

The Sadowsky Jimmy Bruno Model

The History

The electric archtop jazz guitar has been in transition since it was first heard over seventy years ago — has it really been that long? Though seen as a traditional and largely conservative animal the archtop electric guitar has been evolving progressively since it was introduced in the mid 1930s. And while the changes have been largely subtle and maybe imperceptible to the untrained eye they are myriad and meaningful, and have marked corresponding musical strides forward in the jazz art form.

Consider these evolutionary leaps. The first electric archtop of consequence, a 16-inch Gibson ES-150 with a bar pickup, gave way to its larger and more luxurious successor the ES-250, then the first single-cutaway ES-350, the double-pickup ES-175, the Johnny Smith model with a floating pickup, and so on. Along the way, consider the players who embraced these guitars in their evolutionary paths: Charlie Christian and his ES-150, Barney Kessel and his 350, Wes Montgomery and his L-5CES, Herb Ellis, Jim Hall, Joe Pass and Pat Metheny with their ES-175s. Each epoch of musical development seemed to prompt or coincide with another refinement and application of the instrument.

Then came the age of the landmark artist signature jazz models; the artists themselves got into the act, designing or simply lending their names to a flood of iconic instruments. Consider the Gibson Byrdland, Tal Farlow, Barney Kessel and Johnny Smith, the Epiphone Howard Roberts, the Gretsch Sal Salvador, the Ibanez George Benson, the Guild Johnny Smith Artist Award, George Barnes and George Van Eps and others in the sixties and seventies. In more recent years the trend has seen no abatement and has indeed escalated. Representing the tip of the iceberg are the Gibson Pat Martino, Wes Montgomery, Lee Ritenour and Herb Ellis, the Ibanez Joe Pass and Pat Metheny, the Benedetto Bucky Pizzarelli and Howard Alden, the Eastman John Pisano, the Heritage Kenny Burrell and Henry Johnson, and the Sadowsky Jim Hall.

Now the Sadowsky Jimmy Bruno model joins that elite lineage. It is not only a unique entrant in the artist signature family but an instrument that redefines the very concept of what a modern jazz guitar is. And it is not the first. Roger Sadowsky, long known and admired for his solid-body guitars, basses, electric nylon-strings and legendary set ups, made his foray into this genre with the Jim Hall signature model of a few years back and now returns with another winner, the Jimmy Bruno archtop.

The Player

Jimmy Bruno has been aching to have the “right guitar” for years. When I first met Jimmy back in 1995 his reputation and several great albums of jazz guitar preceded him — he was one of the hottest of the hot “new cats.” Naturally the guitar world was interested in what he was using to make music. It was hardly a surprise to see him with a hand-built Benedetto seven-string at the time. Arguably this is one of the finest guitars of its kind, period. Eventually Jimmy decided to return to the six-string and tried a variety of instruments in his journey to musical nirvana. He used a semi-solid Benedetto Benny and a new Guild for a while, was involved in

tar when he appeared in Los Angeles in July 2005. This was months before it was officially released and I remember being duly impressed with the feel and sound then — but after all, this was *his* personal instrument. The obvious question arises: Will the final production model live up to preconceptions and the nagging high expectations? When review models began circulating I realized I was in a unique position to come up with the definitive answer — having tried Jimmy’s own — and share the opinion with interested players. So when the chance to examine the Sadowsky Jimmy Bruno for *Jazz Improv* came up I jumped at the chance.

The Instrument

The Sadowsky Jimmy Bruno is one of a new breed of archtop electrics that strives to scale down the typically large dimensions of the genre’s traditional hollow-body guitar and to retain the acoustic characteristics imperative for the requisite sound and response. The JB succeeds on those grounds from the outset. Initially Jimmy stressed he wanted a consistent and high-quality but *replaceable* guitar with a laminated wood body. This instrument retains the traditional, aesthetically pleasing archtop design with a single-cutaway profile on a compact and lightweight 14-3/4 body with its thinner 2-3/4 depth.

The diminutive profile makes the JB a very comfortable guitar to hold and play. Its construction is solid and the appearance beautiful: a highly figured flamed maple top on a 5-ply laminated maple body appointed in a high-quality nitrocellulose lacquer finish with no imperfections. Gold-plated hardware is standard. My review model sports the presumably stock Sienna Sunburst finish (a rich reddish-toned burst) though Sadowsky also offers several alternate colors like Vintage Amber (aged natural), Caramel Sunburst (gold to brown burst) and Violin Burst (a subtler shaded Cremona-style orange look).

