COUNTERPOINT

THE MANY FACETS OF GUITAR BUILDER JAMES GOODALL

BY STEPHEN CLINE

BACKGROUND: KEVIN KINNEAR / SURF: STEPHEN CLINE

AFTER A PLEASANT dinner on the lanai, James and Jean Goodall had us gather around the laptop. They had brought pictures of the properties they were considering on the Northern California coast. It was bittersweet seeing them; it meant our friends were moving away from Hawaii.

From the perspective of Google Earth, Fort Bragg is a small town on a coastline that looks as if it has been chewed by a snaggletoothed monster, with dozens of miniature coves and beaches sheltered by low stony cliffs. The Goodalls once left the Southern California beach town of San Diego to spend eight years there. And now, after 16 years here in Kona, they were planning to return — uprooting their guitar-making shop and setting it up again amid the windswept beauty of that rugged coast.

As I write, the Kona era of Goodall Guitars is closing. It's not quite *pau* (finished, as we say here in Hawaii), but, given the circumstances, I am inclined to reminisce.

JAMES LOOKED AT me enthusiastically as I commented on the rich, smoky tone of the instrument in his hand. "Exactly!" he said excitedly. "Tone means everything to me!" The instrument in question may surprise you; it was a Baroque-style wooden flute that James hand fashioned.

I had dropped by his house to chat about playing some Irish music for his son's wedding reception. We stood at the kitchen counter comparing half a dozen beautiful wooden flutes: their length, wood, the size of their bores and, mostly, their variation in tone. We found ourselves talking like wine connoisseurs, stacking metaphors onto similes.

We marveled at how two instruments that were identical, apart from the woods, sounded different and evoked different moods; one was like a weightless shaft of morning sunlight, the other more like a cozy evening. There was really no other way to describe the nuances of tone. It's the same, of course, with acoustic guitars.

James and I had an impromptu rehearsal. I played a Goodall rosewood Grand Concert with an Engelmann spruce top. It's just like one of my own Goodall guitars, except mine has an Adirondack top. It sounds quite similar, but a bit punchier, slightly less ringing near the bridge, a tad more differentiated and I think with a somewhat more intense set of overtones — an aftertaste, if you will. They're like two distinct, fine, clean Mosel wines. Looking down on the beautiful blue Pacific Ocean, we played Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738) tunes, James' flute singing with the guitar these remarkable Irish melodies.

So, there you have it: James Goodall is a flute aficionado. He collects them and he makes them; he

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experiments with and modifies ancient designs to maximize intonation and playability, and he tunes them to the old 415 and even 392 pitches. And he plays. He is a very fine player, specializing in Baroque-period music but enjoying the wide range from Frescobaldi to Debussy.

What's that got to do with the creation of some of the finest-sounding guitars made today? A lot. Just as in the study of a piece of literature, or a genre of music, these creations do not exist in isolation (though we tend to study them that way). In reality, they are reflections of the entire milieu in which they are found. They are part of, and expressions of, the greater context. Other cultural aspects inform and influence them: the philosophy, psychology and tastes of the age and place.

Granted, Goodall guitars are made by a fine luthier of immense skill in that particular field, but that craftsman is not only a guitar builder (and flute player); he is also a very accomplished seascape painter, a stylish surfer and a family man of deep faith. It is something of all these qualities that come together in the man that designs and builds a really flavorful guitar.

There is a fundamental limitation with a publication of the type you're reading, namely that, despite the thoroughness of the stories and the beauty of the photos ("guitar porn," it has been called), we are unable to give readers the aural component of the instruments we discuss. Perhaps at a later date, there will be some kind of digital accompaniment; for now, though, I am very aware of the lack. Yet, it strikes me as somehow crucial to my task.

I was playing my Goodall Grand Concert late one evening when the house was dark and quiet. I was just striking individual notes and listening to the overtones as they developed and decayed. It's really quite remarkable what kinds of subtle and complex resonances these wooden boxes make — and how long those sounds last. The next day, I tried recording these same "post-attack" sounds (the word "note" doesn't do them justice). I improvised a simple piece with these very long decaying tails. Then I went back and improvised a second complementary track.

