

LUXE LUTHIER

ROGER SADOWSKY, GUITAR MAKER

When the hieroglyphic formerly known as Prince needed custom guitars for his *Purple Rain* tour in 1984, he contacted luthier Roger Sadowsky. The commission called for two electric guitars that could simulate ejaculation to be delivered to his royal badness. It was like asking Baryshnikov to do the Macarena. Still, Sadowsky took the job. ■ The New York native cringes at the recollection: “I made a guitar with tubes running inside the neck that shot Ivory Liquid in the air when it was hooked up to a compressor. A lot of work went into making sure the guitar sounded good. But Prince didn’t care how it sounded. He only cared that the soap went 100

feet in the air. After that, I promised myself I wouldn’t do any more silly custom work.”

Such outlandish requests are becoming increasingly rare. The word is out: Roger Sadowsky makes only serious custom guitars for serious musicians. His client list reads like a Grammy roll call: Sting, Bruce Springsteen, Adam Clayton, David Byrne, Lee Ritenour, Paul Simon, Earl Klugh, Marcus Miller, Walter Becker, John Patitucci, Gilberto Gil, Pat Metheny. Even headbangers have discovered the subtle pleasures of bespoke: Jason Newsted, the bassist for Metallica, ordered eight Sadowskys for a recent tour.

These endorsements are all the more impressive when one realizes that unlike megamanufacturers such as Fender and Gibson, Sadowsky doesn’t hand out freebies or have artists under contract. Business has gotten so brisk that he had the luxury of turning down Billy Idol’s request for a guitar shaped like the Starship *Enterprise*. Musicians pay up to \$3,500 for the privilege of owning one of these stringed sculptures. In Japan, authorized dealers can command prices nearly twice as high. To put this into perspective, a factory Stratocaster or Telecaster—the two classic stock Fender guitars whose silhouettes Sadowsky has appropriated—retail for as little as \$650.

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To understand the true essence of a Sadowsky, you must look beyond the exquisitely grained AAA rare-maple finish. “Roger crafts one of the best sounding custom guitars in the country,” says Lou Reed. “Sometimes when I’m playing, I think to myself, *This sounds too good to be true.*”

In a nondescript building ten floors above Times Square, Roger Sadowsky is inspecting a stack of maple boards. Dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and an open flannel shirt, the 47-year-old could pass for an NYU grad student going through a Nirvana phase. He holds each board up to the light, checking the grain and tapping it, listening to the wood resonate. He rejects as many as three out of every ten. When it comes to building the guitar: he insists not only on the right wood but the right *combination* of woods. After years of experimentation, Sadowsky concluded that solid-body guitars made of alder or southern swamp ash with maple tops produce a superior tone. On a fretless bass, an ebony fingerboard matched with a maple neck makes for “a nice growl.”

Roger Sadowsky was once enrolled at the Institute of Animal Behavior at Rutgers University, where he studied psychobiology. But halfway through his doctorate program, he realized he was spending more time dismantling



Sadowsky frets about quality.

guitars than cracking textbooks. So he dropped out and apprenticed with the luthier Augie LoPrinzi from 1972 to 1974. For the next five years, Sadowsky ran the service department at Medley Music Corp., a large music retailer in the Philadelphia area. But fed up with the shoddy quality of many mass-produced guitars, Sadowsky moved back to his hometown in 1980 and landed in Times Square.

“I remember the first time I did a fret job for Roger,” recalls Mike Dilalla, a guitarist and former employee of Sadowsky’s. “I sanded the same body twenty times before he accepted it. He would see imperfections and microscopic scratches that nobody else could.” Kevin Augunas, a session bassist and Sadowsky devotee, concurs. “Roger will throw out five necks to get the right one,” says Augunas. “He makes maybe 250 a year. Fender churns out hundreds a day.”

Every Sadowsky custom guitar begins with a consultation. Then the client is taken to a soundproof room where he samples various models. After the body type and wood con-

figuration are chosen, Sadowsky determines the appropriate neck shape, fret size, and electronic components (Sadowsky’s custom pickups and preamps are known throughout the industry for their performance). Custom paint jobs are also available, including sunburst patterns, classic vintage colors, and clear and transparent finishes.

Sadowsky’s early custom guitars (which bear the slightly cheesy nameplate DR. FRETS and are nearly impossible to buy second-hand) have doubled in price. But for musicians, the potential capital gains are beside the point. “You shouldn’t buy a Sadowsky because you think it’s going to be worth a million bucks someday,” says Will Lee, who plays a Sadowsky bass every night on *David Letterman*. “You should buy it because you enjoy playing it.” And what’s it like to play a custom Sadowsky? “Are you kidding?” says Lee. “My ax rocks!”