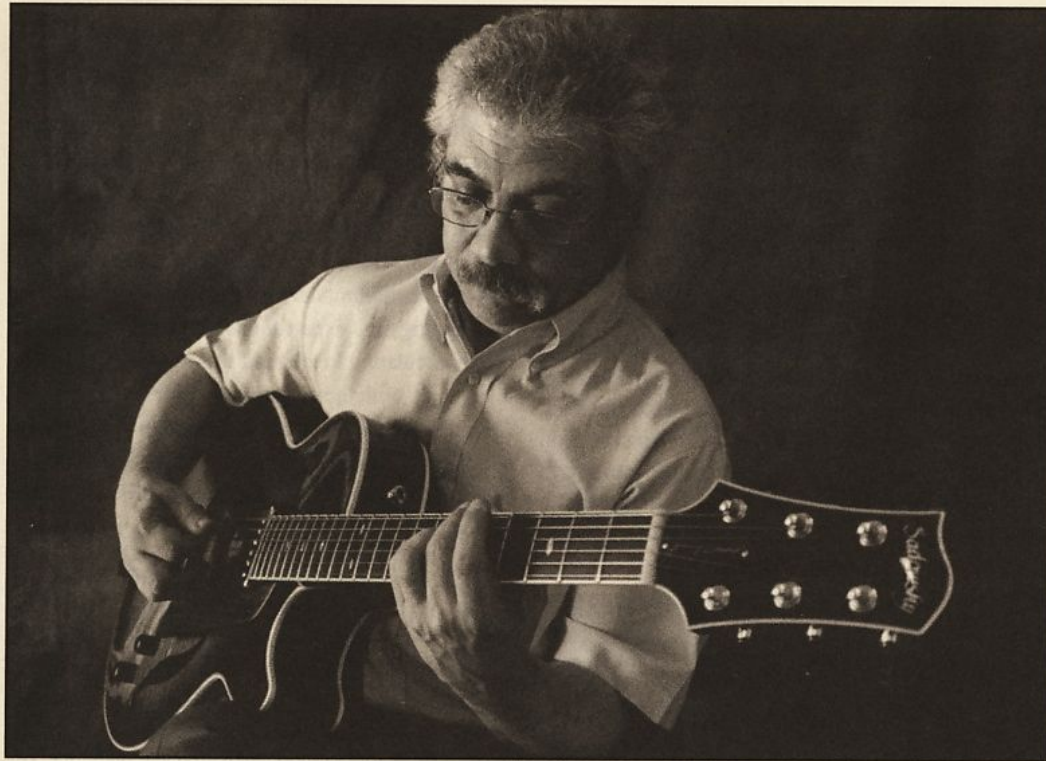
The JB’s set up and fret work are impeccable right out of the box; but that stands to reason as Roger is reknowned for this aspect of



a promising but ultimately abortive artist deal with Fender and Benedetto, and even hooked up with Hofner briefly. The search continued well into the new millennium.

All of that changed in June, 2004, at the First World Guitar Congress. There Jimmy, essentially guitar-less, first played the newly marketed Sadowsky Jim Hall model and immediately fell in love with its response, sound and design. Moreover, he found a sympathetic collaborator and skilled luthier in Roger Sadowsky. Together the two worked for the next year on the Bruno signature model which first made its rounds on the solo tour behind Jimmy’s latest release, *Solo* (Guitar Sessions, Mel Bay Records). At that time I played Jimmy’s personal gui-

the craft. Though the instrument is considerably smaller than its competitors it is surprisingly resonant and lively as an acoustic instrument; particularly with the factory-equipped Sadowsky round-wound strings. The mahogany neck holding a 22-fret ebony fingerboard (24 3/4 scale and 1 11/16th nut width) is extremely comfortable and joins the body at the 15th fret. Incidentally, the mahogany wood definitely contributes to the JB’s warmer unamplified tone. Jimmy confirmed this was a factor in the choice of neck materials. Also noteworthy is the narrow wooden pickguard which permits a balanced acoustic output from the S-holes and flaunts a post-Benedetto jazz guitar vibe. The intonation across the entire fingerboard range is better than acceptable despite enu-



merable string changes and the normally problematic, compensated wooden bridge.

The Test Course

Plugging the JB strung with round-wounds into a few favorite amplifiers across the tonal spectrum yielded a variety of sounds. I tried the guitar with a '58 Fender 4x10 Bassman, a '61 Fender Bandmaster with a 2x12 cabinet and a Fender tube reverb unit, a '65 Fender Twin-Reverb, a '52 Gibson GA-75 with a single 15-inch speaker and a new Fender Cyber-Twin SE as well as my two "jazz mainstays": an Acoustic-Image Clarus head with a Raezer's Edge Stealth 12 cabinet and a Polytone Mini-Brute II. These were run in a studio environment, miked and direct. Tweaking the amp's controls and selecting various degrees of gain and drive, I was able to coax out authentic Howard Roberts and Barney Kessel jazz tones as well as edgy T-Bone Walker blues and even some very convincing R&B and classic roots-rock sounds.

I prefer flat-wound strings for electric jazz guitar work and insist on them for live playing. Roger was kind enough to supply a set of his Sadowsky flats and I restrung the JB for another lap around the sonic test course. With flat-wounds, the guitar was noticeably darker and veered into the familiar timbral worlds of Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, George Benson, Jim Hall, and Pat Martino.

