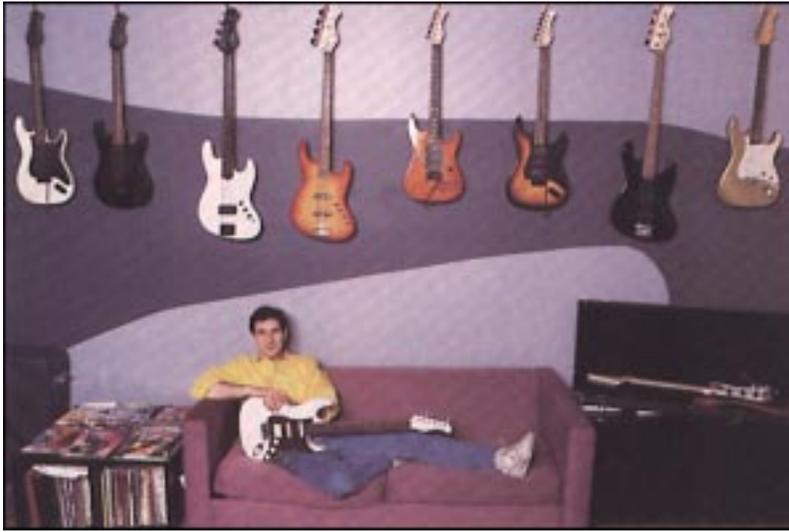


Right: Roger Sadowsky carves a guitar neck by hand.  
Below: Roger takes a break beneath a wall of customized guitars and basses.



# ROGER SADOWSKY

New York's  
Acclaimed Craftsman  
Tailors Instruments  
For Everyone From  
Springsteen and Sting  
To Di Meola And Stern

By Chris Jisi

**T**he job of the instrument maker is to provide a tool that allows the musician to express himself. Ultimately, the changes in sound and design don't come from us, but from innovative musicians whose talent demands something new. The most dramatic example we get is people from all over the world requesting the 'Marcus Miller bass sound'."

—Roger Sadowsky

"Roger was the first repairman to take an interest in my playing. He asked a lot of questions concerning how hard I played, the kinds of music I was involved with, and what sort of sound I was looking for. He has great insight into the wood and electronics that make up an instrument, and he suggested I try one of his preamps. At the time, I was having trouble conveying my style through my bass. With the preamp, I gradually noticed that I could do more with the instrument and the sound was projecting better. What Roger did was give me a sound with which I could communicate my style."

—Marcus Miller



PHOTOS BY EBET ROBERTS

Similar accolades arrive from all corners of the music business for New York luthier/repairman Roger Sadowsky, from guitar roadies and students to top recording artists. The walls of his office are covered with 8 x 10 photos of grateful guitarists and bassists, displayed more out of respect for the artists than for show-and-tell. Indeed, Sadowsky has rarely advertised. His reputation comes by word of mouth. Some of his more celebrated clients, already noted for their good ears, include Bruce Springsteen, Al Di Meola, John Scofield, Will Lee, Prince, John Abercrombie, Nile Rodgers, Sting, Paul Simon, Hall & Oates, Joan Jett, Lou Reed, Billy Squier, Jack Wilkins, Jim Hall, Tommy Shaw, Mike Stern, Steve Khan, Tony Levin, Carmine Rojas, Victor Bailey, Joe Beck, Jeff Golub, Bill Frisell, Darryl Jones, T-Bone Wolk, and Neil Jason.

Sadowsky returns the compliments: "When I first came to

New York in 1979, 95% of my clients were top studio and touring musicians in town. As a result, the instruments coming into the shop were among the finest I'd ever played and worked on, aiding me in the development of my own instruments later on." Paul Simon notes, "I like the necks on Roger's guitars; they feel right to me. I've always liked Strat-type guitars, and Roger's sound good. I gave Ray Phiri his first Sadowsky guitar when we recorded Graceland [Warner Bros., 1-25447]. He and John Selolwane both played Sadowsky guitars on the Graceland tour, and they loved them."

Prior to becoming a fixture in his hometown, the 39-year old craftsman apprenticed with luthier Augie LoPrinzi in New Jersey from 1972 to '74, and from 1974 to '79 Roger honed his chops as head of the service department at Medley

Music Corp., a large music retailer in the Philadelphia area. Currently he operates out of his workshop on Broadway in midtown Manhattan. He is joined by his associate Jay Black, who apprenticed with Dick Boak at Martin, and assisted Roger on work for Prince in 1985, turning a business trip into a permanent position.

Together they establish one-to-one relationships with their customers, examining the player's wants and needs. Says Sadowsky, "Much of what we do is educate our clients. Often they know what they want, but they don't know how to get there. They're seduced by ads that don't deliver, and they end up wasting money. We evaluate everything that comes onto the market and simplify matters by making recommendations. When someone comes in and asks for, say, a phase switch, it would be easy for us to just sell them one, but that gives us no satisfaction. We push beyond the initial request." He estimates that his business is now divided equally between customizing instruments and producing and selling his own line of guitars and basses.

"Customizing," Roger explains, "means upgrading the level of a guitar's performance. It's been about a decade since guitar customizing became popular. Companies like Charvel, Schecter, Mighty Mite, and DiMarzio came out with replacement parts such as necks, bridges, and pickups, which essentially brought a parts mentality to Fender-style guitars. People began looking at guitars or basses as interchangeable parts rather than as an instrument. One of the key insights I had was when a client brought in his Strat for extensive work-fret job, new pickups, a bridge, shielding-in all, a \$500 to \$600 job. I remember being surprised at how the instrument wasn't significantly improved after all that work, whereas other guitars I'd done the same things to turned out superior. I eventually realized that there is an inherent acoustic quality going on in the instrument, which is a function of the wood."

