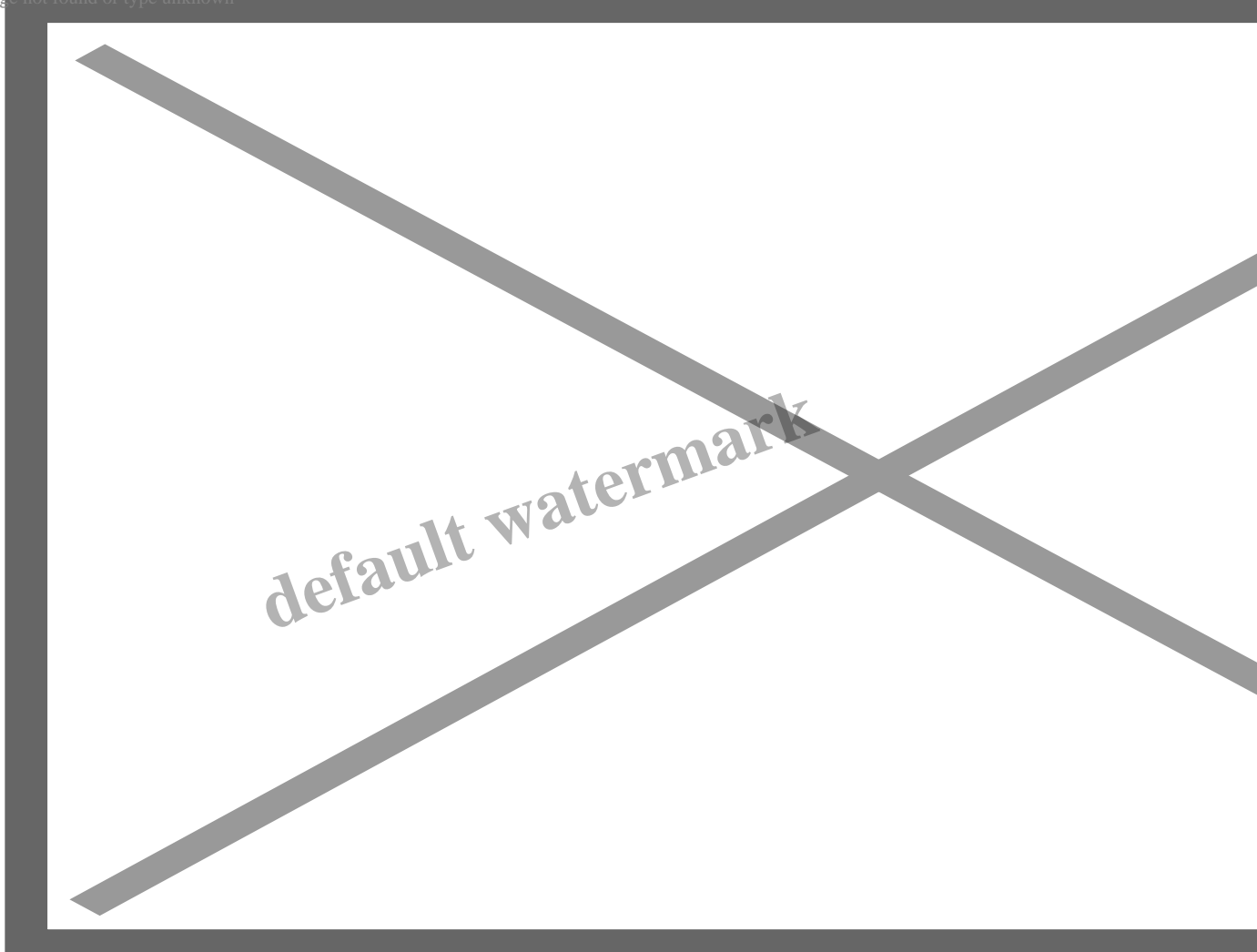


The Cadillac of Woods: Brazilian Rosewood

Description

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Brazilian Rosewood *Dahlbergia nigra* (Photos: [Arvores do Brasil](#)) and [Gerald Sheppard](#)
Minstrel guitar

Brazilian Rosewood has a long history as a prized tonewood, but its over-exploitation and subsequent trade restrictions mean it is now scarce.

This site is dedicated to the exploration of the materials used to build guitars – where they come from, the ecology of the trees that produce the woods, the sustainability and trade issues and the like. I'm interested in the choices available and how these are changing as traditional materials become scarcer and alternatives are tried.

I'm fascinated by all the various alternatives, but it would be remiss not to also consider the traditional mainstays of guitar woods. As foreshadowed in an [earlier post](#), in this post, I look at the big grand-

daddy of them all – Brazilian Rosewood.

Brazilian Rosewood (*Dalbergia nigra*) has an almost legendary reputation among guitar cognoscenti and has been called [“the Cadillac of woods”](#). So, what’s so special about it, and how did it come to have this revered position in the guitar world? Here I explore where the wood comes from, how it got to be a top pick for guitar tonewood, and the current situation in which it is highly prized but hard to come by because of its increasing scarcity and the trade restrictions it is subjected to.

