

Taylor GS Flattop

The company's first new body shape in more than ten years boasts hallmark playability but breaks the mold with thumping bass and a smooth, complex character—Taylor's strongest acoustic statement to date.

by Teja Gerken



More than 30 years after Bob Taylor built his first guitar, his company is in a truly enviable position: Its instruments are in high demand, they're frequently spotted in the hands of some of the finest—and most popular—guitarists, and, perhaps most importantly, they've established the "Taylor sound" as an identifiable sonic signature.

Of course, no signature sound will appeal to every guitarist, and that's what makes Taylor's latest development so intriguing. In the last few years the company's biggest product announcements have concerned their new Expression System electronics and their T5 electric guitar, and to many it seemed Taylor's focus was moving away from acoustics. That sentiment must have made its way to their factory in El Cajon, California, because Taylor's most recent project was to build a new acoustic guitar with a fresh voice—something with vintage tones, great bass, excellent dynamic range, and the "openness" of an old guitar, not to mention Taylor's famous clarity and playability. To that end, Bob Taylor and his crew came up with the new "Grand Symphony" body shape, which also ended up being the foundation of his new R. Taylor line of high-end guitars.

The GS line features one body style and four possible wood combinations: mahogany and cedar; rosewood and spruce; rosewood and cedar; and maple and spruce. Less than a month after the new line was announced, we

were able to check out one of the very first rosewood and cedar models.

ELEGANT AND CLEAN AS A WHISTLE

At first glance, the GS looks almost like Taylor's grand-auditorium shape. The GS body is only a ¼-inch wider (16¼ inches vs. 16 inches across the lower bout), and the depth and length are virtually identical. Further, both guitars have standard Taylor X-bracing. A direct comparison of the two styles reveals a shift in proportions, with the GS having a wider waist and different curves in the upper and lower bout. Plain ivoroid binding, a simple abalone rosette, and small abalone fretboard markers complete the guitar's appointments, resulting in a classy, understated appearance.

Since its inception, Taylor has set new standards in factory-made craftsmanship and attention to detail, and our review GS made it clear that those lofty values are still a huge priority. The guitar we received was incredibly clean in both

At a Glance

Taylor GS

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| HIGHLIGHTS | Robust bass response and breathy, three-dimensional tones that are extremely versatile. Great playability. |
| THE SPECS | Solid western red cedar top. Solid Indian rosewood back and sides. Three-piece mahogany bolt-on neck. Ebony fretboard and bridge. Scalloped X-bracing. Polyester finish. Taylor tuners. 25½-inch scale. 1¾-inch nut. 2⅞-inch string spacing at saddle. Made in USA. |
| WATCH FOR | Flatpickers may want to add a pickguard. |
| THIS IS COOL | Complex tones that run the gamut from deep bass to tinkling trebles. |
| BEST FOR | Fingerstylists looking for a rich-sounding guitar with healthy low end. |
| PRICE | \$2,698 list/\$2,000 street (with hard-shell case). |
| MAKER | Taylor Guitars, (619) 258-1207, www.taylorguitars.com. |

PHOTOS BY RAY LARSEN

fit and finish: the braces were sanded smooth, frets were seated and shaped with precision, and the finish was shiny but free of uneven buildup in the usual problem areas, such as the fretboard extension.

What I loved most about the GS was its openness and the complexity of its fundamental tones—both of which belie its young age.

The only thing even close to a flaw that I could detect was a slight gap between the nut and the end of the neck binding. The woods used throughout were of very high quality, and I particularly liked the polished rosewood headstock overlay and the dark black ebony fretboard and bridge, which displayed almost no visible streaks.

