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THE INNOVATORS

By Jim Roberts



DURING THE 45 YEARS THAT

he's been making instruments, Roger Sadowsky has had to adapt to many changes—different materials, different playing styles, different economic and social conditions. One thing that has remained constant is his focus on his customers. “I want to have a relationship with the person who's ordering an instrument,” he says. “I want to advise them on the options and make sure they're making the right choices.”

A New York City native, Roger began his career as a luthier in 1972, when he left a PhD program at Rutgers University to apprentice with Augie LoPrinzi, building acoustic guitars at a shop in New Jersey. Two years later, he moved on to Medley Music in Philadelphia, where he quickly gained a reputation for his skillful work repairing basses and guitars. In 1979, he returned to New York and opened Sadowsky Guitars. At first, Roger focused on repairing and modifying instruments for up-and-coming players like Marcus Miller, advising them to bring him vintage Fenders for improvements. His preamp, either installed in the bass or an outboard unit, became the

Jim Roberts was the founding editor of *BASS PLAYER* and also served as the magazine's publisher and group publisher. He is the author of *How the Fender Bass Changed the World and American Basses: An Illustrated History & Player's Guide* (both published by Backbeat Books/Hal Leonard).

Roger Sadowsky

basis of the famed “Sadowsky sound.”

As prices for vintage basses climbed, Roger began to build his own instruments, based on the Fender designs. “Leo got so much right the first time around,” he says. “I've never strayed too far from the Fender paradigm.” The first Sadowsky bass was a PJ 4-string built in 1982 for Will Lee—who remains a key customer and the inspiration for a signature model introduced in 2009.

While remaining faithful to his original design concepts, Roger has made many improvements over the years: reshaping bodies and necks for improved comfort and playability; offering models with 20, 21, 22, or 24 frets; improving pickups, electronics, and hardware; and adding 5-string versions. “One of the main things for me has been building lightweight instruments. I started focusing on the acoustic qualities of solidbody instruments in the early '80s, and I developed the point of view that the better they sound acoustically, the better they sound amplified—and the ones that sounded better acoustically were the lighter instruments. Then, about 15 years ago, when I found that the ash and alder were coming in heavier than I wanted, I turned to chambering. That not only decreased the weight of the instruments but made them more acoustically resonant.”

Sadowsky NYC basses are built by an experienced eight-person team in a shop located in Long Island City, Queens. Each instrument is designed on paper before production begins. “Aside from the rough cut of the body and neck on a CNC [machine], everything is done by hand. Once the body and neck are sprayed, one person builds the entire instrument

from that point on.” The final inspection and setup are still done by Roger, and every instrument must have his approval before it leaves the shop.

While the prices for many NYC basses now exceed \$5,000, Roger also offers lower-priced Metro basses, built in Japan by a team led by Yoshi Kikuchi, who trained in the Sadowsky shop. Another budget-friendly option is the new Satin Series. “This is a no-frills bass, with either a rosewood board and alder body or a maple board and ash body, with a satin finish,” Roger says. “They're made on the same benches as our NYC basses, and we've been able to bring the cost down to \$2,900 for a 4-string and \$2,975 for a 5.”

One recent model that deviates from the “Fender paradigm” is a single-cut 5-string, developed with input from bassist Chip Shearin. It's available in two versions, the original with dual soapbar pickups and a “vintage” model with a neck-position J pickup and a unique dual-coil bridge pickup. “In that pickup,” Roger explains, “the distance between the two coils mimics '60s and '70s locations. With the flick of a switch, you can go from the '60s coil to the '70s coil, or both together.”

Whether a Sadowsky customer is ordering a one-of-a-kind NYC model or a Satin Series 4-string, Roger wants to be sure it's the right bass for that player. That's why he has stuck to the direct-sales model for all of his domestic instruments. “I want to get that e-mail a couple weeks after they get the bass, telling me how much they love it,” he says. “For me, it's not about units sold—it's about people.”

For more about Sadowsky basses, go to sadowsky.com. **BP**