There’s not a lot of Rosewood in Brazil

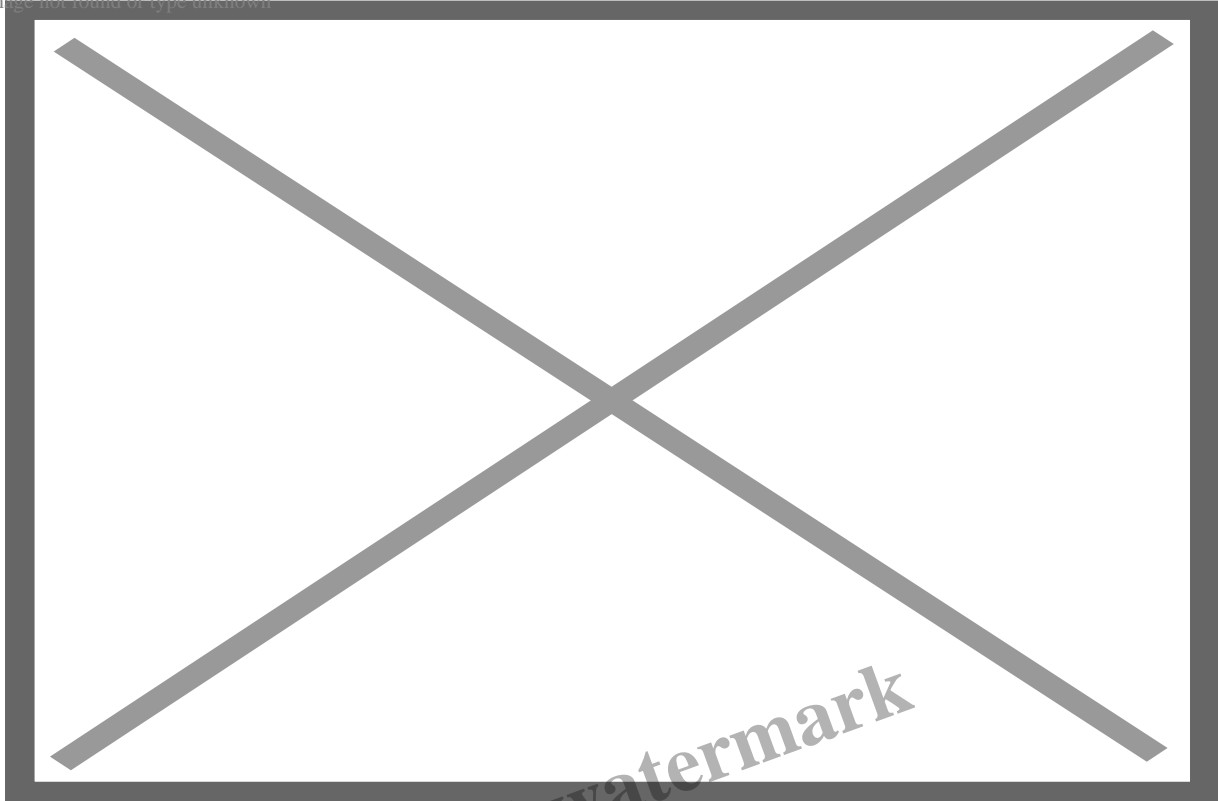
Part of the mystique of Brazilian Rosewood lies in its current rarity and the difficulty – verging on impossibility – of acquiring new stocks of wood legally. As the name might suggest, Brazilian Rosewood comes from Brazil. When I was young, a popular song often played on the radio was “the coffee song”, more accurately titled “They’ve got an awful lot of coffee in Brazil”. Originally released in 1946 by Frank Sinatra, it was sung by a variety of performers, including Osibisa in the 1970s.

There may be an awful lot of coffee in Brazil, but there’s no longer a lot of Brazilian Rosewood. And there is a bit of a correlation between these two things. [Extensive coffee plantations](#) were among the many changes to the Brazilian landscape that led to large declines in the forests where rosewood is found.

Many people will associate Brazil with the Amazon rainforest, perhaps the largest and one of the most important and diverse tropical forest areas in the world. Many will also know about the extensive and ongoing [destruction of the rainforest](#).

Rosewood is one of a great variety of tree species that make up another important forest region of Brazil, the Atlantic rainforest, or Mata Atlantica, which originally stretched over large swathes of the country’s east. Although less well known, the Atlantic rainforest is also a highly diverse forest system that has undergone dramatic change since European colonization. While around 80% of the Amazon forest remains, less than 10% of the Atlantic forest is left, and much of that persists in small fragments scattered through the landscape.

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Extent of the Atlantic Forest in 1500 and 2012. The Atlantic Forest originally covered a total area of 1,300,000 km², of which less than 10% remains.
([Pina-Costa et al 2014](#) See also [Joly et al 2014.](#))

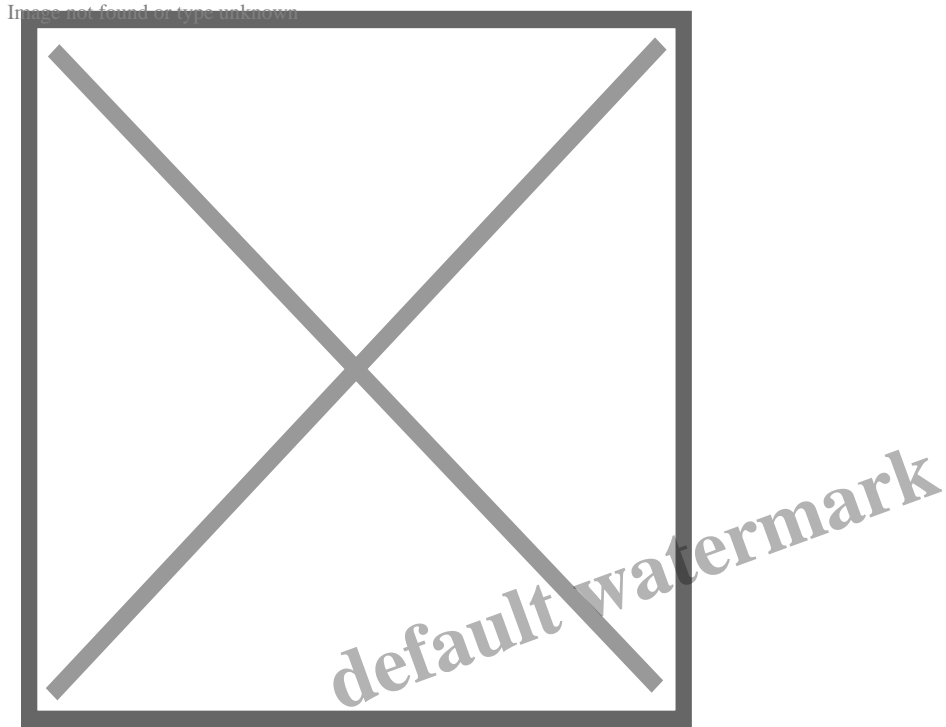
The destruction of the Atlantic forest has been well documented: for instance, Warren Dean's book "[With Broadax and Firebrand](#)" describes the impacts of colonization by Europeans from the sixteenth century onwards through activities including gold and diamond mining, slash-and-burn farming, coffee planting, and industrialization. All of these activities led to destruction or extensive modification of the forest landscapes.

Exploitation of forest resources was also part of the colonial enterprise, as explored by Shawn Miller's book "[Fruitless Trees: Portuguese Conservation and Brazil's Colonial Timber](#)". Miller points out that, as well as actual exploitation of the forest, a lot of it was simply burned rather than used – partially because the Portuguese king declared in 1652 that Brazil's best timbers belonged to him exclusively, leaving no incentive for Brazilians to harvest them.

Brazilian rosewood was one of the [finest woods](#) to be found in the Atlantic forest. It is highly prized for its valuable heartwood, which has been used for decorative veneers, high-quality furniture, musical instruments, tools, and craft products. Once European colonists realized the value of its wood, they began cutting down the rosewood and shipping it around the world. But a lot of rosewood were cut down simply to create plantations and farms or for mining operations. This continued for over 300 years, reaching its peak in the twentieth century.