In typical Taylor fashion, the GS arrived with a buttery-smooth setup. Out of the box, the neck was slightly back-bowed,

but, using the included truss-rod wrench/screwdriver, I was able to remove the truss-rod cover and get a little relief with a quarter-turn of the truss rod. The result was even playability from the nut to the end of the fretboard. Even though the action was very low—something about its similarity to an electric guitar made me launch into a few bars of “Purple Haze” before I knew what had happened—the stock medium-gauge (.013–.056) Elixir strings provided enough tension for the guitar to remain buzz-free until I really dug in with a flatpick. The half-round neck profile felt a smidgen chunkier than the one on my ’94 Taylor 712c, and I quickly came to prefer the GS neck for both its profile and satin finish.

SMOOTH, COMPLEX TONES

Having a guitar that feels and plays great is nice, but what really counts, of course, is how it sounds. And though conventional wisdom might tell you that the similarities between Taylor’s GS and grand auditorium guitars wouldn’t result in radically different tones, the company claims the shape changes and different body-wood thicknesses do just that.

And tone is what truly impressed me about the GS. The first pluck of its low E revealed a growl, volume, and complexity that begged me to play more.

Strumming the GS reminded me more of a dreadnought than a typical auditorium. Bluegrass and aggressive rock or pop players would probably find that the cedar top doesn’t open up and bloom with over-the-top flatpicked rhythms like one of the spruce-topped models likely would. However, I was so bowled over by the rich-sounding open strings that I continued in my Hendrix mode, playing a few bars of “Hey Joe” and basking in the GS’ shimmering, three-dimensional tones.

Being primarily a fingerstyle player, I spent most of my time exploring the GS, sans pick, in standard and D A D G A D tunings. I quickly came to appreciate its quick response and impressive volume with minimal effort—all of which makes for excellent balance during passages with distinctly different lines in the bass, treble, and middle voices. I wished for a touch more richness and authority on the first and second strings, but I often feel that way about cedar-topped steel-strings.

One of the pieces in my repertoire is a Celtic medley that includes the traditional “The South Wind” and “Banish Misfortune,” and although these tunes vary from a gentle ballad to a high-energy jig, the GS rolled with the punches and had plenty of reserve in store. What I loved most about the GS was its openness and the complexity of its fundamental tones—both of which belie its young age. Our review GS sounded more like a mature instrument that has had a chance to “open up” than a box that was glued together just weeks earlier.

THE WRAP

I’ve played a lot of Taylors over the years, but the GS is easily my favorite when it comes to pure acoustic sound. Its complex tone and seductive playability are bound to give many “boutique” guitars a run for their money, and that makes it an equally excellent value for players looking for their first high-end guitar or experienced guitarists who wish to expand their collection. AG



FOR EVERY PLAYER IN ANY STYLE

ACOUSTIC GUITAR

5 SONGS TO PLAY
SIMON & GARFUNKEL
 “Bridge Over Troubled Water”
 “The Cuckoo”
BRYAN SUTTON & NORMAN BLAKE
 “Bully of the Town”
 “I’m a Believer”
ELVIS PRESLEY
 “Love Me Tender”

BEN HARPER
 Roots-Rock Renaissance Man

FROM HERE TO GEARVANA
 The Best New Guitars and Accessories

BRYAN SUTTON
 A Flatpicking Master on Tone and Precision

LESSONS
 Fingerstyle with Ed Gerhard
 Hammer-ons and Pull-offs
 Accompany a Singer

WIN AN ALVAREZ GUITAR PAGE 27

Get Started in Home Recording

GEAR REVIEWS
PEAVEY
 Affordable Dreadnought
TAYLOR
 New GS Series
DIGITECH
 JamMan Digital Looper

How to Have Great Practice Sessions

JUNE 2006
 www.acousticguitar.com

From *Acoustic Guitar*, June 2006, issue 162, © 2006 String Letter Publishing, David A. Lusterman, Publisher. All rights reserved. For more information on *Acoustic Guitar*, contact String Letter Publishing, Inc., 255 West End Avenue., San Rafael, CA 94901; telephone (415) 485-6946; fax (415) 485-0831; www.acousticguitar.com.