

# Roger Sadowsky!



## Two Out of Three is not

# Enough

Interviewed by Brian Bowdren, August 6, 2001

Over the past few years, as I have attempted to learn about and improve my own skills in bass-building, I have visited luthiers across the US. One of the people who most impressed me in these informal meetings is Roger Sadowsky. Roger has the wisdom of a veteran and a very gentle and gracious manner with inquisitive folks, like me. In deciding whom to interview first for BassGuild, Roger came to mind. In response to my e-mailed inquery, Roger suggested a meeting on Monday, August 6. Because the shop is closed to the public on Mondays, he thought we might have fewer interruptions.

**B.B.:** Roger, how did you get involved in building basses? Was this a carefully planned career path?

“My interest in building guitars started when I was in graduate school.”

**Roger:** My interest in building guitars started when I was in graduate school, around 1970. I was working on a doctorate in psychobiology, at the time. I was at Rutgers University, and I had just started playing guitar about a year before: the summer between my junior and senior years in college. And, as I got more miserable in graduate school, the time I spent playing guitar increased dramatically. I really just became obsessed with the instrument.

At the time, I was hanging out with a lot of professional folk musicians, who were doing the folk circuit. They all had these marvelous old Martins from the 30's. I thought that, if I could just learn to do this, I could have my cabin in the woods and my alternative lifestyle. The musicians would just beat a path to my door. This was, of course, a very naive assumption. But, I

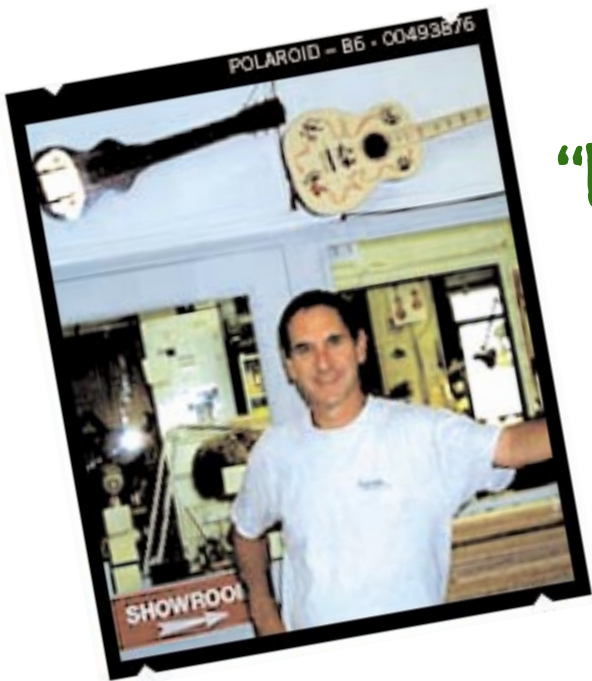
eventually did it.

I spent a year writing letters to guitar makers all over the world trying to find an apprenticeship. I struck out there. Eventually, I quit graduate school, and took a job at a music store in Union, NJ. They were selling some handmade acoustic guitars made by a builder named Augie LoPrinzi, who was working out of Rosemont, NJ, near New Hope, PA.

One day the 'sales rep' came in, and I told him that making guitars was what I really wanted to do. He arranged for me to call LoPrinzi, and I did. He offered me a job. I was pursuing Michael Gurian, at the same time. Gurian offered me \$35/week and LoPrinzi offered me \$65/week. I went with

Philly to NY and had become a very established session player in NY. He started bringing his instruments from NY back to Philly for me to work on them. And, he consistently told me that there was no one as good as me in NY. I couldn't believe it, at the time. But, eventually, I started driving up to NY every weekend and using his apartment as a base. His friends brought their instruments to me – guitars and basses. I did minor setups there, in NY. And, I brought the bigger jobs back to Philly with me, for the week – returning them the following weekend. I did that for about six months, until I felt I had made enough connections to go on my own.

I started my own shop in NY in the fall of '79. Still, my emphasis was on repairs and



**“I wanted to keep my business at a level where I could sell directly to musicians.”**

LoPrinzi. So, I started out as an acoustic guitar maker. I worked with Augie for almost two years.

Then, I took a job with a music store in the Philly area, heading up the repair department. I felt, at the time, I could make a living quicker as a repairman than as a builder. The number of years it takes to develop a 'rep' as a builder was longer than I felt I could afford. I spent five years there really, really learning my repair 'chops'.