Only a tiny portion of the remaining Atlantic forests are protected in national parks and reserves. The export of rosewood logs has been banned in Brazil, and in 1992 rosewood was added to Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora ([CITES](#); an

international treaty to protect wildlife), prohibiting the trade of the tree between nations that had signed the treaty. Despite these protective measures, Brazilian rosewood remains threatened, and [illegal logging](#) of rosewood species elsewhere is a major problem. Of all the species protected under CITES, rosewood (covering all rosewood species) is the most [trafficked commodity](#), far exceeding traffic in things like elephant ivory.

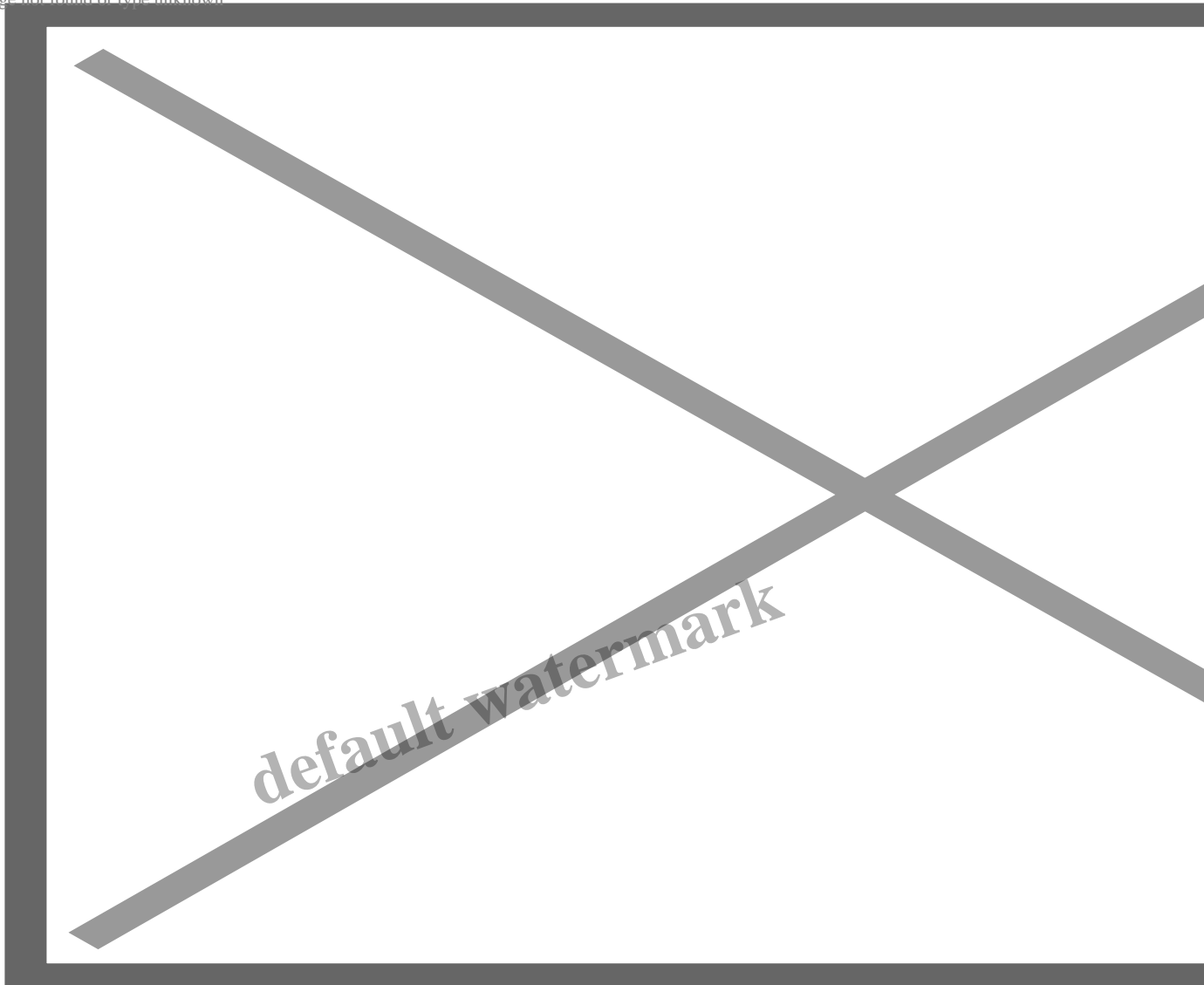


[World Wildlife Crime Report 2016](#)

Rosewood restoration

In recognition of the parlous state of the Atlantic forest, there are encouraging and exciting efforts underway to conserve what's left and turn decline into rejuvenation through restoration efforts. Restoring diverse forest ecosystems is a difficult and long-term task, but indications are that it is possible with enough effort and care. However, it is also hard work, and there are a lot of things about the forest and its species that have still to be figured out.

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Visiting an experimental restoration site in Sao Paulo State, with Brazilian colleagues working on restoration of Atlantic Forest

