



Sadowsky's Jim Hall Signature model archtop.

ROGER SADOWSKY

BY JON CHAPPELL

Gripping the eastern shore of New York City's East River, in the fashionable and burgeoning Brooklyn neighborhood of DUMBO ("down under Manhattan Bridge overpass"), stands the large, multi-unit industrial building that houses Roger Sadowsky's repair shop and showroom. Amidst the bustle of trendy restaurants, loft offices, and artist studios—and the occasional movie crew filming on the gritty streets—is where Roger Sadowsky plies his trade.

For over 25 years, Sadowsky has been a New York City institution, known as one of the best guitar and bass repairman in the business. His clientele includes all the first-call session players, and he stays busy lending his expert touch to setups, repairs, and mods for the most discerning guitarists and bassists. In 1980, Sadowsky branched out to build guitars. "I was doing repairs and restorations for the New York City session guys full time, and then I started building guitars under my own name in 1980, basses in 1982," explains Sadowsky from his sunlight-drenched workshop. "Back then, it was all solidbodies. If you were going to make a living building and selling guitars, you had to be building solidbodies. This was before MTV's *Unplugged*."

It was the long association with legendary jazz guitarist Jim Hall, and in particular with Hall's D'Aquisto archtop, that prompted Sadowsky to explore hollowbody construction. "I've been taking care of Jim's guitars for about 15 years. I'd talked with him about building a laminated archtop. This was something I'd been thinking about

since the late '80s, and I'd discussed the idea with various guitar makers, including Bill Collings and Dana Bourgeois. Laminates are my thing, my niche. I'm not interested in making \$8,000 archtops. Plenty of my colleagues are already making fine instruments, but I've always been about making guitars for professional working musicians. If you have an \$8,000 to \$30,000 carved archtop, you're not going to take it to your jazz-trio brunch gig. I felt there was a need for a more practical, everyday archtop.

"The trend in the last 20 years is to make archtops more acoustic-sounding," Sadowsky continues. "But the more acoustic they become, the worse they can sound amplified. Many people think that the second pickup in a carved-top guitar like a Gibson L-5, makes it sound better amplified and with less feedback. This is because the weight of the extra pickup and the additional cut for it help stabilize the top. Today, no one wants to cut into the top of an expensive carved-top instrument to mount pickups, but you can easily do that with a laminated top. Floating pickups are hard to adjust, in terms of side-to-side positioning and height. If your guitar came with, say, a Kent Armstrong floating pickup and you wanted to try a Seymour Duncan or a Benedetto floating pickup, there's no consistent approach to mounting them. It will cost you a lot of money just to try another option. Whereas, when the top has a set-in pickup configuration, I can mount a DiMarzio or Duncan or whatever the guitarist wants. It's much more player-friendly. So for amplified situations, laminates have tonal and structural advantages."

Using laminate tops didn't make manufacturing the guitars any easier, at least in the beginning. "Dana and I worked on the project for a year," recalls Sadowsky, "but



Inside Sadowsky's Brooklyn repair shop.



On an archtop with a moveable bridge, precise placement is required for correct intonation and string alignment.

we just couldn't get the laminates happening. We were vacuum clamping the veneers, but we couldn't get the plates thin and light enough."

Nor was there a solution in other domestic or international providers. "I checked out everything available from Germany—couldn't get any laminates that I wanted," laments Sadowsky. "All the domestic ones I checked out weren't thin and light enough,

either. So I went to the Japanese. I've been doing business in Japan since 1987, and have a continuing relationship with a distributor there. The idea of having an instrument made on my own in Japan was daunting, but given that I had my own people there, I knew they could liaison with the factory on my behalf. Plus, I knew that the Japanese had the manufacturing capabilities. The Japanese have very high standards, and their craftsmen are



Each Sadowsky archtop gets ten hours of final work and adjustment to assure a flawless setup. Here, Roger Sadowsky checks neck relief by holding the sixth string against the 1st and 14th frets.

among the best in the world. The Japanese consumer is very discriminating, and Japan is one of the only countries that considers their craftsmen national heroes. So I got what I wanted in Japan, including the all-nitro-cellulose lacquer finish. I didn't want the polyurethane finishes you see on so many guitars. I wanted the character of nitro for these instruments."

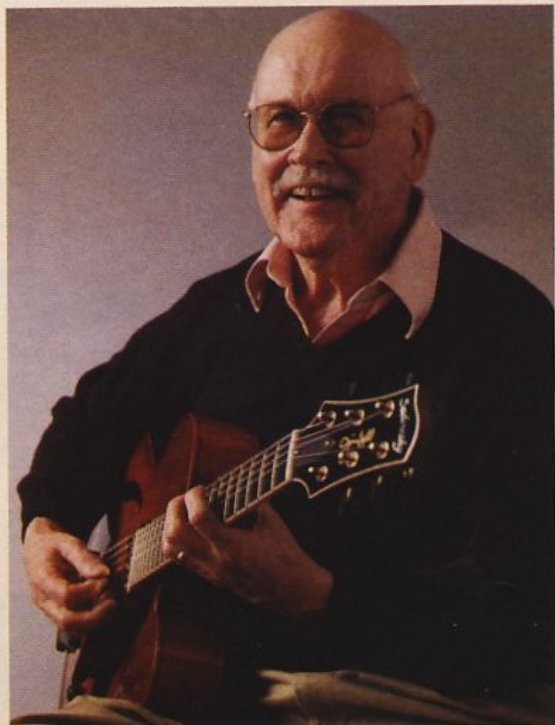
Sadowsky reveals one of the secrets to his successful career: No matter how well a guitar is made, it must feel like a perfect fit from the first note. Once the guitars arrive from the Tokyo builder, the final touches are administered in Sadowsky's Brooklyn shop. "We do ten hours of final work on each instrument," he states. "As to the feel of an instrument to a player, it's all in that final setup. So

