EBONY'S FINAL FRONTIER

TAYLOR'S CO-OWNERSHIP OF AN EBONY MILL IN CAMEROON AIMS TO ESTABLISH A NEW MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

By Jim Kirlin

We in the guitar community love our exotic tonewoods. We savor their beauty, revel in their tonal nuances, and draw inspiration from the craftsmanship that gives them a second life as an instrument. But while our admiration for the finished product may run deep, the back story details of a tree's journey from the forest to the factory are often less clear, especially the more removed we find ourselves from the source. We might have a sense of a wood's native origin (especially those with helpful geographic cues like Indian rosewood, Sitka spruce and Hawaiian koa), but there is always more to the story.

Over the years, Taylor has made an effort to share some of these stories, in part to give you a deeper appreciation for the hard work that often goes into wood sourcing, especially in light of important environmental issues such as legality and sustainability. We've taken you into the jungles of Central America with Bob Taylor to learn of the innovative mahogany sourcing initiatives we've developed with forest communities in Honduras. We've chronicled the guitar industry's collective efforts to promote the sustainable sourcing of Sitka spruce. Now the guitar industry finds itself at a critical juncture with another precious wood species: ebony. This is the first of a series of reports from the Central African country of Cameroon, which has effectively become the last frontier for the legal sourcing of ebony.

As Bob Taylor first mentioned in his column in our winter issue, Taylor recently became the co-owner of an ebony mill in Cameroon, and the implications are far-reaching. This ownership initiative is significant because it brings an instrument manufacturer closer to the source than ever before, which enables greater awareness and control of the supply chain.

Proper management of the ebony supply is a vital issue because if we continue down our former path, the ebony more than likely will go away as we know it. Taylor's co-ownership provides a unique opportunity to develop a new paradigm for ethical, eco-friendly business, and the framework currently being developed there has the potential to positively affect both Cameroonian communities and the stringed instrument industry. Like a healthy forest ecosystem that fosters a balance of different species of flora and fauna in order to thrive, there is an interdependent business ecosystem that links our fellow instrument makers, communities in developing countries where woods are sourced, and customers. Our efforts require a mix of long-term planning, global collaboration, patience, and resilience against the inevitable obstacles that will arise. But the end result will support sustainable forestry and provide greater economic stability to communities around the world.

The Lacey Act and Guitar Companies

As we've noted in previous sourcing stories, there was a time when Bob Taylor didn't have to go any farther than a local lumber yard to buy wood. Trees, after all, were a renewable resource, and the wood was readily available. But in recent decades the seemingly endless supply of certain wood species has been outpaced by consumption. This depletion has in turn threatened their surrounding forest ecosystem. As a result, the guitar industry, along with other industries that rely on wood to make their products, bear a greater responsibility for knowing how their wood was sourced, as well as the impact of sourcing on the environment and local communities.

The U.S. Lacey Act, a landmark piece of legislation originally passed in 1900 to protect wildlife and amended in 2008 to include plants and plant products, marked a watershed moment in terms of business responsibility among importers of products made of natural materials, including wood. Even though some guitar makers had already begun to embrace certain "green" initiatives like wood certification through organizations like the Forest Stewardship Council, those were voluntary and not necessarily Lacey-compliant. Lacey, by comparison, was stronger and farther reaching: It banned the trade of illegally logged wood. Even more important, it shifted the burden of responsibility to wood buyers, compelling them to provide proof to cover the complete chain of custody back to the harvesting of the tree.

It's worth mentioning that compared to other wood-consuming industries like flooring companies and furniture makers, the guitar industry consumes a thin fraction of wood. But guitar makers do consume some of the exotic species that are at risk based on international agreements such as CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).

The good news is that with clear legislation and proper management, musical instrument makers, together with communities where these woods are sourced, have the ability to preserve the species we love so that our grandchildren and their grandchildren will be able to enjoy their unique musical qualities.

Why Ebony?