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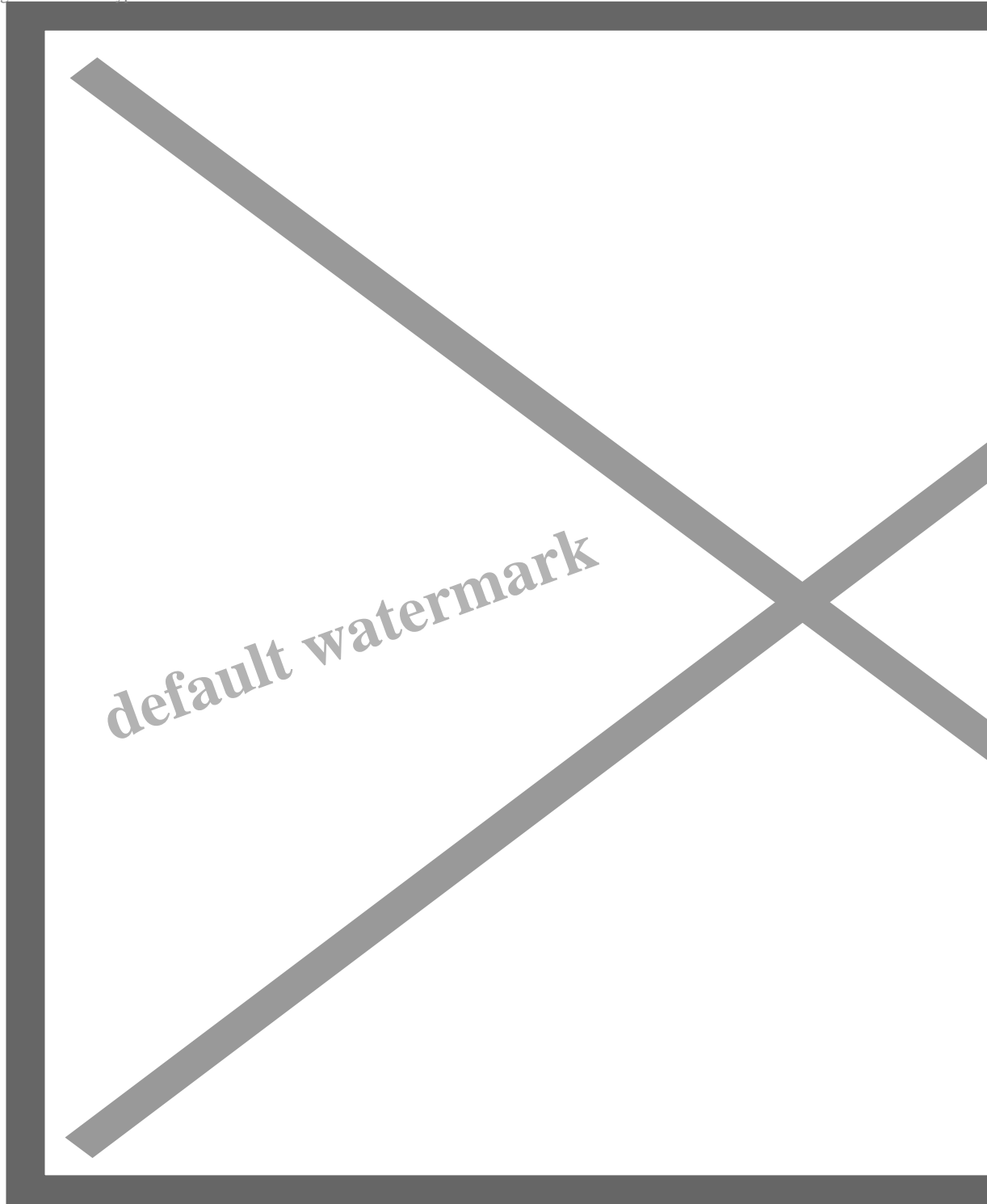
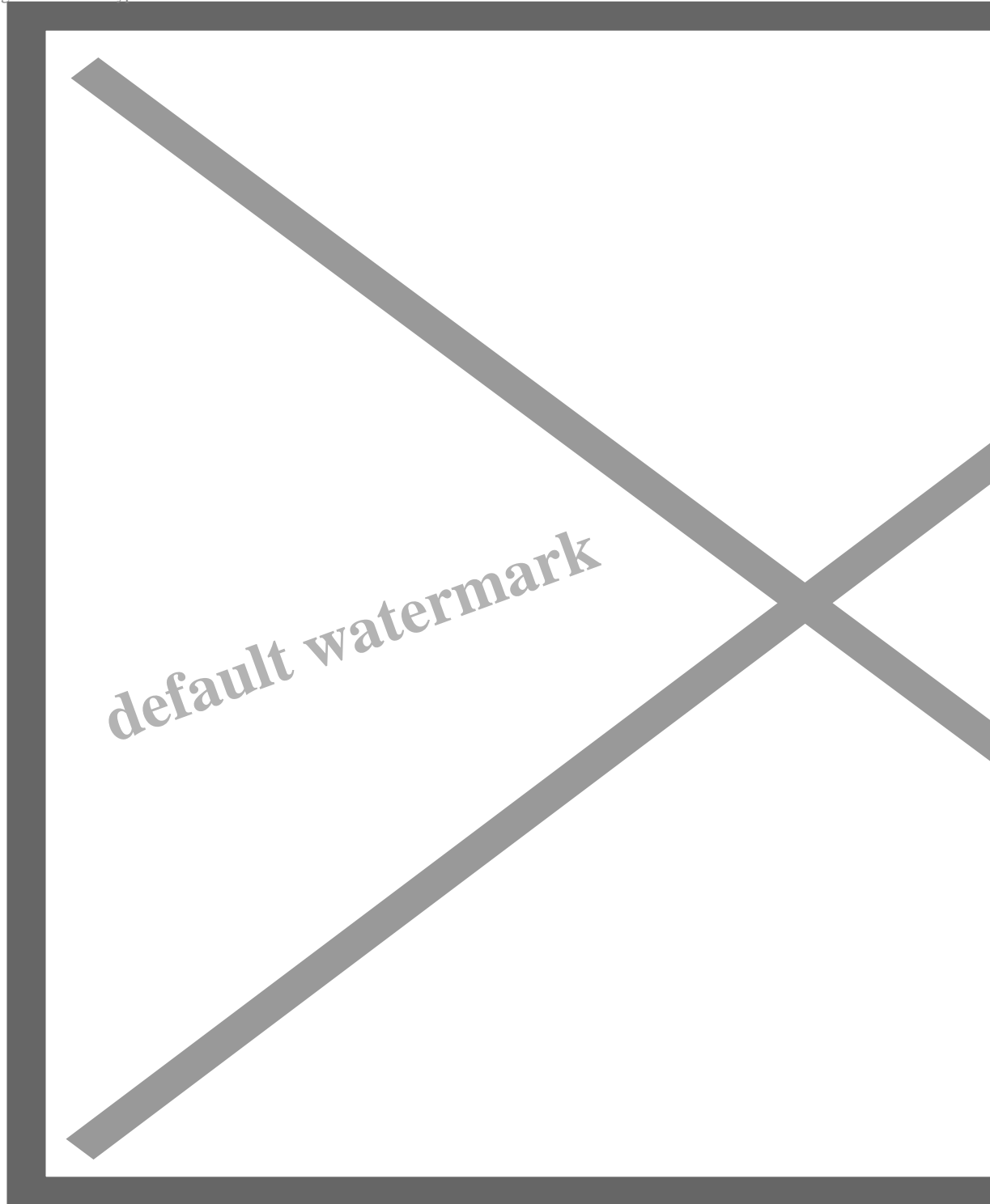