we do the fretwork the way I've been doing it my whole career. We cut the nut, and do the final tweaking on the bridge—anything we can do so that it feels absolutely right the second the player picks it up. In my repair days, I'd see custom instruments costing many thousands of dollars that needed this basic work right from the get-go, and it can be frustrating. If there's one thing we nail, it's those details in that final setup. It's spot on."

Once Sadowsky laid the production groundwork for his archtop venture, he had a conversation with Jim Hall. "I told him what I was planning, and asked if he would be interested in endorsing a guitar, if I could make one that suited him. He said yes, because he was wary about traveling with his D'Aquisto. Jimmy D'Aquisto had based



Sadowsky working on Jim Hall's D'Aquisto archtop.



Jim Hall with his signature model Sadowsky.

his laminate model on Jim's Gibson ES-175—also a laminate—so in turn, I studied Jim's D'Aquisto. As builders, we both looked at the previous instrument Jim was playing for inspiration."

The first Sadowsky archtop was the Jim Hall Signature model. Sadowsky describes the process: "Using Jim's D'Aquisto as my reference point, I designed an instrument that was similar, but not an exact copy. I made the body shallower, to suppress feedback. Jim plays at a low volume, but I wanted a guitar that could handle reasonable volume levels. I also designed a new tailpiece and refined the neck shape, but in the process, I tried to retain a lot of the aesthetics.

"I made two prototypes, one with a laminated maple top, the other with a spruce top. The spruce was more acoustic, but through the amp, there was just no comparison. The spruce sounded muddy, it was too dark, and it fed back at a much lower volume than the maple top. I gave a prototype to Jim, and he liked it, so we committed to the first batch. When you're dealing with a production situation, you have to do 12 pieces minimum of any one model. Jim got one from that batch. He did a blind listening test with a friend between the D'Aquisto and the Sadowsky, and they both preferred the Sadowsky—acoustically and electrically. That was the vindication, the validation. Everything that had been germinating in my mind for 15 years was on the money. That was the Jim Hall guitar."

Sadowsky followed this with the non-signature Hall guitar. "The Signature model is configured to be exactly like the one Jim plays," Sadowsky explains. "The new variant is simply the Jim Hall model, which is the same guitar as the Signature, but available in four different finishes to give people more choices. They all have the cream binding, but they don't have Jim's name on the headstock. I did this because I was invited backstage to show Larry Carlton one of these guitars, and I realized, 'How can you give Larry Carlton—or any other player on that level—a guitar with someone else's name on it?' So the Jim Hall model doesn't have the name on the headstock."

Next up in the archtop line for Sadowsky Guitars was another signature model. "It was unusual that the next guitar I designed was for Jimmy Bruno," reveals Sadowsky. "I've never done signature models for my solidbody guitars or basses. But in 2004, I attended the World Guitar Congress in Maryland to hear Jim Hall play a symphonic piece he composed for the finale concert, and also to exhibit my guitars. There I crossed paths with Jimmy Bruno, who came to the booth and tried a guitar. He was doing a gig, and asked if he could borrow it. He fell in love with the instrument, so we started working on a project together."

The Jimmy Bruno Signature model is also crafted with a specific musician in mind. "It's a smaller-bodied instrument," explains Sadowsky. "And it was just one of those gut things that told me to go with a mahogany neck to keep the tonal warmth, whereas the Jim Hall model has a maple neck. We built two prototypes, one with a maple neck, and one with mahogany, and the mahogany won out. It had more fullness, more roundness. Jimmy Bruno prefers a narrower nut width than Jim Hall, so we went with 1¹¹/₁₆", as opposed to the 1³/₄" width of the Jim Hall model. Like the Hall model, the Bruno comes in four finishes."

Sadowsky's philosophy to guitar making comes through as he explains his decisions on the relatively straightforward matter of designing fretboard inlays: "Jimmy Bruno does instructional videos, so he wanted the inlays for visual reference when teaching. But we wanted to do something different, so drawing on my aesthetic experience, we went with a traditional folk-guitar cat's eye inlay. And we're both very happy with that. Some jazz guitarists like to have more pearl on the fretboard than ebony. [Laughs]. I've never been a fan of that. Both of these archtops represent the minimal aesthetic. Not that I don't appreciate craftsmanship, but decorative stuff that doesn't contribute to the tone and playability to the instrument has never been my focus. My whole career has been about making instruments for working musicians." ●