By '79, I had a client who had moved from

restorations, but I started building guitars in 1980. In '82, I made my first bass. It was a Fender-style 'P/J' with a Precision body. I've been building basses ever since.

**R.R.O.:** Do you have any favorite stories or special memories of the time when you were working with LoPrinzi?

**Kober:** Well, it was just a wonderful time. Those years were actually some of the most wonderful times of my life. It was very a carefree hippie-like existence. There were only six of us in the shop. It was a nice

**“To build an instrument and sell it to a music store was too much of a detachment for me.”**



small, intimate work environment. After work, we all jammed together; played together. It was truly a great opportunity for me.

While I learned my basic skills as a wood worker and instrument maker, I also learned about business. Augie was not a very good businessman. So, I learned as much what not to do from him, as what to do, which really helped me later on. I remember there was always the issue of finding dealers and finding outlets to sell the instruments. Then, there was the problem of getting production high enough. There was this treadmill of stuff that I really saw that I wanted to avoid. I got pretty clear, early on, that I wanted to keep my business at a level where I could sell directly to musicians. The pleasure and satisfaction for me was that one on one contact with the player. To build an instrument and sell it to a music store was too much of a detachment for me. I just didn't want to go there. I pretty much made a decision, as early as 1972 or '73 that, if I ever did this myself, I wanted to keep it small enough that I could sell direct.

**B.B.O:** There's nothing quite as rewarding as having someone fall in love with one of your instruments.

**Roger:** Yeah, you know you start a relationship with a customer from the time he orders his instrument – helping him decide what he should order and what's best for him. Then, you see that come to fruition when the instrument is finished. It's so much more satisfying than shipping something off to a music store.

**B.B.O:** How did you make the transition from

Philadelphia to New York?

**Roger:** The shop in Philly wasn't my own shop. I worked for a music store called Medley Music, which was in Bryn Mawr, PA. My first shop here, in NY, was a loft that I took at 33rd and Madison. It was a 1000sq. ft loft that I literally split in half. I worked on one side, and I lived in the other. It had a closet with a toilet in it and another closet with a stall shower in it. I cooked on a hot plate. It was very primitive. It was all I could afford.

**B.B.O:** And, you moved from there to here?

**Roger:** I moved in '86. That's when I set up shop here. Then, I took a real apartment for living.

**B.B.O:** And, this has worked out well. It strikes me as an unusual place to have a shop. But, what a great place to have a shop.

**Roger:** Well, it's short-lived. I have to be out of the building by December, 2002. They are not going to renew any leases in the building. They're not tearing it down, but they will gut it and renovate it and triple the rent. That's an old story.

**B.B.O:** Do you have any idea where you'll go?

**Roger:** No, I don't. I plan to stay on the west side of Manhattan. But, I don't know, yet, where I'll really be able to find affordable space. My bet would be on the west 20's or 30's.

I moved here because, in '85, I hired my first

full-time employee. Right after I hired him, the bottom fell out of the studio scene in the city, especially the jingle scene (the advertising side of it).

The two things that employed most of the session players in NY were jingles and album sessions. But, a lot of it was disco in the late 70's and early 80's, where you just had an artist, then they brought in session players. By the early to mid-80's, bands were much more self-contained bands, not involved in using hired guns in the studio. The advertising business was really fundamentally changing.

When I started out in NY, there were 'A-call' players, who did the finals, and 'B-call' players who did the demos. You could make a living as a B-call player, just doing 'demos'. The 'demo' was then the thing they pitched to the client. The client approved it, and then they would bring in the 'A-call' players to do the final.

When things really started to change, guys were setting up studios in their homes with synthesizers. All the demo-work started getting done by one person at home. So, that wiped out all the 'demo' work for the 'B-guys'. The 'A-guys' went from doing 20 dates a week to being lucky to do 5 a week.

At that time, 90% of my clients were these session guys from NY, and I saw what was happening. I decided to get closer to the scene on 48th Street. That's how I wound up locating here. I wanted to

be as close to 48th Street as I could without being on 48th Street. I didn't want to be associated with the big music stores. But, I wanted to get as close to it as I could.

