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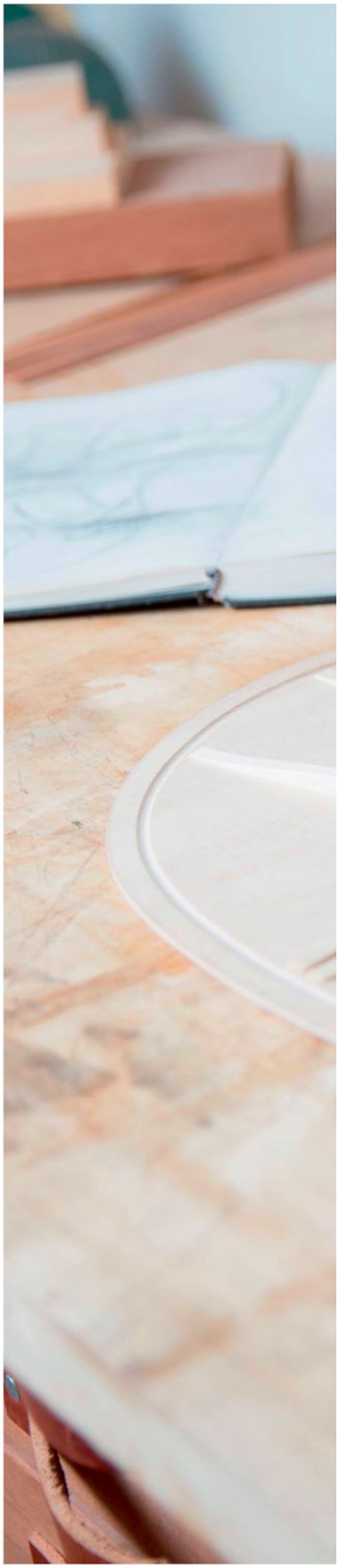
Taylor Challenges Guitar Making Tradition



The unprecedented V-brace pattern represents an entirely new chapter in the history of the steel string acoustic guitar, creating an instrument that fits better with electronic instruments and vocalists using Auto-Tune

A willingness to challenge tradition has defined the culture at Taylor Guitars since the company got its start in a small shop in El Cajon, California 43 years ago. Maybe because they didn't know any better, or maybe because their resources were initially so limited, they had to improvise—but for whatever reason, partners Bob Taylor and Kurt Listug never let conventional wisdom stand in the way of their pursuit of a better guitar and better manufacturing methods. As a result, they dispensed with centuries of guitar making convention with the introduction of computer-controlled production machinery, they ignored industry lore and ditched nitrocellulose lacquer to embrace an easier to apply UV cured polyester finish, and they devised an unprecedented neck joint to achieve improved tuning stability. Some still debate the merits of these dramatic innovations, but the fact that Taylor has sold more than two million guitars to date and enjoys major market share worldwide indicates that a lot of guitarists approve.

With the introduction of all the new V-Class guitars at this year's NAMM Show, the Southern California company is making its most audacious break with the past to date. These new guitars are defined by a V-bracing pattern that replaces the X-brace that has defined the steel string flat top guitar for the better part of a century.

Taylor's V-Class bracing, as the name indicates, consists of two braces that join together at the base of the top, and flare out on either side of the sound hole, creating a "V." Three cross braces and a reinforcement plate under the bridge provide additional support. Andy Powers, Taylor's master guitar designer, who devised the bracing pattern, describes it as "a new sonic engine" and says it delivers "better sus-

Descibed as a new "sonic engine," the Taylor V-brace creates guitars designed for the current musical environment.

Taylor Guitars founders Kurt Listug and Bob Taylor flank Andy Powers, the company's master guitar builder and the creator of the new V-brace.

tain, better volume, and better balance." Vintage expert George Gruhn, who dismisses most "new" guitar designs "as just different binding or inlay patterns," lends credence to Andy's claim, calling V-Class bracing a "genuine innovation." He adds that it has created "the best sounding and playing guitars Taylor has ever produced."

V-Class bracing, like all other Taylor innovations, was preceded by painstaking deliberation and extensive experimentation. You could even say that it was decades in the making, ever since as an independent luthier, Andy Powers wrestled with the inherent tradeoffs between maximizing a guitar's sustain and volume. "Sustain requires rigidity," he explains. "Think of a '59 Les Paul. It's rugged and rigid and it has tremendous sustain." Volume, on the other hand, calls for a flexible surface that can move air. "A banjo is super flexible and creates lots of volume," Andy says. "But, it has limited sustain: the notes decay quickly." He describes the traditional flat top as lying somewhere between the banjo and the Les Paul, depending on how the builder prioritizes sustain or volume.

Andy long ago lost count of the many different ways he tweaked the X-brace pattern in pursuit of an optimal balance. These efforts culminated in his redesign of Taylor's flagship 800 series, introduced in 2014. "I re-voiced the guitar and got what I thought was the last bit of incremental improvement out of the classic X-brace," he explains. Despite positive reviews from players and strong market acceptance, the 800 series project left him feeling unexpectedly depressed. "I've always operated on the premise that the best guitar you build is the one you build tomorrow," he says. "But after the 800 series, I felt that I reached a cul de sac. I didn't know what to do next."

