures 16 inches at the lower bout.

JUMBO A true 17-inch jumbo with a relatively tight waist, this is where it all began for Goodall.

CROSSOVER A hybrid nylon-string designed to appeal to steel-string players, the Crossover has a narrower-than-classical 14-fret neck and a 14⅝-inch body derived from Goodall's Grand Concert design.

CLASSICAL A concert-style classical guitar with a full-width 12-fret neck and fan bracing.



Left: a Standard model with a cutaway, redwood top, and Indian rosewood back and sides. Right: a Traditional Dreadnought model with an Adirondack spruce top and Indian rosewood back and sides.