Again, most of my clients were always working musicians. Guys could make a living doing weddings, bar mitzvahs, and a little bit of studio work, when it came along. Today, the thing I find depressing is that, between the state of the music business, the state of the advertising business; and, the fact that DJ's have taken over a lot of the club work; it is so overwhelmingly difficult for anybody to make a living as a musician. Most of my clientele have shifted to being weekend warriors – guys who are actually doctors, lawyers, investment bankers or any well-paying occupation. They used to play when they were younger, and continue to play by jamming with friends on weekends. Or, maybe they have a club date band that they gig with on weekends. They have become the bulk of my clientele, especially for my instrument sales. And, as much as I appreciate them, as my customers, again, I just find it so depressing. It's virtually impossible to make a living playing anymore.

**Bob:** One of the things that is most striking to me is your entrance to your shop – as you walk in from the elevator. Obviously, your shop is a reflection of you. Is there any one part of it that is most comfortable to you or that is a clear reflection of who you are?

**Roger:** I like to think the whole shop is a reflection of who I am. But, for one thing, I love looking at my wood pile. I've always been excited by wood.

As much as I love my crew, and I'm really blessed with wonderful guys to work with me, I love being able to come in on a Sunday, when nobody is here and just have the space all to myself. There's still a real pleasure in that for me – just to be in the shop alone.

**Bob:** In spite of what you said about your relationship you have with your customers, would you consider yourself to be an introvert?



**Roger:** No, not at all.... I don't consider myself to be an introvert. But, for me, the bench work has always been a Zen-like experience. I don't even necessarily like to work with music playing that much. There's just something about (I don't want to sound like I'm being a cliché) being one with your work – one with your chisel, one with your file, whatever tool you're working with. During the regular weekday, between having 6 other guys around me, the phone ringing and people coming in; there's no way to achieve that

**"More than a resource, Roger is a gentleman and pleasure to know"**

almost meditative work space (the phone is ringing in the background) like I can when I am in here alone on a Sunday.

**Bob:** I know exactly what you mean.

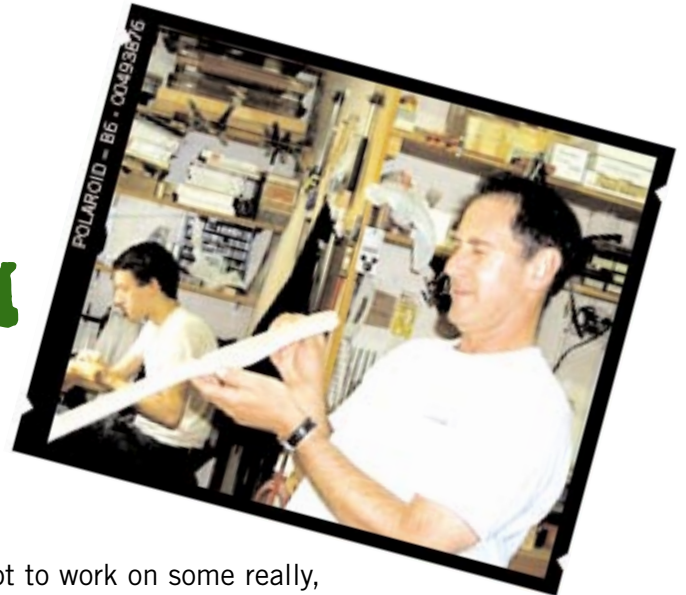
The sound and playability of any bass is affected by different factors: design, materials, construction, electronics, setup. What's the most crucial?

**Roger:** I don't think any one thing is the most crucial. Obviously, this is a situation in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The instrument not only has to look good, it not only has to feel good, but it has to sound good. Any two, out of three, doesn't cut it. It has to be all three, or nothing.

Because of my background as a repairman, one of the things that really really helped me with my instrument making is nailing issues like final setup. It amazes me, to this day. Often, I see a custom-made instrument – sometimes literally over \$10,000, especially, if we're talking about a arch-top guitar – where

the builder has done just a magnificent job for 98% of the instrument. But, he was unable to nail 2 areas: fretwork and setup. Without the fretwork and without good setup, all that other 98% just becomes a pretty instrument.

Having had all of that one-on-one with these session players in NY has really enabled me to nail that part of my skills. I benefited remarkably from my early years in NY. I had top professional players as clients, who all had pretty good instruments. I



got to work on some really, really great instruments in the late 70's and early 80's. That was a huge benefit to me.

One of the things I dealt with was the fact that the studio scene in NY was overwhelmingly Fender. The union directory of that time, the local musicians union, only had two listings: acoustic bass and "Fender bass". "Fender bass" was the generic description for electric bass.