Compared to the attention we often lavish on the attributes of other exotic tonewoods, ebony is far less glamorous. Used for the vast majority of guitar fretboards, its role is fundamental to the playing experience, yet is often taken for granted because of its more supportive function. The wood's dark complexion also tends to fade into the background compared to other more visually striking woods and appointments on a guitar. Nonetheless, ebony has long been one of the most desirable of woods among instrument makers for other reasons. Its high density enables it to be finish-sanded to a very smooth and durable surface, which is comfortable on the fingers. The density also enables solid, predictable seating of the frets. By comparison, softer woods that are sometimes used for fretboards, such as rosewood, can "squish" slightly as the frets are seated, which can lead to a less consistent fret job. In terms of visual aesthetics, ebony's dark color won't show dirt or grime like a lighter colored fingerboard such as maple. The darker color also creates a crisp contrast with traditional, lighter-colored inlay materials such as abalone and mother-of-pearl. For all these reasons, ebony is an ideal wood for instrument fingerboards. Other components it is used for include guitar bridges, headstock overlays, bridge pins and appointments like binding and rosette inlays.

Native Origins

Like woods such as oak, walnut or rosewood, there are several species of ebony that grow in different regions of the world. Ebony grows predominantly in Africa and India, although it is also found in places like Indonesia. There was a time when Taylor sourced Indian ebony from Sri Lanka, but Bob Taylor says it was the lesser of most of the ebonies. We have also used Macassar or "striped" ebony, which comes from Indonesia, although for backs and sides only. The best ebony species for instruments tend to be African strains (a tree's typical growth cycle is about 80 years), and Taylor has sourced ebony from Cameroon for 30 years. Until fairly recently, the African country of Madagascar was another source of ebony (along with rosewood), but political turmoil following the overthrow of the government in 2009 led to a spike in illegal harvesting within the country's national forests. As a result, the export of ebony and rosewood was suspended entirely, making it illegal to import it under the Lacey Act. That effectively leaves Cameroon as the last area for legal sourcing.

"You actually can get legal ebony out of Congo, including FSC-certified ebony," Bob Taylor says, "but there is very little of it and the price is many times that of Cameroonian ebony."

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Sourcing Challenges

One of the common denominators among the different exotic tonewoods used to make guitars is that many originate in tropical regions of the world, often in developing countries. This can present steep obstacles when it comes to responsible forest management. Such economically underdeveloped countries often lack the proper infrastructure – and the political will – to manage their national resources. Trees are often located in remote forest regions that make it difficult to enforce any existing harvesting regulations, leaving the "back door" open for illegal logging. And the immediacy of poverty can supersede long-term thinking about preserving an area's natural resources, particularly when people need to feed their families. Corruption is regularly a factor. Things often happen more slowly. The available tools are often primitive or in poor condition.

"The reality is just different," Bob says. "In Cameroon, something seemingly simple like cutting a tree can become very complicated. One person might have a chainsaw, another has the chain, and someone else has gas. And there might be a whole lot of conflict just to get that saw through the tree. And that's after you finally determine if the tree can be legally cut or not."

Buying an Ebony Mill

In November of 2010, Taylor partnered with Madinter Trade, S.L., a Spain-based international distributor of guitar parts and tonewoods used to make musical instruments, to explore the possibility of purchasing the company Crelicam, the largest ebony mill in Africa. Located in the country of Cameroon, the company employs 75 people in two mill locations, one in the country's capital, Yaoundé, and another about 180 miles northeast in the city of Bertoua. Crelicam supplies fingerboards and bridges to several distributors, who in turn sell to makers of guitars, violins and other instruments that feature fingerboards, and even pool cues. The company's owner, a Spaniard, had recently decided to sell the business and retire after running it for 12 years.

Bob already had a good working relationship with Madinter's managing director, Vidal de Teresa, as Madinter supplies Taylor with sapele (which also comes from Cameroon) and ovangkol. Madinter also had been an ebony client of Crelicam. The partnership, Bob says, was a natural fit.