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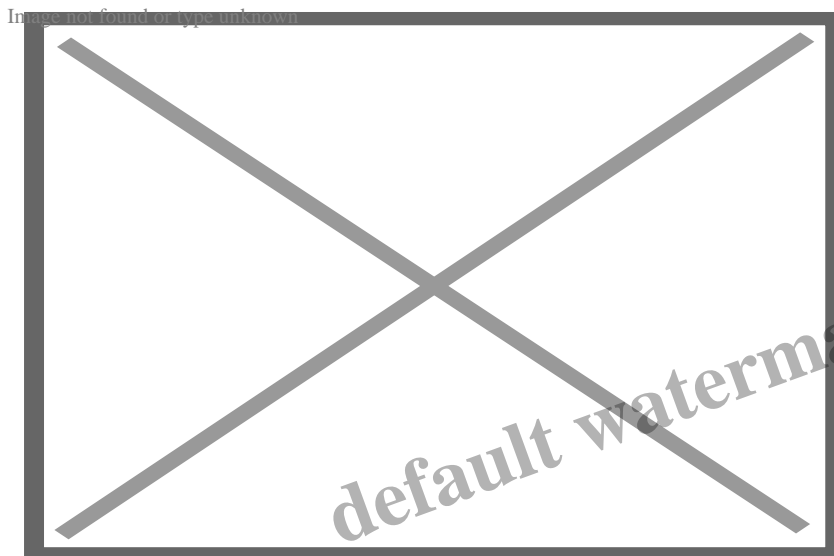
From seedlings to mature forest will take many decades, at least. The site depicted on the right is a restored high-diversity forest established 55 years previously. Rosewood forms a very small component of the tree cover in this forest.

Brazilian rosewood can be part of these restoration efforts. However, it can be difficult to grow and will take a long time to mature. Plantation grown rosewood may also produce low quality wood because [the growth of the trees is different under high light conditions](#)

, compared with what would have happened within old growth forests. Most restored areas and plantations are for conservation outcomes rather than for eventual timber production – although some are also aiming for multiple use options.

Brazilian Rosewood and guitars

Richard Johnston, cofounder of [Gryphon Stringed Instruments](#) in Palo Alto, California knows a lot about guitars. He's contributed hugely to the understanding of the history of how guitars developed, and in particular the history of Martin Guitars.



Richard Johnston at Gryphon Stringed Instruments

When I visited Richard at Gryphon we had a long chat about all sorts of things relating to guitars, wood and much more. We talked about the CITES regulations and how they were affecting the supply of various woods. Inevitably, Brazilian Rosewood came up in the conversation, and I asked Richard why, in his opinion, this particular wood had been so important in guitar making. It's [well documented](#) that Brazilian Rosewood was used on Martin guitars from the early beginnings when Martin set up in New York in the 1830s.

Richard's take on why rosewood became so important in guitars is that it had become established as the main wood used in Europe where it was readily available following import from Brazil – and the idea that Brazilian rosewood was “the” wood was transported across to America.

37-year-old Christian Frederick Martin had left Germany and the oppressive rules of the Instrument Guilds. He undoubtedly brought with him the guitar making ideas and techniques that were evolving in Europe at the time. In a [book](#) about the Spanish guitar maker, Antonio de Torres (often credited with creating guitars that are the clear antecedents of modern acoustic guitars), José L. Romanillos suggests that 19th century European guitar makers used a variety of different woods, including cedar, ebony, maple, walnut and cypress as well as rosewood. Some of these were locally grown, while others came in through burgeoning colonial trade.

Rosewood was available via Portuguese trade, and its initial use in guitars seems to have been on account of its attractive visual properties rather than on acoustic grounds. Various European guitar

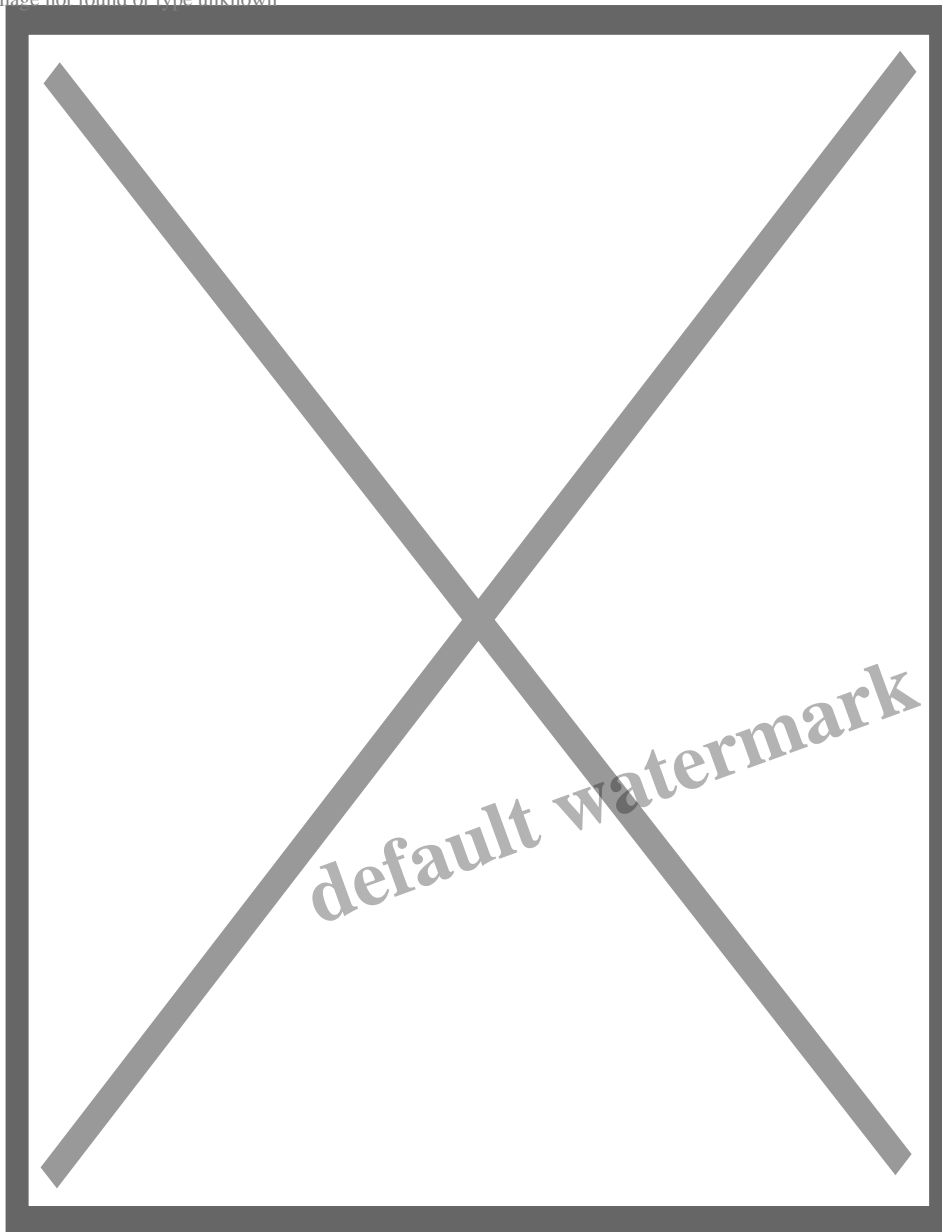
makers had preferences for different woods, and it was only latterly that Brazilian Rosewood became established as the “ideal” wood for guitar making.