That combined with the fact that most of the work was jingles. Jingles were fast, in and out, 45-50 minute sessions. And, the engineer did not have any patience to deal with a bass that he had never seen before – spending 10 or 15 minutes playing around with the EQ to get the right sound of it. They wanted you to walk in with a Jazz bass or a P bass. They knew exactly where to set their board controls and, boom, get it done.

When I started building instruments, I realized that there was substantial pressure from the

players. They wanted an instrument that they were familiar and comfortable with. And, there was pressure from the studio side – the engineers and the producers – for these players to show up with a Fender. So, that's why I started building an, essentially Fender-style, instrument.

There's no question that, as a craftsman, my instincts were to want to do something more original. But, in order to gain the acceptance from both the players and the engineers, at that time, the only way to do it, here in NY, was to build a Fender-style instrument. I have no regrets. That's the way the course has led me or pulled me. I think to this day, the Fender-style has proven itself to be an extremely worthy design.

Let me take a step back. In the early 80's, my clients could go out and pick up a great early 60's L-series Fender Jazz bass for \$800. They would bring it to me. I would re-true the fingerboard and re-fret it. I would install a

**Bob:** Was there a specific distinguishing characteristic of your basses? Or, was it simply a matter of an improved quality Fender-style instrument: great fingerboard, a better fret job, shielded electronics...?

**Roger:** Again, I think it was a matter of taking everything that I used to do, from a customizing point of view, with Fenders – which was good fret job, good setup, good electronics, good hardware – and combining it with carefully selected wood. You see, the other thing I keyed into during this heavy restoration/modification period, was that somebody could bring me two Jazz basses – two L-series '64 Jazz basses -- and I would do the same work to the both of them. One of them turned out just amazing. The other, even though all the work was comparable and just as good, was not all that much better than it was before we started. I had the same experience with guitars as with basses. And, I really had to take a look at what was going on

**“To make a living at it you need to be obsessed, in the same way any artist is obsessed to pursue an art form!”**

preamp. I would probably re-bridge it too. I'd shield it. And, for \$1300-\$1500, total, they would have a first class working instrument.

By the mid-80's, when the vintage market took off, those \$800 instruments were now \$1500. Everything I was doing to them was devaluing them, as a vintage instrument. That's when I realized that I could build an instrument, from the "get-go", that would be everything (if not more than) these customized Fenders. And, then I wouldn't have to be concerned with devaluing vintage Fender instruments. That's when my instruments really started taking off – around 1987.

there.

I think this is one of the areas where my background in acoustic guitar-making really helped. What I came to see was that the instruments that sounded the best acoustically, were always the ones that ended up sounding the best, amplified. So, I began to focus on the wood. I saw that – in my opinion – the lighter, the more acoustic the wood, the better the instrument sounded acoustically. The better-sounding instruments tended to be the lighter weight instruments, rather than the heavy 70's Fenders. The more resonant they were acoustically, the better they sounded with all of the modifications I did. So, I really began to adopt the philosophy

that solid body guitars and basses are, first and foremost, acoustic instruments. So, I began combining my ability to select acoustically resonant woods for my instruments with the Fender design and all my other 'mods'. I think that's what led to them being what they are.

**R.R.O.:** There are elements of some of your instruments that are clearly not Fender-inspired. How have they developed?

**Roger:** Most of my instruments have been a J-bass-style body, a little smaller than a Fender. I've always offered them with either double-J or P/J pickups. And, I've offered them with a J-bass width neck and a P-bass width neck.

In the late 80's, I started on the 5-string basses. I was a little slow in jumping on the '5-string wagon'. But, my 5-strings have done very well. When I started doing 5-strings, that was the first time I did something a little bit different than the more traditional design. I designed a 24-fret instrument with soapbar pickups. As I was designing 5-strings – asking my clients to evaluate various instruments – I noticed that, as a result of having this extra bass register, they would suddenly want extra treble range, too. So, that's what led me to do a 24-fret instrument.

Then, I realized that if you put traditional Fender pickups in traditional Fender locations on a 24-fret instrument, the neck pickup ends up very close to the end of the neck – an inch and a half between the end of the fingerboard and the top of the neck pickup. This arrangement gets a little crowded, especially for 'slap' and 'pop' playing – for 'thumb' styles. That's why, on that instrument, I kicked the pickups closer to the bridge.

Once the pickups were no longer in traditional Fender locations, I found that the output of soapbar pickups worked really well. I didn't feel obligated to stay with traditional Fender pickups, because they were not going to sound like a J-bass or P-bass anyway – being in different locations. So, I started using soapbar pickups.