"Taylor has expertise in the processing of ebony, while Madinter was already a large distributor of Crelicam ebony and had extensive experience as a supplier to the trade," he says. "Together, we felt that we had all the necessary expertise to not only take over Crelicam, but to improve the product."

Bob and Vidal visited the company in Cameroon in February 2011, and again in July 2011. As prospective owners, the two did extensive research.

"We turned over every stone in order to put ourselves in position to make a sound purchase," Bob elaborates. "We wanted to identify all the challenges and potential shortfalls of doing business in Cameroon."

Between their two trips, Bob and Vidal spent a lot of time meeting with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Washington DC, London, and eventually Cameroon. They learned of Cameroon's high unemployment rate and discovered that those who did have jobs were often expected to take care of anywhere from 10 to 20 people on their wages. They also saw the primitive working conditions at the mill. As their understanding of Cameroon's economy and the milling operation deepened, their original ownership goals evolved.

"Our interest went beyond simply operating a business that only provided clients with uninterrupted supplies of legal ebony and fair prices," Bob says. "Our focus grew to include the workers in the factory, the citizens of the communities where the ebony grows, the truck drivers who transport the wood, and the forest itself in terms of how we can sustain it and set it up for future stability and harvest."

For Bob and Vidal, their vision was grounded in a three-pronged goal: supplying ebony in a way that was legal, ethical and sustainable.

"Today's Lacey Act in the U.S. and the forthcoming EU timber laws address only legality," Bob explains. "So, in essence, each one of us users of ebony, or any other species, could choose to be legal and not worry ourselves with the ethics, traditions or current state of society in the countries from which our woods originate. But I feel it's important that we in the developed, wealthy parts of the world take special notice of the conditions in these regions."

Bob points to the historical track record of resource exploitation.

"What has happened in developing countries? Well, we go take their diamonds and their coal and their oil and their wood until there's none left. Then we leave the people kind of impoverished. Do you know a lot of places where exotic woods come from that are flourishing and in great shape and are First World powers? If they are, it's a place like Brazil, in which case they say, 'You can't buy our rosewood anymore.' But if the people don't have any power or other means to support themselves, they'll trade their wood for a bowl of rice."

Cutting Permits

In order to be in the wood business in Cameroon, you need a permit that grants you access to a specific Forest Management Unit (concession). Such concessions can be logged according to certain regulations. For example, there has to be a cutting plan, with a limit to the number of trees that can be cut. Under these specific permits, ebony is strictly off limits. This is because in Cameroon, ebony is classified as a "special species," and a special permit is required to harvest it. One reason why it's not regulated by concessions is that ebony trees tend to be widely dispersed. Crelicam has a special permit for harvesting ebony, but no concessions.

"The way they work it is, you can either cut ebony or you can have a concession and not cut ebony, but you can't have both," Bob explains. "So, we're effectively a man with no land. We have to get permission to cut ebony in places. They have community forests that are part of the country's National Domain, and we can go make a deal with the chiefs to cut ebony there."

There are approximately 13 companies in all of Cameroon who have permits to cut ebony, and there are currently no new permits being issued. Every year a 14-person government commission decides on the permits and the individual quota allocations for each. The total annual limit that permits are issued for is 2000 tons of raw ebony log material.

"When 2000 tons of it has been cut, it's officially over for the year," Bob says. "So, each of those 13 companies is issued a permit that tells them how many tons they get to cut. Our company has permits for 1,500 of the 2000 tons. We're the biggest and best operator there. The other 500 tons are split between the other dozen permit holders."

One might wonder how Crelicam has been allocated so much of the quota.

"It's a question we wondered ourselves at renewal time, which occurs annually," says Bob. "It appears that our solid business plan, our two legitimate locations, and our 75 employees are unique among the country's other operators, who are hard to locate. The commission respects that and granted our permit renewals."