Christian Frederick Martin apparently preferred Brazilian Rosewood over species growing locally in the US, although [other early guitar makers](#) experimented with some success with local species. Given the amount and variety of wood available from different North American species, it may seem odd that Brazilian Rosewood became a mainstay. But, as in Europe, trade and transport made acquiring exotic timber easy and relatively inexpensive. A guitar maker in New York using timber imported from Brazil is no stranger than a builder putting [Douglas Fir floor-boards from Canada into a workers cottage in Fremantle](#), Western Australia.

So it was that Brazilian rosewood became a standard material for backs and sides of Martin guitars and remained as such for over 100 years. So, a little Civil War era Martin 1-21 and a 1950s D28 both have Brazilian rosewood back and sides. Rosewood was also valued as a fretboard material.

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Brazilian Rosewood in an American Civil War era (pre 1867) Martin 1-21 (right) and a 1954 Martin D28 (left)

Brazilian rosewood was also used to produce the “Golden Era” guitars of the 1930s and 40s – although there are also many fine mahogany and koa guitars from that era too. Many see this period as being when guitar making was at its pinnacle, with relatively small numbers of high quality guitars being produced.

Where has all the rosewood gone, long time passing?

Its preponderance in classic vintage guitars adds to the Brazilian Rosewood mystique, especially since it is now much harder – and more expensive – to buy a new Brazilian rosewood guitar. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, it remained in relatively plentiful supply. However, this was due to the rampant harvesting of the Brazilian coastal forests, and supplies began to dwindle in the late 1960s as

Brazil banned its export. Martin and others stopped using Brazilian rosewood in 1969, moving over to Indian rosewood and other varieties. When Brazilian rosewood was added to the CITES treaty in 1992, its exportation was no longer legal. Brazilian rosewood could only be obtained and used for guitars (or anything, really) if it was harvested and exported prior to the CITES ban, or harvested from trees that have fallen naturally – and is accompanied with a certificate of provenance in both cases.

Although the focus of this post is Brazilian Rosewood, it's important to note the large number of other rosewood species growing around the world. When Brazilian rosewood declined in availability, guitar makers turned to other species – particularly East Indian and Madagascar rosewoods. [East Indian rosewood](#) in particular was relatively easy to come by and did not suffer to the same extent from the pervasive mis-management and overharvesting that characterised Brazilian rosewood. Other species around the world such as Madagascar rosewood, on the other hand, have also been [badly over-harvested](#).

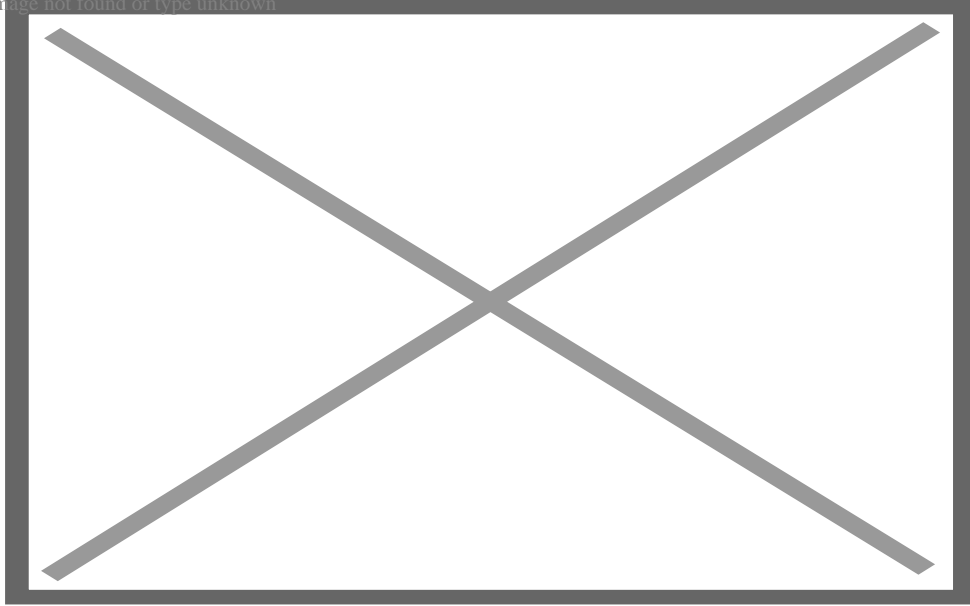
Of course, very little of the rosewood cut in the world goes towards guitars. Most is destined for China to be used in luxury furniture. Around the world, impoverished people are illegally cutting valuable rosewood trees to earn a few dollars, while organized crime makes large amounts of money from the illegal trade. It has proven very difficult to prevent illegal timber from sneaking into the supply chain. Over 75 species of rosewood are commercially traded, and species-level identification is often nearly impossible, especially when accompanied by false documentation.

CITES hits guitars big-time

In 2016, CITES decided to protect the entire *Dalbergia* genus under Appendix II in order to close the enforcement loophole. This aimed to facilitate effective enforcement of trade and forestry laws. It was a significant move towards reducing destructive illegal logging and international wildlife trafficking – but it was also huge for the guitar industry, which under the new rules had to provide CITES permits for all commercial trade, imports, and exports of rosewood guitars (or guitars with ANY rosewood in them). Language on “non-commercial personal use” supposedly protected traveling musicians from officials seizing their precious instruments, but confusion reigned for a while, and guitar makers, players and dealers all had to come to terms with the new arrangements.

