

# Luthier Roger Sadowsky

By Ed Benson



**T**ucked away in an office building on West 48th street in Manhattan is where luthier Roger Sadowsky and his staff build some of the finest nylon string guitars and basses. Building and repairing guitars for over twenty-five years, Roger has made guitars for Earl Klugh, Lee Ritenour, John Abercrombie and Pat Metheny to name only a few. He's currently working on a new model which should make its debut in 1999.

**EB:** *When did you begin building guitars and what is your background?*

**RS:** In 1972. I was working on a PhD in Psychobiology before I got into guitars. I apprenticed with Augie LoPrinzi from '72-74 making flat-top acoustic and classical guitars. I then did a 5 year stint as

a repairman heading up the repair shop at Medley Music in Bryn Mawr, PA. The repair gig was mostly learn as you go.

**EB:** *Are you a player and do you feel that being a player has an effect on your product?*

**RS:** I am a hippie/folkie fingerpicker. It certainly helps. I think having a good ear is essential and it is important to know what a properly set up guitar feels like. I am amazed at how many high end custom made guitars come into my shop which are so poorly set up from the maker.

**EB:** *Have you always made electric solid bodies? Any desire to get into other styles like archtops/basses?*

**RS:** Again, my first love was acoustic guitars. However, by the late 70's you couldn't make a living making hand made acoustics so I got into making electric guitars and basses as an extension of my repair business. We now have a complete line of guitars and basses including the Electric Nylon Guitar.

**EB:** *How many models do you make and what are their differences and prices?*

**RS:** We have the Electric Nylon, and several vintage style and standard style tele and strat styled models. For bass, we have two different 5 string models and 2 different 4 string models that can be configured in a variety of styles. Prices range from \$2500-\$3500.

**EB:** *How long does it take to get a Sadowsky once a customer orders it?*

**RS:** About 6 months delivery.

**EB:** *What's special about your design?*

**RS:** A lot of my instrument design resulted from the customizing and modification work I used to do. In the 70's and early 80's, I used to send my clients out to find a good early 60's guitar or bass, and then I would redo the neck with a good fret job, customize the electronics and upgrade the hardware. They could pick up an L-series strat for \$800 and I would do \$500 of custom work and they would have a great guitar for \$1200-\$1300. However, in the 80's, the vintage market began to take off. All of a sudden, those L-series Fenders were \$1500 and the work I wanted to do to them would destroy their vintage value. It was then that I felt I could build a new instrument that would be better than the "customized" vintage guitars I was doing, and I wouldn't be "destroying" all those nice vintage instruments.



Lee Ritenour

Essentially, all of our instruments are Fender style. When I started building around 1980, all of my clients were the full time studio musicians in NY and a lot of their session work were jingle dates. These were fast, in and out sessions, and the engineers knew how to get a good sound from 6 instruments: Tele, Strat, Les Paul, 335, Jazz Bass & P-Bass. There was a lot of pressure not to show up with anything else as they didn't want to take the time to "get" a sound from an unfamiliar instrument.

Another factor was that in NY, players could not bring a lot of guitars to a session due to the limitations of travelling by taxi and subway. Players wanted to bring

one guitar to a date. From my years of customizing work, I found I could make a more "versatile" guitar building in the Fender style than in the Gibson style.

**EB:** *Can you tell us about the materials used in your guitars? Do most players use nylon or steel strings?*

**RS:** Most of our instruments have alder or swamp ash bodies with or without highly figured maple tops. Our necks are all clear hard maple with bolivian rosewood, maple or ebony fingerboards. We only make one guitar that uses nylon strings.

**EB:** *Do you do all of the work or is some of it done elsewhere?*

**RS:** We do as much work as we can in the space we have. We can't spray in this building so we send out the finish work for the instruments (we do touch up spraying for repairs in house). We also have our necks carved on a CNC machine for consistency, and that we send out as well. Just about everything else is done in house.

**EB:** *Do you work alone?*

**RS:** I have six fabulous craftsmen working with me (Ken Fallon, Norio Imai, Frank Robbins, Chris Swope, Caleb Milestone and Lech Wojcik).

**EB:** *Is there much customizing available or do you prefer to make specific models without custom work?*

**RS:** Ken Fallon and I spend a lot of time doing R&D on new models to be sure they perform the way we want them to, so we are not interested in building one-of-a-kind custom instruments. However, within our models we build to order and offer many choices of woods, finish colors and various options.

**EB:** *Over the years have you changed your models*



Norio Imai repairing a headstock on a Gibson 175



Caleb Milestone sanding a body



Frank Robbins installing a Sadowsky logo.