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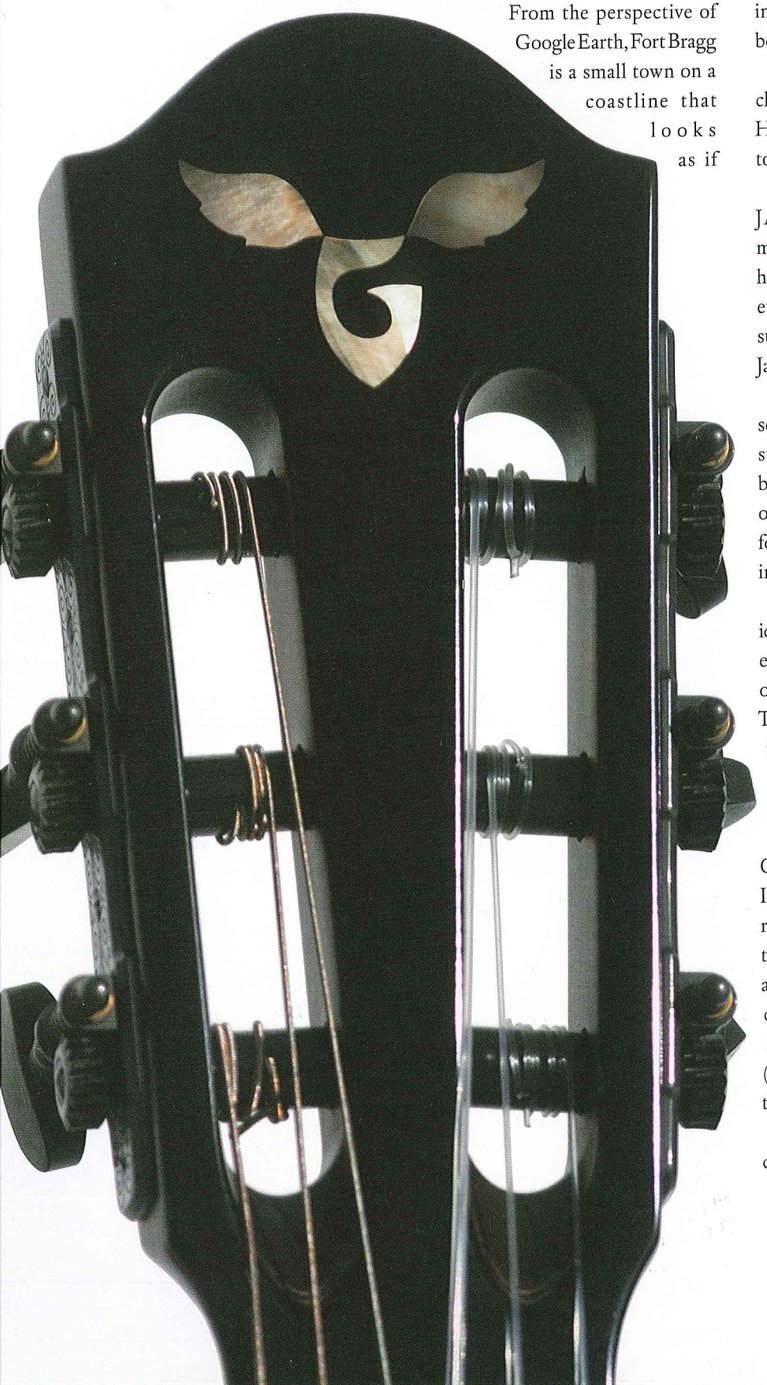
It was nothing special in terms of composition, but the sounds were quite special, reminding me of an 18th century glass harmonica, the unmuted overtones blending into complex chords. I think guitar composers could do much more with this aspect of the guitar's capabilities —



In addition to his proficiency at guitar building, surfing, motorcycle riding and oil painting, Renaissance man James Goodall is an accomplished Baroque flutist.
JOSHUA FLETCHER / GOODALL GUITARS

providing, of course, the instrument is up to it.