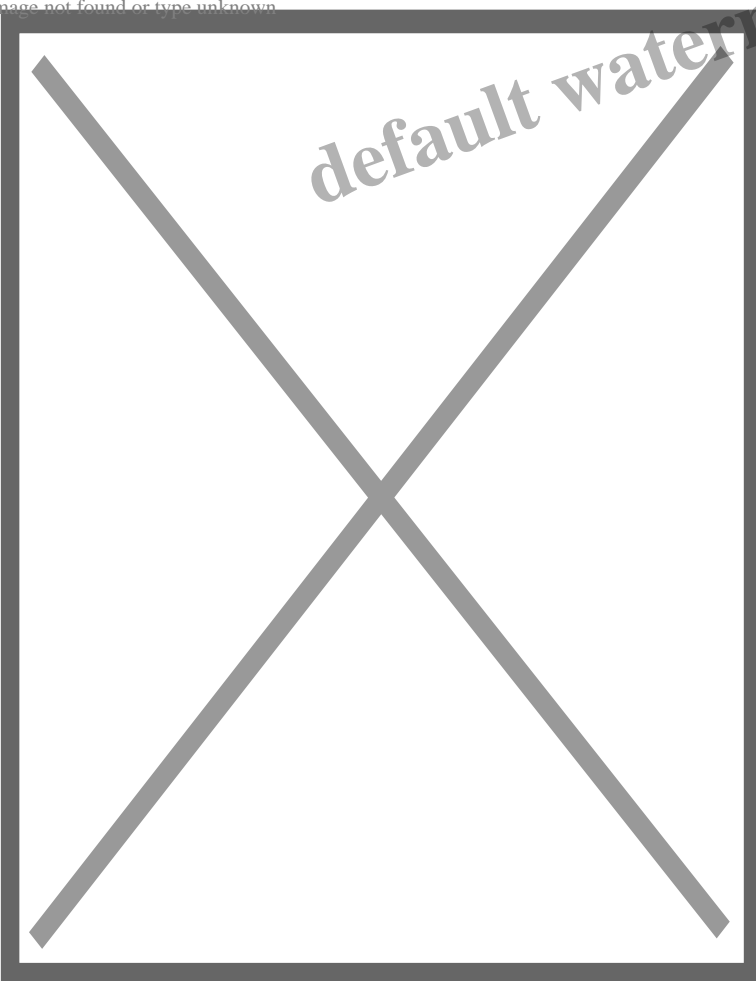
Basically, CITES, and the associated national laws such as the Lacey Act in the US, meant that any international trade in rosewood required a permit – including in existing instruments. So, when I bought a 1953 Gibson L50 from Artisan Guitars in Nashville, it turned out that the guitar had a Brazilian rosewood fretboard. In order to send the guitar to me in Australia, the folks at Artisan had to apply for a permit through the US Fish and Wildlife Service that specified that the guitar was “pre-convention” and contained Brazilian rosewood imported into the US circa 1953.

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1953 Gibson L50 with a Brazilian rosewood fretboard

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Permit issued to allow shipment of the Gibson from the US

This took some time – basically because the new rules meant that permits had to be obtained across the board, and the agency was completely swamped with applications. Mostly, everyone wanted to do the right thing (with a few notable exceptions: Gibson had already been pinged importing illegally-sourced wood, but that’s a topic for another story). However, the system got clogged, people were worried and confused, and it was a valid question whether all the extra restrictions actually helped achieve better outcomes in terms of conservation and stemming illegal trade.

Prominent guitar makers such as Taylor and Martin made the case to CITES that the new restrictions were problematic and causing major headaches for all concerned, including the enforcing agencies. As a result, towards the end of 2019 [CITES dialled down the requirements](#), particularly those regarding finished instruments (for all rosewood species except Brazilian). The guitar industry heaved a sigh of relief, but the whole episode certainly acted as a wake-up call and brought the plight of endangered timber species more into the guitar-playing public’s eye.

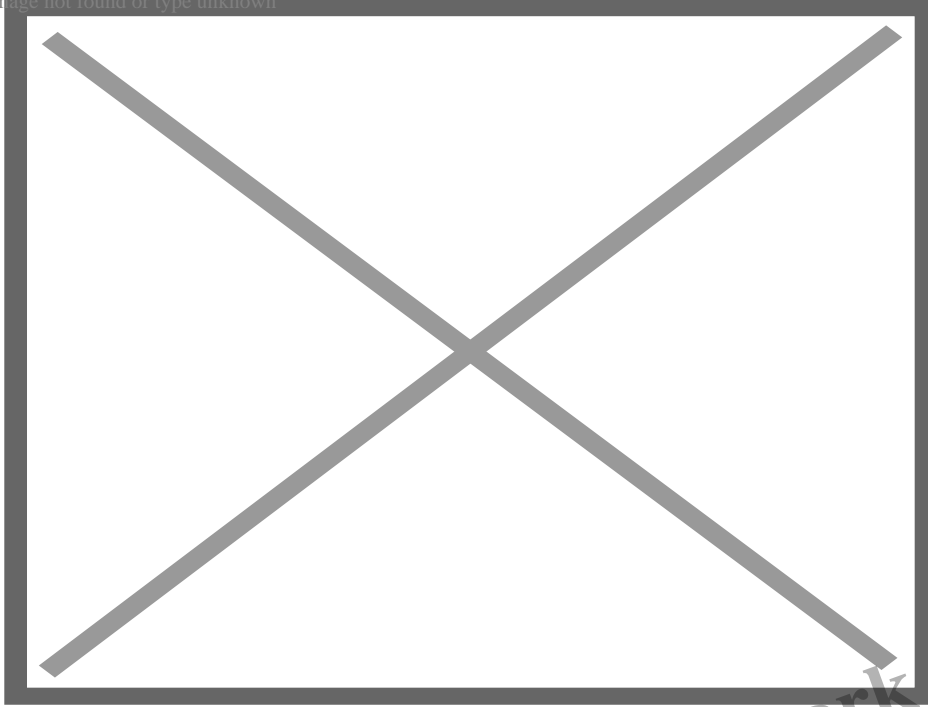
So, what now?

What’s the future for Brazilian rosewood? Will guitar makers ever be able to use sustainably-sourced rosewood from restored forest areas? Maybe, but that might be a long time coming – probably a hundred years or so, and it remains to be seen whether the wood from the new trees growing now will have the same appeal as the old growth that was logged last century.

So, no more Brazilian rosewood guitars, then? Well, not exactly. There’s a thriving trade in vintage guitars, and rosewood guitars pop up for sale regularly on sites like Reverb. Usually at a premium price, of course, unless you get lucky. But there’s also an ongoing trickle of new guitars made with Brazilian rosewood. You’ll find a range of guitar builders – big and small – that have access to existing supplies that were bought before the CITES restrictions came in. There’s no restrictions on making a guitar from Brazilian rosewood, as long as it can then comply with the relevant trade regulations.

As well as the existing small stashes of legal Brazilian, some guitar makers have sourced larger amounts of the wood. Tom Bedell, for instance, acquired a large supply from a [source in Spain](#) that had a surprising amount of wood stored away since the 1960s. Bedell is now making a fine [range of guitars](#) featuring exquisite Brazilian rosewood.

