

# RESCUING ROSEWOOD

BY ALEX HARRELL

In response to China's upscale furniture industry increasing demands for rosewood and the consequential deforestation of several *Dalbergia* species in countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, CITES' latest regulations now protect all 300 rosewood variations — resulting in guitar manufacturers and retailers scrambling to fulfill government documentation requirements, send shipment orders on time and keep consumers content. The entire MI industry is forced to make a decision on the bigger question that looms over the not-so-far future: How do we make guitars without rosewood?



Ah, rosewood. You'd be hard-pressed to find a guitar without a rosewood fretboard. Brazilian rosewood is the epitome of tonewood options for guitar back and sides as well as fingerboards. It's the holy grail of hardwoods. Its dense characteristics are known for producing clear and crisp tones that are sonically superior to everything else.

The billion-dollar trade in rosewood timber is also the world's most trafficked wild product, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and accounts for a third of all seizures by value — more than elephant ivory, pangolins, rhino horns, lions and tigers combined.

So, it's no surprise that when the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) put out a regulation restricting rosewood trade that went into effect in January 2017, the guitar industry had a collective panic attack.

The information — and lack thereof — regarding the regulation was so difficult to digest that CITES' released a 23-page document answering 60 different questions, most of which spawned more confusion. To break down what this means for the industry in a nutshell, any instrument that contains any amount of any type of rosewood must be documented when shipped internationally. Manufacturers must document their existing inventory and apply for certifications, while dealers and sellers must include a CITES re-export certificate when shipping instruments out of the country.

Despite the hassle of getting government certifications on short notice, the real dilemma (for guitar makers, sellers and lovers alike) has been navigating the subtext of the ban: How can we replace rosewood? Do we push through the paperwork and continue using it, or do we saddle up and source other woods?

### **BREAKING TRADITION**

For some manufacturers, the ban is a blessing in disguise.

"This is an opportunity to do something different," said Adrian O'Brien, vice president of marketing and sales at Prestige Guitars. "If you get to the point that the wood is so endangered that CITES feels it's necessary to lay down such a strict regulation, I feel it's best to let that one go and move on to other sources or do something different."

And for the Canadian-based boutique guitar manufacturer, various wood options are bountiful. Most of the maple used for guitars comes from southwestern British Columbia, where

Prestige is located. Plus, another aspect of its business is dealing in wood. The benefits of having the timber industry in its backyard, as O'Brien put it, is that Prestige is perfectly positioned to stop using rosewood altogether.

"There are some great woods out there, like granadillo that has more density, like ebony wood — that's really beautiful sounding," he said. "There's another wood, Pau Ferro, that's really close to rosewood. There are options."

In fact, the bigger challenge for Prestige won't be finding rosewood replacements, but getting the big-name companies and retailers onboard with them.

"There's this inherent thing in the guitar industry of everybody following each other;



Yamaha's Armando Vega

we don't really subscribe to that," he said.

Prestige prides itself on making abstract guitar tops and incorporating different woods that aren't the norm, like zebrawood and poplar, that still sound great. "For us, it's like, why would you want to do what every other guitar company is doing when there's an opportunity to be a bit more forward thinking, in the sense that these are natural woods that have a certain supply limit to them, so why not take advantage of that and make it a part of our platform, and just go a different direction?"

## UNDERSTANDING ISSUES

But replacing rosewood can't be done overnight. Yamaha, for example, studies every element of what goes into its instruments: the lacquers, the woods, the behavior of said woods over time, etc. This process takes years. Making a quick decision doesn't always lead to long-term solutions.

"We're still figuring out how to navigate the rosewood delays," said Armando Vega, marketing manager at Yamaha. "I don't foresee it being immediately replaced, but I think what it does is, as an industry, we have to look at a replacement. But we've been challenged in the past — Yamaha has been around for over 128 years — so I have the utmost trust that they're going to find ways of getting past this."

And for Yamaha, the regulation has posed two things; The short term issue was shipment, which was resolved fairly quickly. The long-term problem was a bit more philosophical: approaching alternatives.

"What CITES has done is helped Yamaha speed up that process of expanding our wood palette," said Dennis Webster, PAC marketing manager at Yamaha. "So we're still going to make guitars with rosewood, but it may not be as many models as we've offered in the past."

Cordoba Music Group has taken a similar approach.

"We're making adjustments in some of the materials we're using, some composites, some alternative woods, and we'll be rolling those out over the coming months, as I'm sure all guitar companies are," said Rick Gagliano, CMG's director of brand management. Though Cordoba (and subsequently Guild) haven't abandoned rosewood altogether, the company has absorbed some of the costs associated with rosewood by shifting some models that wouldn't be challenged in the marketplace — such as lower-end ukuleles — to a composite material that has similar qualities to rosewood but doesn't come with any additional stringent regulations.

"That has happened and will continue to happen," Gagliano said. "On some of our higher-end models, some of our classical guitars and of course in the Guild world, we're making some shifts to alternative woods like Pau Ferro and cocobolo as acceptable replacements that have similar hardness and tonal qualities as rosewood and that should have the same market acceptance."