Inspiration for a next move came from an unexpected source. Sitting on his surfboard, Andy was mesmerized one morning as he watched waves crashing on either side of a stone jetty that protruded off the San Diego coast. The jetty was immovable while the surf on either side was in constant motion. What if, he wondered, you could create a bracing pattern that would be still and yet flexible at the same time? One that could provide a stable foundation under the strings to extend sustain, but simultaneously would allow the edges of the top to freely vibrate for volume? Working into the night at his well-equipped shop behind his house, the V-bracing pattern quickly emerged as the

Outwardly, the V-Class guitars look little different from other Taylor guitars. The headstock, appointments, and Grand Auditorium body style remain unchanged. The only visual cue is a black nut, instead of the ivory, and a new interior label. Above, left to right, the flagship "Builder's Edition" with a beveled cutaway, with koa sides and back and a Sitka spruce top; the K24ce in all koa; and the 914ce with rosewood back and sides and Sitka spruce top.

answer to his question. He contends, it resolves the conflict between sustain and volume. "It provides rigidity in the center of the guitar, delivering good sustain, but it has a lot of flex at the sides for volume," he explains.

As an added and unexpected benefit, Andy says that V-Class bracing also solves some of the inherent tuning problems that plague many acoustic guitars without having to readjust fret positions or the nut. "Because the movement of the top is more orderly," he explains, "the fundamentals of each note are stronger, with fewer stray harmonics, and they ring more evenly up and down the neck." The improvement is subtle, but important when so much music is now being made with perfectly intonated electronic instruments, and vocals corrected with Auto-Tune. "People ask us all the time about the future of the guitar," he says, "We think it's important to build instruments that work better in the current musical environment."

"WITH V-CLASS BRACING, WE'VE DEVELOPED SOMETHING THAT COMPLETES THE TAYLOR GUITAR BUILDING STYLE."

But what about that intangible quality that tops the priority list of every guitarist, namely "tone?" Andy has a ready response and opines that "tone" isn't as subjective as most people think. "Guitarists would agree that balance across all the strings and up and down the fret board is a good thing. They also think a wide dynamic range is important, as are volume and projection," he says. "These attributes have a lot to do with what players refer to as 'tone,' and they can be measured and controlled. The V-Class bracing performs well in all these areas."

Guitars with V-Class bracing may represent a break from tradition, but outwardly they're hard to distinguish from any other Taylor guitar: The only visual cues are a black graphite nut instead of Taylor's traditional white nut, and a new interior label that highlights Andy Powers' signature. Three standard models are offered in the Grand Auditorium body style with the distinctive Taylor headstock. The PS14ce is built with a striped West African ebony back and sides with a sinker redwood top; the K24ce is an all koa model; and the 914ce features Indian rosewood back and sides with a Sitka spruce top. For the flagship "Builder's Edition," to showcase the new "sonic engine," Andy added a beveled armrest, a compound cutaway with finger bevel, and elaborate inlay work.

Eventually, the V-Class bracing system could be applied to any guitars in Taylor's lineup. However, for now, only high-end guitars made in the El Cajon, California factory will receive the new bracing innovation.

For Bob Taylor, the new V-Class bracing is more than just another product improvement; it is a defining characteristic that will set Taylor guitars apart as genuine originals in a world populated by replicas. "We developed our own trade dress and headstock that was distinctive. Then we came up with an original body shape with the Grand Auditorium," he says. "With V-Class bracing, we've developed something that completes the Taylor guitar building style." This bracing innovation also signals an important new chapter in company history, and Andy Powers' expanded role.

To ensure that their guitar business would outlive them, Bob and Kurt both agreed that it was critical to have a skilled guitar maker in the upper echelons of management to succeed them. They were convinced that a reputation built on four decades of hard work could be quickly dissipated by someone without a firm grasp of the guitar maker's craft. As Kurt explains, "This isn't a 'brand'; it's a guitar company, and we're guitar builders." As they discussed a suc-

Vintage expert George Gruhn (left), above with Andy Powers, calls the V-Class the "best guitars Taylor has ever produced."

cession plan, Bob scribbled down a list of characteristics he wanted in his "ideal" guitar maker candidate. He still has the note that reads, "Dear God, I need just one guitar maker. He has to be a better guitar builder than me, and he has to be self-taught with no prior factory experience. He has to be a great player with a thorough understanding of the history of the guitar. He has to be a good person with a good lifestyle that would enable a long-term commitment. He has to be under 30 with 20 years of experience, and he has to be from San Diego."

Reading the list today, Bob laughs and says "these were just my ponderings and I knew it was an impossible list. But then I met Andy."

Andy Powers grew up in Oceanside, just north of San Diego, and developed a fixation with fretted instruments shortly after he left the cradle. He built his first instrument—unsuccessfully, he points out—when he was eight. But he persisted, and by age 12 was building and selling ukes and guitars to his friends. By the time he was 18, he was wearing bifocals because of all the time spent hunched over his work bench, turning out instruments. When he wasn't building guitars, he was playing them with other locals, including Jason Mraz.

At the University of California at San Diego, Andy studied guitar performance, with a heavy dose of musicology, and developed a working knowledge of instrument making history from the great violin makers of Cremona, Italy, to Bartolomeo Cristofori, the inventor of the piano, to the Southern California inventors, led by George Beauchamp and Leo