The Real World Test Course

I was so enamored with the tone of the JB with flats through the Polytone amp that I broke one of my own cardinal rules and took an unproven guitar out on an important corporate gig. Moreover, this was an outdoor daytime performance at the beach playing straight-ahead and smooth jazz with a trio — challenges galore. The good news is that the guitar stayed in tune remarkably well despite the ocean breeze and the amplified sound was excellent in the open-air setting. In fact, a passerby from a block away walked

over to comment on the Joe Pass-like tone I got out of the JB-Polytone combination. That's an unsolicited endorsement.

The next day I had a completely different gig and decided to take the JB out for another real-world trial. Here the leader required more volume and some contemporary rock tones in addition to the typical hollow-body sound. The JB mated to a Fender Cyber-Twin SE did not feed back once, even though I was standing rather close. It covered all stylistic bases and handled the entire situation well; remarkable considering its single neck-pickup configuration and flat-wound strings. Also remarkable was the compliment I got on my sound from the normally reserved electric bass player on the gig. He actually only confirmed what I was already hearing from the JB.

A couple of weeks later I was teaching and performing in Pittsburgh and played a concert with a few good friends, including Jimmy Bruno himself. I got to hear him really work out on his JB, playing everything from "Stormy Monday" and "Four on Six" together (with me, Jimmy and Henry Johnson) to an unaccompanied baroque/bop version of "All the Things You Are." And I was able to experience his JB sound on stage, up-close and personal, in a very real context. Afterwards, while we were hanging out backstage, Jimmy gave me a set of his signature Sadowsky semi-polished strings to try on my review guitar — that's what he prefers. When I got back to the West Coast I restrung the JB with the slightly heavier (.013-.052) Bruno set. With only a minor bridge adjustment and slight truss-rod tweaking (easy to do, even for a tyro, on this guitar, and by the way, the JB has one of the most stable necks I've ever played) the instrument was good to go for a regular Friday night jazz gig in Del Mar, California. Playing everything from standards, Brazilian, funk, blues and smooth jazz, the JB with the Polytone once again passed its trial by fire admirably.

In the weeks to come I took the JB out on a couple of other gigs worth mentioning. One was a solo

gig in Columbia, Missouri. Not only did the instrument perform well, outdoors again — this time in some serious late-summer humidity through a Fender Amp Can (!!) no less — but the guitar's size proved ideal for travel. It was no problem to bring the smaller hard-shell case on board and stash it in the closet or overhead bin. I previously had my larger custom-made Heritage archtop in a gig bag confiscated and gate-checked on a puddle-skipper en route to Pittsburgh (that was a heart attack in the making). So far, four flights later, the JB has obviated recurrence of those cardio-arresting occasions. Another real-world outing was a demanding quartet gig with an all-star lineup, Bob Magnusson, Robert Parker and Jim Plank, back in San Diego. This time the JB, now set up with Thomastik-Infeld flat-wounds, plugged into a Clarus head, Roland reverb unit and Raezer's Edge Stealth 12 cabinet did the trick. The guitar projected admirably in a large banquet room — a setting in which a distinct archtop electric sound customarily is dissipated and lost. Finally, the JB was a hit at the recent Arlington Guitar Show. There I used it to play blues-swing set with Will Ray and an unaccompanied jazz performance. There it was plugged into a Fender Blues Deville and later a Fender '65 Deluxe-Reverb reissue picked at random off the floor.

Parting Shots

In the wrap-up a few nice incidental features are worth mentioning. The JB's rim-mounted output jack is located close to the lower bout's strap button. This design splits the difference between the traditional rim-mounted jacks and the recent trend of end-pin jacks, and works very well with an angle-plug cord. It is especially convenient when using a Circuit Breaker cable with an on/off switch. Oversize buttons are mounted on the body rims (one of them located on the upper rim like a Les Paul or Tele) and hold conventional straps much more securely than anything I have seen short of locks. It turns out these are pre-fitted Jim Dunlop strap-lock buttons; should you decide to go the route of Dunlop locks. The Gotoh tuners are very smooth and precise, and are fitted with aesthetically pleasing ebony buttons, which match the fingerboard, pickguard, control knobs, tailpiece and truss rod covers. That's right, I said *covers* — Roger supplies the JB with two ebony truss rod covers, one with Jimmy's signature, and the other plain so that you can truly make the JB your own. He also provides pads to protect the headstock edges from hanger stands which might discolor the finish. And the artsy cat's eye pearl fingerboard inlays are a nice aesthetic touch. They are elegant and exude bebop cool.

The Bottom Line

At its very conservative \$3,995 MSRP (with hard-shell case) the Sadowsky Jimmy Bruno model is in a real buy. Considering its quality, playability and tonality it is in a league with instruments twice and three times the cost. No hype; I now own and play my review JB regularly on gigs and recordings. It has become a welcome addition to my archtop arsenal and will no doubt be part of yours when you get a chance to sample the wares.

— Wolf Marshall