A Plan for Social Investment

Owning Crelicam and directly overseeing the milling operation puts Taylor-Madinter in a first-hand position to understand not only sourcing issues, but also Cameroon's cultural and economic conditions. Bob and Vidal quickly recognized that the employees were underpaid, with their wages stretched even thinner due to the country's high unemployment rate and the number of people who relied on their support. As Bob and Vidal spoke with employees as the new owners, they laid out their vision for what the mill would eventually become and announced that everyone's wages would be doubled by the end of this year. They developed an action plan for upgrading the working environment. They explained how the wood processing skills they would learn would enable them to add value and get more money out of the ebony they harvest. Currently, only raw ebony blanks are exported from Crelicam, and the value-added work, whether for guitars or violins, is done in other countries.

"Our Cameroonian employees need to do that work," Bob says. "We're going to start drying and processing the wood so Cameroonians can share in the processing of guitar and violin parts. Currently it's not easy – we don't even have running water. We don't have electricity that you can count on, or a concrete floor that even looks like it'll support a machine. But one day there will be machines making parts for our clients, right there in Cameroon, at the ebony source."

To illustrate his point to the Crelicam employees during one of his early visits, Bob showed them video footage of the ebony processing work that Taylor currently does at our factory in Tecate.

"As a guitar manufacturer I am confident that this can happen in Africa," he says. "We can dry and process four smooth, straight sides, delivering a much better product to guitar factories. Just this simple operation will employ more people in Cameroon, allowing them to get more value from their resource. I have no reservations about the quality we can perform there. And the benefits to the clients are many, including less shipping weight and volume. One day in the next five years, we'll be able to go to the Cameroonian government and say, 'For every ebony tree that comes out of the forest, we turn it into this much economy here in Yaoundé and in Bertuoa.'"

Learning to Use What the Forest Provides

As Bob and Vidal discovered during their early conversations with Crelicam employees, the challenges of the ebony operation weren't limited to the mill's shortcomings. The harvesting process was another major issue.

The company contracts with about 25 cutters who work in conjunction with Crelicam's ebony cutting permit.

"They go out into the forest, cut trees using our permit, and we buy it by the kilo from them," Bob says.

As Bob and Vidal talked to the cutters to better understand the nature of their work and the challenges they face, a more complete picture of the harvesting process began to form. For starters, they learned that it was an enormous amount of work to deliver the wood. Because the ebony trees closest to the roads had been harvested, the cutters had to go deeper into the rainforest, on foot, to get to the trees. Unlike loggers in the jungles of Honduras who use mules to remove mahogany from the dense forest, in Cameroon people carry it out. This has limited the harvesting range to about eight kilometers (five miles) from a road. A cutter would get permission to cut from a village with a concession and hire a group of people to haul the wood cut from a felled tree.

The cutters said another issue was the wide discrepancy in value between highly desirable black ebony and the more marbled wood (featuring light-streaked variegation), also referred to as "déclassé" (lower class or grade) wood. Crelicam previously only paid a fourth of the black ebony price for the déclassé wood (about 8 cents a pound) because it was less desirable among their instrument-making clients. At that rate, the cutters said, it wasn't worth all the labor to haul the déclassé wood out.

Bob asked them how they determined which trees were black and which were déclassé. They said they cut down an ebony tree and looked at the wood. If it was marbled, they simply left the tree and moved on. Bob asked how many trees on average they would have to cut to find a black one. They said about 10. Bob was shocked.

"This was news to everyone else," Bob says. "Not even the previous owner of Crelicam knew. The cutters don't tell anybody that. I just started asking questions and went down that rabbit hole and they told me."

Bob told the cutters on the spot that he would buy the déclassé ebony from them and pay the same price as the black wood. They were taken aback. But no one will want it, they said.

"Well, now they will," Bob told them. It was a decision he says he and Vidal felt compelled to make to be responsible stewards of the forest resources.

"Now that we know this, we can't un-know the realities here in Africa," he says. "We live in a different world, a world where we have to respect that environment. Decisions had to be made, and Vidal and I have proudly made them. Our ebony reflects the reality of the forest. This is what ebony looks like. Here's the good news based on what we learned: There's 10 times as much usable ebony in Cameroon as we thought there was."