**R.R.O.:** Whose pickups did you use?

**Roger:** Initially, we auditioned everyone's pickups. We decided on the EMG's. We used the 40-J. I used them for over 10 years.

I'm starting to move away from them, now. That was the only instrument where I could not find a passive pickup that I was happy with. On all of my other basses, the pickups are passive. So, the bass can be played active or passive, depending on whether you engage the preamp or not. Finally, I have a passive that I'm happy with. I'll be starting to use it in the next few months.

**R.R.O.:** How about your other hardware? Do you have a single source?

**Roger:** I try to have as many things made to my 'specs' as I can. We have designed a new bridge. We're in transition with it, now. It's being made for us by Hipshot. They also make our tuning gears. Essentially, all of our pickups, are custom made for us at DiMarzio or at Seymour Duncan Basslines.

**R.R.O.:** Is there any one of your models, that has been in greater demand than the others? Or, are they fairly well balanced?

**Roger:** It's quite balanced. It is a matter of pursuing the needs of every little niche market you see out there.

Our newest thing is a series of basses we're calling our Ultra Vintage series. We're doing an Ultra Vintage Jazz and an Ultra Vintage P. What they have in common is that they are full-size Fender bodies – because all of my other bodies are a little smaller than a Fender. I'm going after as much of that early 60's vintage 'vibe' as I can. We're doing more curve in the fingerboard than usual. We're using a 9" radius as standard on those. Although I've always offered a 9" radius as an option, a 12" fingerboard radius has been standard on Sadowsky basses for years. The Ultra Vintage models have Brazilian rosewood fingerboards, single coil pickups (instead of hum-cancelling), volume/volume controls (instead of volume/blendpot), passive tone controls, in addition to the preamp. I am trying to incorporate as much of the early 60's vintage

Fender as possible into a bass and still have it have everything you would expect from a Sadowsky!

**R.R.O.:** We have talked, on other occasions, about your market approach. How do you get your instruments out there? What has been the most effective medium?

**Roger:** For the last few years, there's no question, the most effective medium has been the internet and the web. I got on the internet pretty early.

I've always done very little advertising. I do a small one-sixth of a page every other month in Bass Player and Bass Frontiers. But, as of 4 years ago, in spite of what I said about wanting to sell direct, I had quite a few dealers around the world. These dealers were not in the US. I had quite a few dealers, internationally.

About 4 years ago, the US dollar started to get strong again. As soon as I saw the dollar getting strong and orders from the dealers in Europe starting to diminish, that's when I decided to really, really make a press on the internet. I started building more instruments for my own stock; putting my inventory up on my website; then, selling direct from my website. I have gotten pretty good at digital photography. So, every time we build a new bass for our inventory, it's photographed. I maintain that part of my website, myself; that has worked out very well. I have made up all the slack that I had lost overseas, due to

a strong dollar.

**R.R.O.:** Do you display your instruments at either of the NAMM shows?

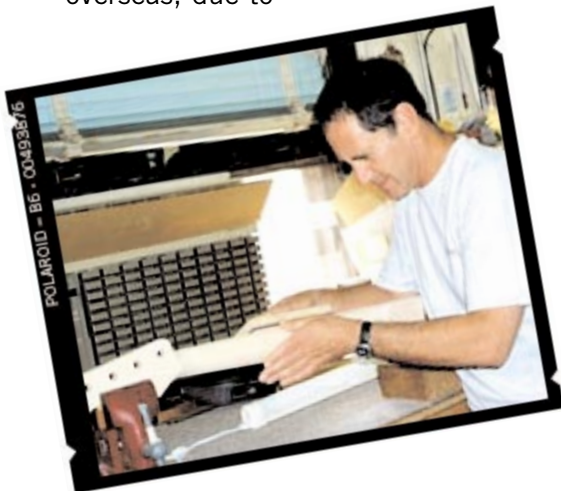
**Roger:** I am fortunate that, for the California NAMM show, my friends at LaBella Strings have always invited me to use a corner of their booth. So, I'm always there with a few instruments. I'm there mostly to be seen. I'm not looking to write orders from dealers, because that's not the way I do business. There are certainly a lot of players who come through that show, so it's really nice to be able to be there.

I went to the first three Nashville shows, because I really wanted to get to know the studio guys in Nashville. I was successful in doing that. But after the third show, I really felt as if I had gotten to know the people in Nashville, that I needed to know. So, I haven't continued.