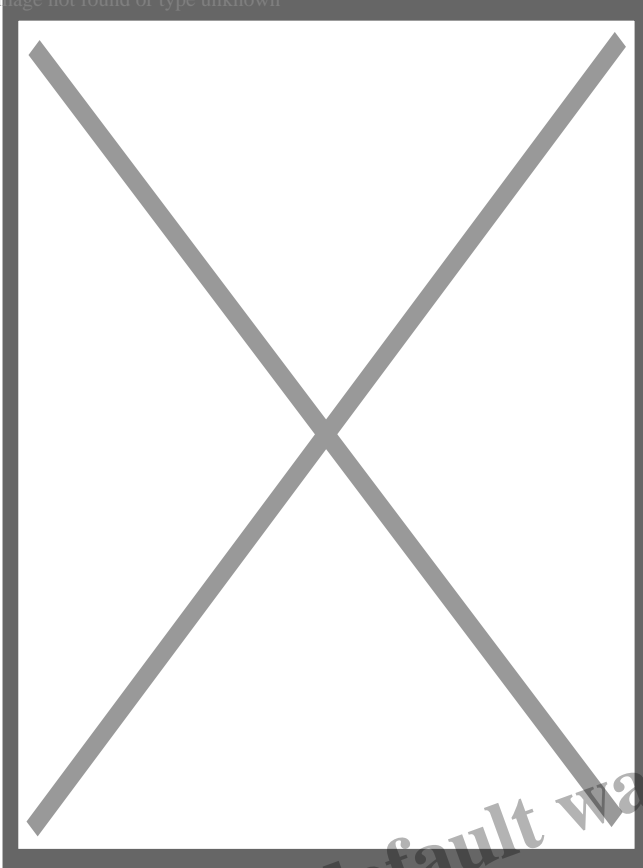
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Visiting Tom Bedell in Bend, Oregon – here holding one of the new range of Brazilian Rosewood guitars with wood sourced from Madinter in Spain

There's also the opportunity to use recycled or salvaged wood. A wonderful example is this [Charis guitar](#) built from Brazilian Rosewood salvaged from an old barn

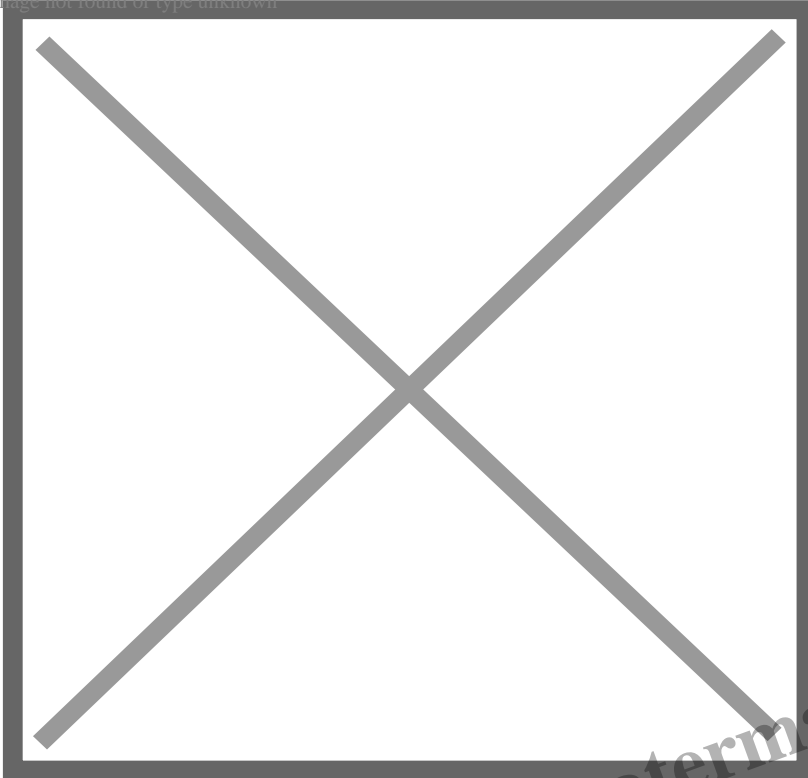
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2008 Charis Overo guitar – image courtesy of [Dream Guitars](#)

Another example involves the real-live drama of treasure found in a shipwreck. In 2005/6 a scuba diver discovered a shipwrecked ship off the Brazilian coast – or off the Spanish coast, according to other accounts – and it turned out that the wreck was full of logs. Apparently the ship (whose name I haven't been able to source) sank in 1938, after leaving from Salvador, Bahia for Denmark. The logs – old-growth Brazilian Rosewood – were well preserved and were salvaged. Shipwreck Brazilian Rosewood now appears in some spectacular guitars made by folks like [Preston Thompson](#) and [Morgan Guitars](#).

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Shipwreck Brazilian rosewood sets – [Morgan Guitars](#)

Yes, but...

So, Brazilian rosewood has a long history of use in guitars and is revered and valued in guitar circles. Does it deserve its exalted reputation?

Certainly if the prices asked and paid for Brazilian rosewood guitars are anything to go by, then yes it does. Guitars with “the Cadillac of woods” can cost more than a brand-new Cadillac. So, some folks at least are prepared to pay a large premium for a Brazilian rosewood guitar. Others question whether that premium is worth it. Is there really that much difference between a guitar made with Brazilian rosewood and, say, East Indian rosewood? Like many questions in the guitar world, this one ignites a healthy debate with widely differing opinions.

Have a look at the videos by Tony Polecastro and Heartbreaker Guitars where they compare guitars. As interesting as the videos themselves are the comments on them. They reflect the split between those who think they can easily tell the difference and those who think the whole thing is a bunch of baloney.

Tony Polecastro on Brazilian Rosewood (Check out the comments on whether you can tell the difference between woods!)

Tony Polecastro comparing Brazilian and East Indian Rosewood

Comparing Santa Cruz guitars with Brazilian and East Indian Rosewoods and Mahogany

This leads to a much broader question on what effect different woods – and every other aspect of

guitar making – have on how a guitar sounds. There is a scientific aspect to this question, where people employ experimental methods to test the physics and acoustics of different guitars. And then there is a psychological/perceptual aspect relating to how humans perceive and process sounds and other inputs. We'll explore this broader question in future posts. For now, it's suffice to agree with Brendon from Heartbreaker Guitars that there probably is no right answer and choice of guitars and guitar woods – just like wine and whisky – is mostly down to personal preference.

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