“Roger has been working on my instruments for close to 20 yrs. now. I know of none better than him, and believe me I’ve tried many!!! I started playing his instruments about 12 yrs ago. I own 3 instruments: a tele-style w/humbucking/single coil/humbucking configuration, a strat-style w/3mini humbuckers, and one of his beautiful electric nylon guitars. All three are superb sounding great playing instruments, that have served me incredibly well, in both live, and recording situations. He is a real artist (and a nice guy) who has proved that jazz can be played on a great guitar even it it’s not an archtop.”

John Abercrombie

*in terms of styling and electronics?*

**RS:** The main change in styling over the years has been to do more instruments with traditional Fender vintage styling. As much as I don’t want to make instruments that look exactly like Fender, the classic vintage look is visually very powerful and a lot of players want it.

**EB:** *What pickups are you using and why?*

**RS:** Most of our pickups are custom wound for us by DiMarzio or Seymour Duncan. When we R&D a model, we solicit samples from the major pickup companies and after we narrow it down to our favorite, we then have them make custom wound variations until we find our favorite.

**EB:** *How are most guitars ordered in terms of pickups?*

**RS:** Most of our guitars have three pickups except for our vintage Tele style guitars which usually have two. The Electric Nylon only has a piezo pickup under the bridge saddle.

**EB:** *With so many luthiers now (especially archtop makers) do you feel there will be a shakeout and many will not survive as the market is small? How can a small luthier make it in today’s marketplace?*

**RS:** It is almost impossible to make a living as a guitar maker these days. I counsel everyone who approaches me to approach it as an avocation, not a vocation. But those who are totally obsessed by the craft, the way I was 25 years ago, will prevail. I think there will be a shakeout among arch top makers. The market is small, the competition among the established makers is intense and the new up and coming players will not be able to afford instruments in this price range.

**EB:** *I know you have International dealers but none in the US? Why?*

**RS:** I always knew I wanted to sell direct to musicians. I like the one-on-one relationship and the direct feedback from the player helps me always improve what I am doing. The only reason I have some dealers overseas is it is a bit intimidating for someone

to order a \$3000 guitar, sight unseen, from outside the US. I do not seek out dealers, but if someone with a top pro shop in a given country approaches me, I will consider giving them an exclusive for their particular country.

**EB:** *Are you building any 7 string models? Is the demand for 7 string increasing?*

**RS:** I think I have had three requests for a 7 string guitar in the past 20 years.

**EB:** *How many guitars are you making a year now?*

**RS:** Our production is about 20 instruments a month. We have been steady at the number for a few years and have no plans to increase production.



Strat model



Electric nylon model

**EB:** *Are you also doing repairs?*

**RS:** Absolutely! I think it is essential even though it can be a hassle to balance the repair work with the building. Repair work keeps me in touch with my clients and helps me to be a better builder. I personally have a problem with builders who refuse to repair their own

guitars because they are too busy building. I don't want to offend any of my friends, but I think there is no excuse for that.

**EB:** *Who are some of the jazz players who play your guitars?*

**RS:** John Abercrombie, Jay Berliner, Djavan, Gilberto Gil, Mick Goodrick, Earl Klugh, Wayne Krantz, Pat Metheny, Lee Ritenour, John Scofield, Ricardo Silveira, Richard Smith, David Spinozza, Mike Stern and John Tropea. Bass players include: Oscar Cartaya, Bob Cranshaw, Kermit Driscoll, Nathan East, Bob Hurst, Jay Leonhart, Marcus Miller, John Patitucci, Chuck Rainey, Steve Rodby and Kim Stone.

**EB:** *What would most people say they like the most about your guitars?*

**RS:** My Electric Nylon Guitar makes a very special jazz guitar. The neck is half way between a standard electric and a classical and the fingerboard has a 12" radius—so it is very comfortable especially for a player coming to the instrument from electric guitar. It is a wonderful instrument for jazz and brazilian style music. All it needs is a touch of reverb. Just listen to anything recorded in the last few years by Earl Klugh or Lee Ritenour. Mike Stern has also recorded a ballad with it on most of his albums.

**EB:** *What do you see evolving in terms of your guitars in the next few years?*

**RS:** I am prototyping a "jazz solidbody" that has a wider neck like many jazz guitars, a single neck position humbucker, and a piezo bridge. I hope to have this refined and offered as a model during 1999.



Pat Metheny

**EB:** *What percent of your customers are professional players?*

**RS:** I would guess 50% full time, 25% part time, and 25% non-professional.

**EB:** *Who do you consider your competition in the classic nylon electric category?*

**RS:** I view them as colleagues rather than competitors, but Kirk Sand and John Buscarino are the other builders making a quality electric nylon guitar.

**EB:** *Thanks for your time and I'm looking forward to checking out the new model.*



Sam Sadowsky at age 4 learning to drill.

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