Given the complicated issues that surround the sourcing of ebony, one might wonder why an alternative wood isn't used for fretboards. Ebony's superior qualities aside, Bob says the sourcing issues would be similar elsewhere. And since it's legal to source ebony in Cameroon (when following proper protocols), purchasing a mill gives Taylor-Madinter a chance to introduce measures of sustainability for the industry as a whole.

"If somebody had done in Madagascar what we're trying to do now in Cameroon, maybe Madagascar would still be supplying ebony," Bob says. "And if nobody does what we're trying to do now, how long will ebony be available from Cameroon before the NGOs and the government and everybody just has it up to here with wood being stolen off parts of the land it shouldn't be taken from?"

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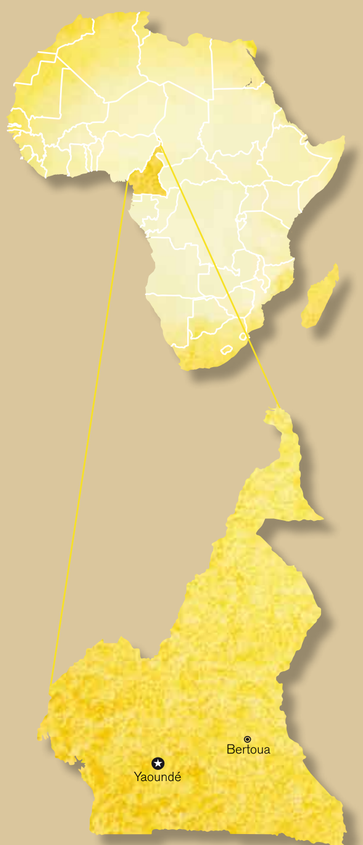
Clockwise from top left: Bob with Crelicam partner Vidal de Teresa from Madinter Trade; Bob documents the milling process; Bob shows employees video footage of the ebony processing work that Taylor does in its Tecate factory.**Opposite page:** The interior of one of Crelicam's ebony mills, located in Yaoundé, Cameroon

About Cameroon

Cameroon is located on the western side of Central Africa just north of the equator. The southwestern portion of the country borders the Gulf of Guinea, where the port city of Douala is located. Its border countries are Chad to the North, the Central Africa Republic to the East, Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea to the south, and Nigeria to the West. It's been described as having all of Africa in one country for its cultural and geological diversity, which boasts beaches, deserts, mountains, rainforests and savannas. Ebony harvesting occurs in the rainforest regions, which are located in the southern and eastern part of the country. The overall population is about 20 million people, and both French and English are the official languages. The country's capital, Yaoundé, where one of the Crelicam mills is located, has nearly 2 million residents.



Using Déclassé Ebony

It might surprise you to learn that Taylor has been buying and using what's considered déclassé ebony for decades. In fact, it accounts for roughly 70 percent of the ebony we use for fretboards and bridges. The B-grade designation might be based on coloration, wormholes, cracks or pores in the wood. Our ability to condition the wood into a refined part resolves many of the physical irregularities. Our Tecate factory plays a vital role in this type of wood processing, not only for guitars made there, but also for guitars that will be built in El Cajon. These steps include properly drying the wood, and then planing, tapering, sanding and later shaping the parts by hand and with sophisticated computer mills.

While some other guitar makers use rosewood fretboards for their lower-end models and reserve ebony for their high-end guitars, we use ebony for every guitar. One benefit of doing this, beyond ebony's performance superiority, is that it gives us a broader spectrum for internal grading; in other words, we use it from the Baby Taylor to exotic Builder's Reserve models.

Though there may be some debate among guitar enthusiasts about differences in quality between marbled and black ebony, Bob insists the difference is just cosmetic.

"There's no difference in tone, density, the way it dries or anything like that," Bob says. "Although, one irony is that worms actually seem to prefer the blacker wood."

Above: A sampling of ebony's variegation

One other point that inevitably comes up in discussions of ebony's cosmetic appearance is staining it black. Other guitar companies have tried it.