James and I were talking about a Baroque concert he had performed (with two other woodwinds, harpsichord and Baroque cello) and that I had recorded with a portable studio. He was so eager to hear it — "not as an egotistical thing," he said. "I want to hear how the different woods of the flutes sound in that setting — what the audience hears. I'm always searching for that moving tone." In other words, he is very, very attuned to what the wood is doing as it resonates, and that same passionate search was manifested in the sounds that so mesmerized me that evening on my couch.

To get a guitar to produce those more mellifluous sounds, though, takes a profound attention to detail. Buyers, James cautions, shouldn't be overly distracted by the visuals of the guitar. Goodall guitars are handsome instruments with choice woods and purposeful ornamentation, but James insists that they are primarily functional tools — thus beautiful, but not gaudy.

"Think of the violin," he said. "It's elegant, but restrained in looks. It's beautiful, but it's about the music it makes." To stress the point, we talk about an all-koa guitar I have that was built by another maker. It's a very pretty instrument that is quite playable, but it's quiet. I guessed that its lack of volume was due to the hardwood top, but James said, "It's not the koa, per se; it's the right piece of koa. To find a top that works tonally is an endeavor. It's a rare piece of koa that isn't too dense for a top, or is curly enough to be beautiful, but isn't too brittle and has really good tonal responses. It has to be just the right-sounding piece of wood, and they're hard to find. It's not enough for it to be visually curly. Tone and construction is the order of importance."

I don't propose to go into an arcane disquisition here about the esotericism of Goodall bracing and top carving, etc. For those interested, there's quite a bit of information on their website. (That being said, he also seems somewhat reticent to simply "give away what makes a Goodall guitar special.") No, I'm more interested in exploring the attitudes of the maker, rather than his particular techniques — the confluences of wood, shape and density, along with a sense of the divine in tonal properties, that have brought about, over years, the structure of Goodall guitars.

Luke Goodall works on a future Goodall guitar.
JOSHUA FLETCHER / GOODALL GUITARS

Jean Goodall says that her husband is a "Renaissance man." It's perhaps an outmoded expression, but at the heart is an idea that is a touchstone of civilized accomplishment — at least in an earlier age. James specializes in more than one field, but not just as a mere dilettante; rather, he is highly accomplished in several arenas. Another area of expertise is oil painting seascapes.

Being a surfer myself, I have spent uncountable hours gazing as waves break in procession across a multitude of shores. So I feel I can report with confidence that, in James' paintings, he's got it right. There's the breaking wave, yes, but also there's the much more subtle, small crossing waves angling across the face made by the previous waves bouncing off the rocks. There, too, is the mushy section, as surfers call a part of a wave that breaks softly due to a deeper spot of the sea floor below.

And across all, there's the slight cat's paw of breeze and the shifting grays through cloud and sea. The mood is there as well, that same mood one feels on a cloudy day, watching not-quite-inviting waves break against a hostile shoreline; there is a poignant sense of being able only to observe without partaking — and that is, in the end, enough.

That's a lot to accomplish in a painting. He combines aspects of observation, technique and years and years of surfing experience, of actually judging and riding waves, feeling sensorially (not just imagining) their grace and power. Being immersed in something affects how you portray it. (This, of course, is true of making instruments, too.)

Having grown up on the sunny beaches of San Diego, James might be expected to paint those flaxen

This 1987 Goodall, made in Fort Bragg, California, was ordered new by Celtic fingerstyle guitarist Steve Baughman. "I call her Rosie, because she's made of rosewood," he says. Rosie's top is spruce, her neck is mahogany, and the bridge and fretboard are ebony. "Rosie's spent a few too many nights in smoky pubs and around blazing campfires. She's been in Alaska in the winter, Arizona in the summer. After I took the bar exam in 1990, I stuffed her in a cloth sack, strung her over my back and took her hitchhiking in Europe."

When James Goodall heard about Rosie's rough cosmetic condition, his eyes lit up. "I am so happy to hear that Steve has played the guitar I made for him in some supposedly inhospitable places," he says. "Guitars are meant to be played around campfires, on the beach, in the mountains, as well as in your living room. I feel a little sad about the guitars I see that are still in perfect condition after years of use. Pick wear and scratches are badges of honor."

MICHAEL JOHN SIMMONS

Close-ups display the gorgeous details found on a Goodall all-koa Concert Jumbo Cutaway. Undoubtedly, the Goodalls had an advantage in finding great koa sets, being so close to the source.