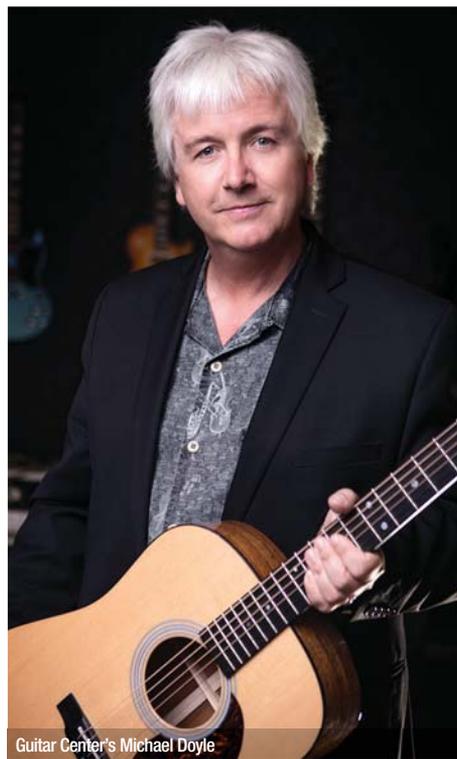
For other manufacturers, focusing on the

short-term challenges is the No. 1 priority.

"We were stuck behind the eight-ball for quite a while as factories worked out the proper permits and this held up our initial 2017 lineup introduction," said Tom Appleton, sales strategist of guitars and electronics at Ibanez. "But I'm happy to say we're finally shipping which should make a lot of people happy."

President and CEO of ESP Guitars, Matt Masciandaro, stated that ESP believes environmental regulations such as CITES are for the greater good.

"We work hard to make sure that our products (and the factories who make them) are compliant with the regulations," he said. "The act of enforcing CITES can slow



Guitar Center's Michael Doyle

the import process while shipments are examined to be sure importers are compliant under these regulations. We have a good team who works with our factories in Asia to try and minimize the challenges regarding CITES."

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

And for retailers, focusing on the short-term challenges is the only priority. Shipments have been stalled due to unclear paperwork requirements, and even consumers are aware of the regulations now.

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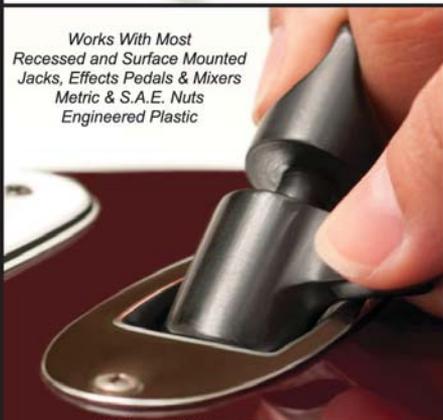
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Guitar Center's sales have been impacted because GC imports — some, not all — guitars, according to Michael Doyle, GC's vice president of guitars, amplifiers and accessories. "Because of the limitations on rosewood productions, the inability for our suppliers to fill containers with guitars has limited their ability to ship us complete containers, even if some of those guitars within the container weren't CITES guitars," he said. "We're being hit by both sides of it to some degree, so that's impacting our sales because of the lack of inventory."

While manufacturers have gotten a better grip on what the documentation requirements are, thanks to the FAQ that CITES released in late April, more guidance from respective governments would be helpful for GC (and probably every other retailer).

"I know manufacturers are very diligent on following up on that, but greater clarity would help us all as we learn to navigate the CITES regulations, and I'm sure that will help us get the inventory in, while still being respectful of the greater goals that CITES represents," Doyle said.

At Westwood Music, holding off on international shipping is the best bet for the Los Angeles-based guitar shop.

"We don't want to break some rule that we're unaware of," said Alex Sinclair, operations manager. "It's been confusing; there's not really any information provided by the government on what to do."

Some manufacturers have discouraged or prohibited retailers from shipping new guitars outside of the U.S., as is the case for

Wildwood Guitars in Louisville, Colorado. Unexpectedly, this has also impacted the shop's used guitar business.

"Some manufacturers let us ship certain instruments outside of the U.S., and we're working with a legal team to figure out if we can obtain permits for some of these used guitars, but that's going to be a slow process," explained its owner Steve Mesple. "There are so many hurdles to overcome; when those regulations were passed, we focused on guitars that didn't have rosewood. I see some manufacturers changing their offerings and I think that will continue."

### EMBRACING OPPORTUNITY

So, the ban isn't *all* gloom and doom. At least, it doesn't have to be.

"I look at these changes as [being] more than deterrents to business," Mesple said. "Perhaps as opportunities to be innovative and creative and find other [woods] to sell."

Which sounds easier than it might be (no pun intended). And even though toneheads are particular about the tonal qualities of rosewood, O'Brien of Prestige doesn't see an issue arising for retailers.

"In reality, there are probably dozens of other woods that sound pretty much like rosewood. The nuances are so subtle, whose really to say that one's better than the other? At the end of the day, it just depends on what grabs your ear," he said. "I'm always a fan of that — doing something different is your chance to break out. How else are you going to build a name for yourself if you just do all the same stuff?" **MI**



Prestige's Adrian O'Brien