"I don't have an issue with that – after all, we stain maple and mahogany," notes Bob. "But it's not easily done. For us, it would have to be a neck with no binding or inlays because the stain would transfer to those materials."

Enlisting the Support of Other Guitar Companies

As a new owner of Crelicam armed with a deeper understanding of the ebony situation in Cameroon, Bob Taylor's next step was to share his findings with other guitar makers who were clients of the distributors to whom Crelicam sold their ebony. He put together a detailed presentation and personally visited companies including Martin, Fender, Guild, Collings, PRS, Breedlove and others. He explained the realities of the ebony trade in Cameroon and laid out the new vision for the company: to provide ebony that was sourced legally, ethically and sustainably, and over time to provide them with a better processed product. He explained Crelicam's intent to use trees with coloration in them because a lot of the black ones had been harvested. Ultimately, he invited them to be valued partners who, together as a group, could bring enormous improvement to the forest and communities in Cameroon.

"The 10 to 1 cutting ratio was illuminating to a lot of people," Bob says. "It was the equivalent of showing a picture of an elephant with his face chainsawed off and then asking them if they want some ivory. Different people had different reactions, but almost everybody said, 'Yes, we'll use that wood, no problem.'"

Following Bob's visit, Gregory Paul, Vice-President of Business Development for C. F. Martin & Co., emphasized Martin's ongoing commitment to the legal and ethical sourcing of ebony.

"There is no question that ebony is very scarce," says Paul. "Scarcity of any species creates a trading environment rife with abuse and illegality. Martin remains committed to sourcing materials from companies who clearly demonstrate that they do the right things for the resource and the people to whom it belongs, all within the confines of the rule of law."

One person suggested making the black ebony available for a premium upcharge, but Bob disagreed.

"What will happen is people will just fight to spend extra money to get the black wood, and that will work its way all the way back to the forest, there will be a price difference between the two, and we'll be right back where we started even though the numbers are different."

Another person suggested that as an ebony supplier, Taylor might be inclined to have two grading standards: one that set aside the black wood for its own guitars, and the marbled ebony for everyone else. It was a fair question.

"I told everyone I was already their great experiment," Bob says, "because I make guitars out of déclassé ebony all the time and have been for years. When the guitars are finished they look great and no one thinks anything of it. We'll probably start to see a little bit more wood with coloration, but we already buy and use this wood."

Besides, Bob says, consumer acceptance of ebony variegation is easier to achieve if it comes from the entire industry together.

Anne Middleton Joins the Team

In March, Taylor welcomed Anne Middleton to our Crelicam operations team in the role of Environmental and Community Relations Manager. Based in Cameroon, Anne is responsible for Crelicam's traceability and transparency of ebony wood (including FSC certification), legality (including compliance with CITES, the U.S. Lacey Act, the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, and the European Union's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade [FLEGT] Action Plan), sustainability initiatives, building relationships with NGOs and community leaders, domestic and international government relations, and anti-corruption measures.

Before joining Taylor, Anne was a forest campaigner at the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) in Washington, DC, where she worked with industry and government officials to develop tools and resources for understanding and implementing the Lacey Act. She also helped build and sustain the Forest Legality Alliance (www.forestlegality.org), of which Taylor is a leading member. Her educational background includes a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin College and a Master of Environmental Science and Management from the Bren School at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Middleton says she's thrilled to bring her environmental background into the business world and play a role in fulfilling Taylor's vision as an ebony supplier at Crelicam.

"For the first time in the industry, Taylor has taken a giant step toward supply chain transparency by owning the source," she says. "It's a huge challenge for us, but knowing exactly where the wood comes from and knowing that we're investing in Cameroon and its people is as important to me as the quality of the guitar parts. What happens at Crelicam has the potential to have a positive and far-reaching impact."

With Anne based in Cameroon, we look forward to sharing her regular reports on our progress at Crelicam in *Wood&Steel* and at taylorguitars.com.