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A rare James Goodall surfboard, shaped by the luthier-to-be when he was just a teenager, circa 1967.
KEVIN KINNEAR

scenes. In fact, he once had a studio in Spanish Village in Balboa Park. But then he moved to Northern California in 1984, and the rugged coast around Mendocino became the inspiration for many of the paintings. It's a picturesque and formidable coast, notorious for shifting beauties of sun, wind, cliff and fog.

Here, in Hawaii, James has also painted tropical scenes, which call for a much lighter palette and perhaps a lighter touch as well. These paintings, too, reflect those same aspects of personality that inform his instrument building: close observation, meticulous craft and a willingness to evolve. As Jean puts it, "James really wants to make an instrument that inspires people, a handcrafted tool that instigates music."

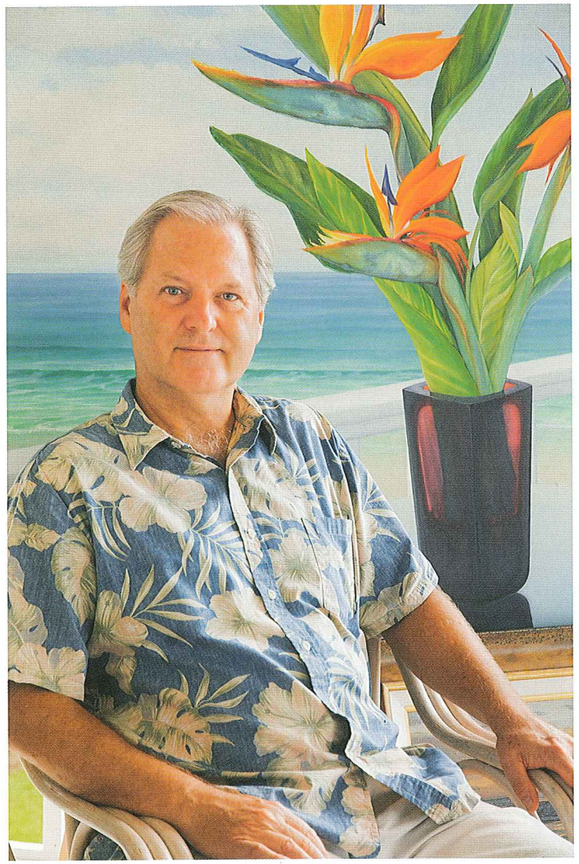
James and I were surfing together recently and between waves chatting about art — and waves — when suddenly a nice wave popped up, and he spun around, saying, "Hold that thought." From the back, I saw him drop into the wave and turn. The wave was just tall enough to hide his body, so what I saw was his red hat traversing the top of the wave. When he paddled back out, he was smiling gleefully, and we decided that it was a 10-point ride.

We didn't get back to the art conversation until an hour later, when we were leaving — bumping slowly along the shell-sand road through stunted trees in what felt like a place miles and years from the modern world. James turned to me and asked, "Do you mind if we stop here? I want to shoot that view. I just love how the coast looks to the north."

He recently bought a new high-definition video camera, and he's taken to learning its functions and capabilities with the same diligence he does everything else — testing all the settings, keeping a running commentary on f-stop, focus, frames per second and the like. (In fact, he's done much the same thing in trying to find the ideal tripod!)

While he set up the shot, I asked, "Are you always thinking about composition?" Eye still to eyepiece, hat on backwards, he answered, "Oh, yeah, constantly. Look how the sparkles are on the water through the foliage." He stepped back to let me look. He was right;

An older, cedar-topped Goodall Walnut Concert Jumbo. Notice the winged bridge, which Goodall phased out in the early '90s.
KEVIN KINNEAR



Goodall sits in front of one of his paintings. In 1972, he sold one of his seascapes to pay for the wood he used to create his first guitar.
BRADY CLINE

it was pretty, really pretty, and, as he pointed out, so much more interesting in movement than still. Very perceptive, very patient and very painterly in his eye for composition.

