

Roger Sadowsky

by Jim Hyatt

The name Sadowsky has become synonymous with impeccable quality among recording professionals and “high-profile” working bassists. The man behind the reputation is Roger Sadowsky. While he will humbly give extra credit to his team of techs, reading his personal history will reveal Roger to be the “real magic” of the Sadowsky sound.

Can you tell us about how Sadowsky Guitars came to be?

Sure. I grew up in NY, and before I got into guitars I was working on a PhD in Psycho-Biology.

Right at the end of my junior year of college (a small college in upstate NY) in 1969 there was a folk festival. It was a bunch of hippies playing guitars which I found quite appealing. I bought my first guitar that summer (a \$40 Japanese model) and I started learning to finger pick.

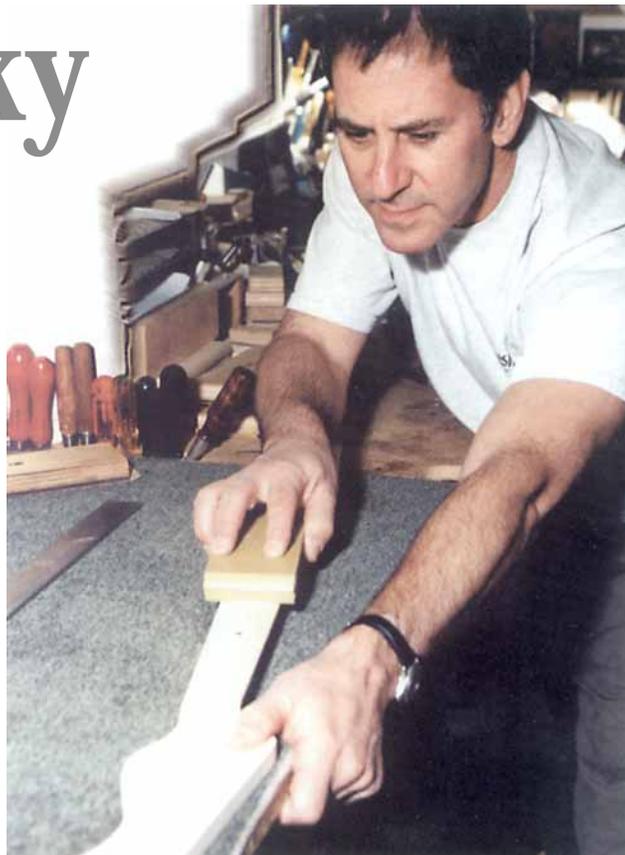
As time went on, I found myself more miserable in graduate school and playing more guitar. I eventually found myself more interested in guitars than in laboratory rats. I had this kind of naive romantic notion that if I could learn to be a guitar maker, I could live a lifestyle (that I thought would be nice) in a log cabin in the woods and I could escape the “rat race.” So I spent a year writing to guitar makers all over the world, but I just couldn’t find anyone to take me on as an apprentice.

Eventually, I quit graduate school (after about 2 years) and I started working for a music store in New Jersey as a guitar salesman. They had taken on a line of hand made acoustic guitars from a guy in New Jersey named LoPrinzi. I was 23 at the time (1972). I arranged to

meet him and explained that building guitars was what I wanted to do. He took me on as (essentially) an apprentice. It was a small four man shop, and I was the fifth guy. I worked for him for two years as an acoustic guitar maker. I learned a lot of my basic stuff from him. Then I moved on to head up the repair department for one of the better music stores in the Philadelphia area, a place called Medley Music. I was repairing acoustic and electric guitars, basses, cellos, violins, etc. I learned a lot of my repair, restoration and modification chops during my tenure there.

I had a client who had been a Philly guy who moved to New York and started becoming successful as a studio musician. He would bring his instruments from New York to me, and he would tell me there was nobody good in New York (which I found really hard to believe at the time). He would come down every couple of weeks and he started bringing his friends’ instruments with him. I then started to make trips to NY on Saturdays and picking up work from his friends out of his apartment, bringing the instruments back to Philly for repair and then returning the following Saturday with the repaired instruments. After doing this for about six months I decided to go out on my own, and in September of 1979, I opened my own shop in Manhattan.

At that time I was doing repairs and modifications for all of the studio



players in town. There was a vibrant scene, disco was still hot, and they employed a lot of studio musicians. Out of that I started doing work for a lot of key players like Bob Babbitt, Neil Jason, Will Lee, and in late 1979 a friend brought me Marcus Miller. He was about 17 or 18 then, and doing jingle sessions. He came in with his well known Fender Jazz bass asking what he could do to make it a better instrument. I felt it needed a first class fret job, a better bridge, and I suggested some active electronics (I had just started installing active treble and bass circuits for a couple of key guys in town and was very happy with the results). He said let’s go for it. So that’s what I did. I installed a pre-amp, did the fret job, and put a Badass bridge on it. At that time, my installation process was not refined, as far as doing it with minimal routing, so I had to make in oversized pickguard to house the electronics and battery compartment, and the rest is history. (Fender now offers the Marcus Miller model).

Does that add to your sense of “leaving your mark” on the bass world?

Yeah, it's certainly cool. Actually Marcus asked me if I wanted to be involved with the Fender project, and I discussed it with the guys in the shop, but we decided against being involved with a production instrument. The Fender production model doesn't have a Sadowsky pre-amp (I really am not sure what they have put in there).

Have you used the input of the artists you work with to refine the Sadowsky sound?