"The United States Embassy Yaoundé is proud to have provided assistance to Taylor Guitars and its Spanish partner [Madinter Trade] during their purchase of two Cameroonian ebony-processing factories. We were happy to advise Taylor on the business climate in Cameroon, introduce company representatives to Cameroonian officials, and host a dinner at the Ambassador's residence in honor of Bob Taylor. At the dinner, Bob met government and non-governmental organization officials who could assist with Taylor's efforts in Cameroon. We applaud Taylor Guitars' efforts to improve employee working conditions at the factories, and its determination to institute less wasteful and more ecologically sustainable use of ebony. We believe by fostering Cameroon-U.S. business initiatives, we not only improve income for American companies, but the livelihoods of many Cameroonians as well."

– U.S. Ambassador to Cameroon, Robert P. Jackson

Top down: Bob captures another step in the ebony milling process; L-R: Crelicam employees Vincent Lumpungu Yakawumbu and Jean Paul Ndzié Mvondo. **Top right:** Pre-processed and banded fretboard blanks

A related issue that Bob thinks guitar companies need to consider is the way they have allowed their purchasing decisions to be influenced by people who are removed from the realities of the sourcing process.

"Some companies have their marketing and sales people, who aren't fully aware of the sourcing issues, telling them what color their ebony needs to be," he elaborates. "And you know how that happens? A customer – it could be a teenager – will call the company and say, 'Hi, I bought this guitar six months ago, and it's really awesome. But I was with my friend the other day and he looked at my fingerboard and said it shouldn't have that color in it. And I thought I was buying a quality guitar, and now I found out you have a low-quality fretboard on there, and I'm calling to find out what you're going to do about it.'

"There's always a friend involved," Bob laughs. "Why that opinion? Well, it was born of the fact that for 100 or 200 years if there was a striped tree and a black tree, we'd take the black one. That same customer might also talk to his dealer, who calls the sales rep at the guitar company and says, 'I have a customer who's really unhappy,' and the sales person tells marketing, and marketing tells the purchasing department, who doesn't understand the wood sourcing issue, and the purchasing department says, 'The ebony must be black.' And this all might have started from a person who buys your lowest grade guitar.

"Those decisions are made through this big chain of fear," Bob adds. "We work through a chain of confidence. We don't bring fear up to the president; we bring confidence down to the customer. Part of my role in the ecosystem of guitars is for me to understand the sourcing issues and make a judgment that brings the most good for the most people. A hundred years ago, I'd have been a totally different guy because it was a different world. But things have changed dramatically."

This is far from the first time guitar makers and customers have had to adapt to changes in the availability of tonewoods. Brazilian rosewood and Adirondack spruce were once widely available. Aesthetic preferences change, too.

"Twenty years ago if there was sapwood in a guitar, a dealer would send it back," Bob points out. "Now the trees are smaller so we use it, and we made it a 'thing.' Some of our customers love to request a cocobolo guitar with sapwood in the middle."

Ultimately, Bob doesn't think having more variegation in some of the ebony will be a huge issue among customers. Dark ebony isn't going away altogether, and companies including Taylor will still grade so that the darker fretboards are used for the higher-end models. And consider that when you look at a fretboard on a guitar neck, you're also looking at elements like frets, strings and inlays. Besides, some of the variegation is truly beautiful. Anyone who's seen some of the Macassar ebony Build to Order guitar bodies we've made in the past will certainly agree. We've also been setting aside ebony with exotic marbling features for special custom and Build to Order guitars. (See pages 18-19.)

As Bob reflects on the initiative in Cameroon and the role that such communities in developing countries play in the ultimate success of companies who rely on their resources, he reiterates the need for social responsibility in business.

"I believe that the best way out of poverty is business," he says. "People need meaningful jobs, where they have some say in their future. I don't believe these problems can be fixed with charity, but I do believe that these people involved in getting our ebony cannot help themselves. They desperately need a partner, as in us, who cares about their plight and will use the business to better their lives." W&S