**R.R.O.:** Have you ever endorsed or sponsored specific artists?

**Roger:** I don't do endorsements in the traditional sense. I don't see how smaller builders can afford to do endorsements. It's something that big companies can afford to do. It's just not possible for small guys to do that kind of stuff, nor should they have to.

The players that appear to 'endorse' my instruments, do so because they like my instruments, and they appreciate what I do.



**"The only way to do it is jump in. It's like diving into the deep end of a pool."**



They're not endorsing me because I pay them to do it or because I give them free instruments. If a player is really out there with my stuff and I feel they have generated a great deal of good will for me, then I will show them my appreciation in any way I can. There's no expectation that's going to mean free instruments or significantly reduced-cost instruments.

**B.B.O.:** If somebody came to you and said they wanted to become a bass builder, how would you advise them?

**Roger:** My response has been the same for a long time, now. I'll do everything I can to assist them in pursuing bass building as an avocation. But, I really try to discourage them from doing it as a 'living'. It's really, really, really hard to make a living at it. To do so, you need to be obsessed, in the same way any artist is obsessed to pursue an art form – whether it is music, sculpture, painting or whatever the craft. You must be obsessed in that you don't have a choice about it. You're just compelled to do it, no matter how the circumstances of your life have to conform in order for you to follow this pursuit – this compulsion. If you have that, you're going to do it, no matter what I say.

The truth is, it's not an easy way to make a living. And, it is much harder today than it was 20 years ago. But, bass building does make a wonderful avocation. If you've got the space to set up a little work bench at home, between Stewart MacDonald's and Luthier's Mercantile, there is a wealth of resources available for pursuing instrument-making as a hobby.

**B.B.O.:** How should someone acquire the skills? Do you recommend someone do repairs first, as you did?

**Roger:** Not necessarily. I think either you have hand-eye coordination, or you don't.

I've seen a few people, in my day, who just kept taking courses. They kept taking courses and taking courses, with the assumption that having a certificate was going to make the difference in whether they were good enough

to do this or not. The only way to do it is jump in. It's like diving into the deep end of the pool.

You have to get your hands on some old, inexpensive instruments. Try removing the frets, truing the fingerboard, and refretting it. Try making a new nut. Or, just get some parts, try putting a bass together, and learn from your mistakes. There are certainly plenty of books and videos and all of that stuff, out there. The more you do it, the better you get.

**B.B.O.:** Where do you think the electric bass is going developmentally? There is a lot of new stuff out there.

**Roger:** : Is there? I'm not sure about that.

I haven't seen much new, out there - a little here and there – 35" scale instruments. I really don't see much new out there at all. Steinberger had its day. But, I think headless designs only had so much appeal, anyway. They certainly were different, and have their place in bass history. I don't see much new else out there.

Lightwave is trying to develop the optical pickup system. But, I really.... Tell me what you see out there.

**B.B.O.:** Are materials still going to stay traditional?

**Roger:** I think, for the time being, there's enough wood around. I think even if alternatives to wood occur, they're going to occur in the \$300-\$400 production instrument, long before they occur in the high end, more crafted instruments. I really don't see much new.

**B.B.O.:** If anything, I suppose I see people trying to rejuvenate old ideas. I saw a bass builder starting to use wooden saddles on his instruments. And, I thought, I have several old Guilds that have wooden saddles.

**Roger:** What's new is more of what's old. I think there's a great appeal in the more retro/vintage instruments. The real things have gotten priced so high, that no real player can

afford to buy them and play them. In the days ahead, we will see more builders incorporating vintage characteristics into instruments.

**Editorial Note:** One of the things that has spurred me to do these interviews, is that I have found luthiers to be a varied, but unique, breed. To be successful, they must demonstrate a fascinating combination of characteristics: part engineer, part artisan, musician, entrepreneur, perfectionist, philosopher and, with some degree of balance. But, these descriptors alone are inadequate to describe Roger Sadowsky.

Roger is one of few people I have met, in this industry, who has nothing derogatory to say of anyone – customers, competitors or employees. More than a resource, Roger is a gentleman and pleasure to know.

The other thread that I see running through Roger's career is his ability to listen to the marketplace; to hear what musicians are demanding; to recognize an opportunity; and, to implement the directional changes in response. These competencies, essential in any business, make the difference between success and failure in lutherie. And, while Roger is not leading an alternative life-style at his cabin in the woods, he has grown a reputation and enterprise we can all admire.

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