No question about it. I didn't create Sadowsky basses to address any particular needs I saw. I created and refined the basses to meet the needs of the artists. I started building instruments under my own name in the early 1980's. In the very beginning, my clients would go out and pick up an early '60s Fender L series Jazz bass (which they could get on the streets for about \$800) they would bring it to me and I would do a fret job, shield the electronics, add a pre amp, put a better bridge on it, and for about \$1500 they had a first class working instrument for any live or session gig. Then the vintage market took off and the \$800 bass became \$1500-2000. All of the work I was doing to those instruments was actually de-valuing them as vintage instruments. It was at that point that I realized I could build an instrument from scratch that would be every bit as good as these vintage instruments, and maintain my integrity in terms of not messing with the vintage instruments.

I think the first bass I made I gave to Will, and he checked it out for a while and then gave me some feedback. Marcus then commissioned me to build him one. At this time I was only building 4-strings. I didn't start with 5-strings until the late 1980's. Again, the place where I was coming from was the 1970's. During this time there were a lot of basses being made from exotic hardwoods. As it turns out, these woods were wonderful for coffee tables, but they didn't make great instruments. I took away from those experiences that the instruments that sounded great acoustically really shined after I

finished modifying them. This realization helped me focus on getting back to basics and using the most acoustically resonant woods (like Alder and Swamp Ash for bodies, Maple for necks, and Rosewood and Maple fingerboards).

After many years of a successful 'directly-only' sales approach, you now have a couple of dealers. Can you tell us what people can order through these dealers?

Yes, we have opened Corner Music (Nashville, TN) and the LA Bass Exchange (LA, CA). First of all, with 4-string models we offer a standard style (plain face with rear mounted controls) or vintage style (pick guard and control plate). Our body wood choices are Alder or Swamp Ash (both available with or without a figured Maple top). Maple necks with Maple or Rosewood fingerboards (our preferred Rosewood is Morado which is a South American Rosewood). In a 5-string, we have a 24-fret model with soap bar pickups (only available in the standard style) and a 21-fret Jazz bass available in standard or vintage style. One instrument I came out with last year was a 4-string vintage style PJ instrument which Michael Rhodes has made into his absolute main ax and Alison Prestwood in Nashville has one as well. We are now prototyping a 5-string PJ version. We will see if that works out. There are some physics of the pickup designs we are working through right now.

In a nutshell what makes these instruments so incredibly even?

Let me be clear, there are no secrets. I think it's a combination of our use of really good resonant, structurally

stable woods, and high quality electronics and hardware combined with really good workmanship.

Can you tell us a little bit about your staff?

It has really been a struggle to find (over the years) really skilled guys who love this work. Over the last ten years I have been able to put together a great crew. My two main guys (who both started with me ten years ago) are Ken Fallon and Norio Imai. About two years after they started we added Frank Robbins. About three years ago we

added Chris Swope, and last year we added Caleb Milestone, and our most recent addition is Lech Wojcik. I feel blessed to have all of these great guys who share my vision. As an example, at a recent staff meeting I asked the guys how they would feel about making more money per instrument by spending less time on each (and not having them be quite as

good), the unanimous answer was 'no'. I think that is a reflection of the commitment my guys have.

How do the guys operate as a team?

We all work on various stages of the instruments until the parts are ready for final assembly. For example, Ken, Norio, and I true the fingerboards prior to fretting. Once they are trued, Caleb, Frank, and Chris install the frets. Once the frets are installed, Caleb and Lech do most of the filing, leveling work as well as the final finish sanding work. Once the parts are complete, one person does the complete assembly of the instrument. After each instrument is completed, Ken takes it to the sound room for a test run. If any minor changes are necessary, they are taken care of by the builder. Ken personally



inspects, plays and fine tunes every instrument before it goes out the door. Ken is an incredible musician.

Could you describe the shop for us?

Sure. The shop consists of a main room which doubles as a showroom as well as an office with a wall full of guitars and one full of basses. Off of that is the sound room where we have several guitar and bass amps, here people can check out any of the instruments on the wall, decide what they like and either buy that one or order one to be built. Any time we build a bass for someone (as long as it is within our standard parameters) the bass is on approval when it is done. I don't want anyone fearing that they are going to be stuck with an instrument that isn't magic for them. If the instrument isn't what they wanted, we will either refund their money or build them something else. The rest of the shop is split into two sides. One side is still dedicated to customer service, repairs and restorations. We feel it is really important to continue a first rate restoration and repairs business to stay in touch with, and get feedback from the players who help us continue to refine our instruments.

How do you see the Sadowsky persona?

First rate. I am not afraid to advise a consumer against spending a lot of money on what may be a mediocre instrument. I would advise them against fixing up a mediocre instrument that just doesn't have the basic bones to become a great instrument. There is just a whole lot of integrity in our operation. We are not looking for any quick sales, we are looking for long term relationships with people. I think that's the key to how we approach everything we do. We all go to sleep at

night knowing that we have taken the best care of our clients that we possibly can. Nobody here is going to make a lot of money doing what we do for a living but we all love going to work everyday, and we consider it a privilege to be able to make a living doing what we love to do.

Sadowsky is known worldwide as a company with integrity and representing craftsmanship. What do you see for the company in the future?

I would be happy if we could just maintain what we are doing. Right now the dollar is strong and that has impacted the international market (which is about half of our business). The high end products of any industry are always only a small percentage of total demand. We are committed to staying small, and I am happy if we just maintain what we are doing for the next fifteen years. I have always turned down people who approach me about making production versions of my instruments.

What are your interests outside of building basses?

I spend all of my free time being a parent to my six year old son. If I could have more free time, I would love to get back into building acoustic guitars. It is still a real love of mine.

Sounds like you're working like crazy but you're a happy man.

That's exactly where I'm at. I keep a file of emails and letters that I get, and anytime I get down or discouraged about anything I pull out this file of positive feedback and it recharges my battery.