We photographed around there for another half hour before bouncing onward. We got back to his house, where I had left my car, several hours later than I had expected, and I teased him about being in "Goodall molasses time." I added that I had better hurry home, as my wife would be expecting me. In parting, I said, "It's been fun." His answer was, "Sometimes having fun takes time." Touché.

THE FIRST TIME I played a Goodall guitar was in 1983. It was a custom Standard made for Mark Rayburn (of the well-known '70s Christian duo Limpic and Rayburn). Mark and I got to know each other in the little California mountain town of Julian. We'd get together about once a month to play in our living rooms.

On those occasions, we got into the habit of trading guitars. Mine was a 1947 Martin D-18. Every time we played, I found myself asking Mark why his guitar sounded so much better than mine, so many more nuances of sound. In reality, it may simply be that my rather beat-up mahogany guitar (from the low end of the Martin line) was no match for the high-end rosewood Goodall. But what Mark said was, "Well, you've got a nice, old factory guitar, and this is a modern handmade guitar. There's been a lot of design development by luthiers in recent years."

It was the first time I had heard the term "luthier" used for someone other than strictly a lute maker. I was aware of a number of new small-time guitar makers, but didn't really know what they were up to. And, as I gradually learned, there was indeed a lot going on in garages and barns and small woodworking shops around the country.

To return to the word "renaissance," there seemed to be a rebirth of guitar design and crafting that had been going on for 10 years or more. (Just look at all the amazing guitars that have been highlighted in this publication.) It seems that we are in the midst of a golden age of acoustic-guitar making. In short, I sold the Martin (and a lovely little Hernandez rosewood classical guitar) in 1984 and purchased a San Diego-built Goodall Standard, which I have loved dearly ever since.

That model, of course, is not an example of how Goodalls are made today. One could (uncharitably) say that, now, they have become factory guitars, but that would be missing the mark by a wide margin — especially in this age of high-volume production lines. In fact, with Jean running the office and son Luke building the bodies, it's more like a mom-and-pop operation. The "factory" setup is really just a sort of grownup and spread-out woodshop.

There are no big automated machines and processes. The nods to production are more along the lines of having more tools, jigs, fixtures and a spray booth. James and a small band of highly skilled craftsmen are hand building different components of the guitars, while James teaches; he inspects each instrument, listening, and participates in a variety of steps,

The next chapter of Goodall Guitars: James, Jean and Luke pose in front of their new guitar workshop in Fort Bragg, California. The family will continue to create their namesake guitars, but on a more intimate scale than they did in Hawaii.
GOODALL GUITARS

not the least of which is maintenance of equipment.

I had the fun experience of taking my '84 Standard into the Kona shop for "show and tell," and all six of the workers clustered around, looking at this artifact from the past. They pointed and chattered all at once, like kids, about the old wing-style bridge and other esoteric design tweaks that had happened during the intervening years. James asked me to play something for them, and, as it was tuned in DADGAD, I played one of my own fingerstyle pieces. Applause from those guys meant a lot, but then came the capper. James turned to them and said, "That's how a Goodall is supposed to sound." That made my day, for sure!

James spends part of his shop time designing new guitar models. He says that he designs new models, not to compete with other builders, but to produce niche instruments that players seem to desire. He'll explore the design features that might address their needs, though there has to be solid tonal and musical justification — not just cosmetic configuration. He's still inventing and evolving; after several years of research and development, he recently introduced a very sweet and responsive crossover nylon-string model. He continues to tinker with woods, shapes and their relationships, searching for the magical confluence of design and materials that will produce those special tones he talks about.

And that's what it comes back around to: tone. For James, it's all about maximizing the musical experience, whether it's playing a beautiful O'Carolan melody that seems to have "dropped miraculously from heaven" and brings tears to his eyes, or building a guitar that inspires another artist's creativity.

After one flute performance, James, hand on chest, said earnestly, "I've just been so very touched by certain pieces of music that, when I play, I want to share that with the audience — to get out of the way technically and also in terms of personality — so the music is just there for them to experience, to touch them in, hopefully, the same way."

He has the exact same attitude about making guitars for musicians to play. They are tools, yes, but in another way, gifts. While the luthier gets "out of the way," the guitars allow other artists to produce heavensent sounds, sounds best described, perhaps, in the metaphorical language of the wine connoisseur.