

Retro-Rama: 1977 Ernie Ball Earthwood Acoustic Bass Guitar.
Dave Pomeroy [Click Here for Official Article](#)

After some years of experimentation and several unsuccessful attempts to interest existing companies in the ABG, Ernie Ball developed the prototype Earthwood in collaboration with George Fullerton, who was previously with Fender and would later reunite with Leo Fender at G&L. Production began in 1972, and it apparently stopped and started a few times before finally ending for good in 1985. Brian Ritchie of the Violent Femmes—whose band's sound and image were built around the distinctive style of the Earthwood—and John Entwistle of the Who have been two notable users of this bass.

Essentially, the Earthwood is exactly what it appears to be—a huge acoustic guitar with a bass-guitar-like neck. This is the Standard-version body, which is 24 1/2" long, 18 1/4" wide, and 6 5/8" deep. While it's hard to imagine a bass much bigger than this, the Deluxe model is nearly two inches deeper. The Earthwood is very well made, with a number of distinctive touches. First of all, that big "E" on the headstock is hard to miss! The walnut sides and back are beautiful, and the dark wood binding on the top and bottom of the sides is subtle and well executed. The 34"-scale maple neck has an adjustable tilt accessed from the back on the bass. The Grover tuners have funky curved pegheads that fit the oversize proportion well. Some Earthwoods were made with a pickup included, but this one is acoustic all the way.

This bass's owner, legendary session player and producer Emory Gordy Jr. (Elvis Presley, Emmylou Harris, Patty Loveless, Bill Monroe), has had it since it was new. Emory played another Earthwood belonging to producer Brian Ahern on Emmylou's classic *Roses in the Snow* record, and used this one extensively on Loveless's *Bluegrass and White Snow* Christmas album.

In the studio, Emory has found that playing the bass upright, cradled between his legs, works better than "normal" playing position, and actually helps project the sound to the mic. Emory feels the Earthwood retains a string-bass character in a track without taking up quite so much space. Hearing some new tracks in the studio with him, I agree with his assessment:

It records very well. Like many acoustic instruments, it has some resonant notes and some dead ones. The art in recording with this axe includes knowing its sweet spots.

As you might expect, this bass is pretty darn loud, especially compared to other ABGs. It can't move as much air as a string bass, but it has a full, punchy sound, accentuated by its (original!) Ernie Ball Earthwood bronze strings, which still have a strong midrange component. It is fun to play, although most folks will find that its long reach takes some getting used to.

We have Ernie Ball to thank for bringing his brilliant idea to fruition. It seems he was ahead of his time, as the Earthwood didn't take off as expected. Perhaps its gargantuan size scared people away. But hey, compared to a string bass, it's not that big! In its smaller form, the ABG had its commercial breakthrough in the '80s and '90s, especially with the popularity of MTV *Unplugged*. We'll look at another cool ABG next month. Until then, thanks for reading!

Ernie Ball Earthwood

A Big ABG--By: Willie G. Moseley

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Way before "unplugged" became a popular way to play music and fretted acoustic bass guitar (ABG) models began appearing from so many manufacturers and independent luthiers, Ernie Ball bought a Mexican guitarron and gave it frets. Unable to interest manufacturers in the viability of an acoustic bass in the early 1970s, the veteran musician, retailer, and stringmaker created one himself.

There were, of course, prior attempts at making and marketing an acoustic bass. Gibson's humongous Style J mandobass was made from 1912 to circa 1930 and had a 42" scale (same as an upright bass). Four decades after the demise of the mandobass, Ball's short-lived attempt at a true acoustic bass guitar was innovative and eye-catching - and ahead of its time. Guitar manufacturing legend George Fullerton (Leo Fender's right-hand man for decades) departed the Fender company five years after it was acquired by CBS, then worked with Ball to create the prototype acoustic bass. They hit the market in 1972.

Perhaps the most intriguing facet of the Earthwood acoustic bass models was that wood was used wherever possible, including places where plastic or metal may have been more typical. On the latter-day example shown here, the truss rod cover, body, and headstock binding, fret markers, and soundhole trim are all wood. Note the flame maple overlay on the headstock, and Schaller tuners. And there were variants of the ABG, including bodies of different depths - 6 5/8" and 8 1/4". The model shown is shallower, and many examples had maple fretboards and/or wood pick-guards.

The top of #1021 is two-piece spruce. Its body is 25" tall and 18 3/4" wide at the lower bout. The sides are made from two pieces of book-matched mahogany that flare in opposite directions from center vertical strips of wood at the top and bottom of the body. The back is two-piece book-matched mahogany, as well. The maple neck is bolted on, and a small panel on the back covers the three neck bolts as well as (surprise!) a tilt-neck adjustment access hole for an Allen wrench. The instrument's serial number is stamped on the assembly that houses the neck bolts inside the body.

The scale on this beast is a full 34" standard length, and the strings have to be loaded through the sound-hole, then through the holes in the bridge. Moreover, this example is technically an electric instrument - there's a Barcus-Berry Hot Dot pickup mounted under the bridge, and the cord for amplification plugs into the large lower strap button. There are, however, no controls - no volume, tone, equalizer, or active circuitry of any kind. The general line of thought for a player whenever one of these was wired up was probably to hope like hell it didn't feed back (which it has a propensity to do when amplified).

For most would-be players, terms like "cumbersome" or "ergonomically-challenged" don't even begin to describe the reaction when you first sit to plunk on an Earthwood bass, but then the guitarron on which it was based isn't exactly sleek and slim, either.

Nevertheless, these gargantuan instruments can generate a generous and resonant sound once (and if) a player becomes accustomed to the bulkiness. It can add a unique (usually appreciated) low-end to any pickin' and grinnin' session in nearly any acoustic-oriented genre... and it's still a lot smaller than a doghouse bass!

These days, improvements in piezo pickup technology and active circuitry have made it possible for the bodies of modern acoustic basses to be the same size as their guitar counterparts... as long as they're running through an amplifier. But an Earthwood bass, considering the immense size of its body, moves a whole lot of air, so it's more than capable of holding its own in a purely acoustic environment, as notable players like the Who's John Entwistle and the Violent Femmes' Brian Ritchie could attest.

For slightly over a decade, amidst stops and starts for various reasons, the Earthwood acoustic bass and other Earthwood instruments were created and produced sporadically until 1985. The brand name lives on for the Ernie Ball company, and currently serves as the moniker for its #2070 phosphor-bronze acoustic bass strings.

The quantity of Earthwood basses made is nebulous, but they are relatively rare - and big - birds.