Black asserts that players who buy student-level guitars and hope to improve them through customization are much better off buying a high-quality guitar and making small adjustments. Sadowsky agrees, "The bottom line is that we can do a lot to make a good guitar superb, because the most critical element is the wood, and that's the thing we can't change."

Overall, Sadowsky believes that most stock instruments can be improved by



**Sadowsky (R) with Marcus Miller: "We get people from all over the world requesting the 'Marcus Miller' sound."**

refretting the neck, resurfacing the fingerboard, manipulating the curve of the fingerboard so strings bend well in the upper register – and improving the electronics through shielding and hum cancellation. These make up his most frequent requests. He explains, "Some customers look to convert their axes into all-purpose guitars, which can lead to problems. Say, they have an old Strat and want to install a tremolo system. Well, we don't like cutting up nice old Strats, for two reasons. First, we're affecting the instrument's vintage market value, and second, the guitar isn't going to feel the same or sound the same, due to the change in string tension. We would probably encourage the person to look for another guitar."

Dealing with the New York market however, Sadowsky appreciates a player's need for one guitar with maximum versatility "In L.A.," he notes, "studio musicians are able to experiment with different instruments. Many carry huge racks, and they have cartage to haul them around. In NY musicians are dealing with subways and taxis. They usually carry one axe and whatever effects fit into the pouches of their gig bags, and use the amps at clubs and studios." That, along with years of frustration over the lack of quality control exhibited by some guitar manufacturers, has led Roger to design and build his own guitars and basses.

"My main philosophy is that solidbody guitars and basses are first and foremost acoustic guitars and basses," Roger emphasizes, "and their overall character is related to the wood. After many years of experimenting, I came to the conclusion that lightweight solidbodies made of alder, Southern swamp ash, or basswood with maple tops produced the liveliest and best instruments. We match the tone characteristics of these body woods with rosewood fingerboards, which add warmth and nice mids. Or to maple boards, which produce a crisp, tight, punchy sound. For fretless basses, we only use ebony boards, not so much for wear resistance, but because ebony gets that nice growl."

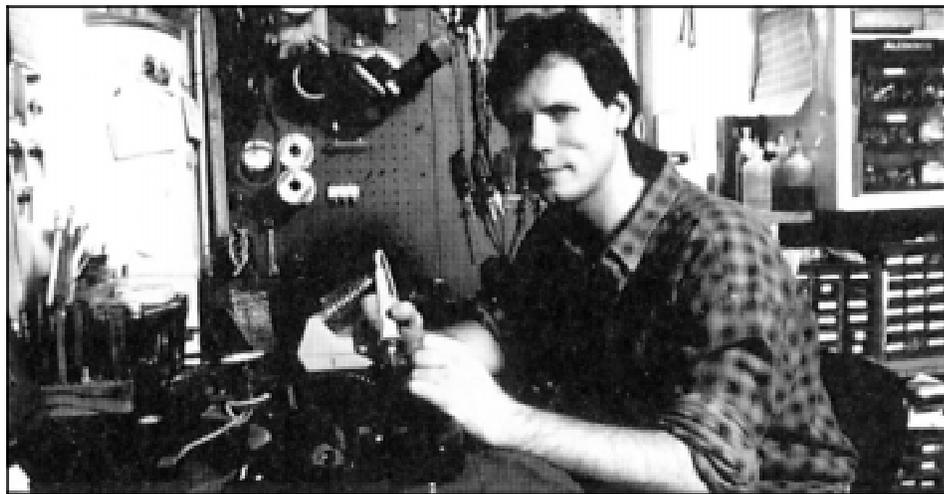
Regarding construction of Fender-style instruments, he explains, "New York is a Fender town. When I returned here in 1979, a lot of the studio players, such as Steve Khan, David Spinozza, and John Tropea, had Fenders with humbuckers added to the neck position. Part of this was the 'New York' sound, but part of this was due to the preference of producers and engineers to see Fenders rather than other brands. Tony Levin had me convert his Fender bass by adding EMGs and my bass preamp because engineers on New York studio dates didn't want to deal with getting a sound from his Music Man or Steinberger. A lot of it is just psychological.

"I also looked at the number of successful, innovative designs over the last 10 years and decided that Leo Fender, in many ways, hit the nail on the head. His Stratocasters, Telecasters, and Precision and Jazz Basses have stood the test of time. The question was whether I could make a contribution to that style-which transcends the basic instrument, in terms of feel, sound, and technology, and remains familiar and comfortable to my clientele."

Offering advice to guitar and bass buyers, Sadowsky stresses, "Listen to the acoustic quality of the instrument and compare it with others, It's very hard to judge any instrument by itself, so if possible, do an A-B test between two instruments and choose the one that sounds the loudest and most alive acoustically." Another important point stressed by Sadowsky Guitars is that there are so many different neck shapes and fret sizes available that it's important for players to evaluate their style before shopping for an instrument. "Someone playing one kind of music on a wide, flat neck might want to evolve into a style that calls for a narrow, chunky neck," says

Black. "It's best to find a versatile neck."

Sadowsky echoes that sentiment, adding, "Irving Sloane, who authored several definitive books on guitar construction, once told me, 'Great instruments are not made for the listener. Great instruments are made for great musicians.' Most of us have felt, at one time or another, that if we only had different pickups or a certain tremolo system or a better bridge, we would be better players. We naturally prefer to blame our equipment rather than ourselves. Jay and I are just trying to eliminate the instrument as a source of problems, so the musician can focus on his creativity. You could give Marcus Miller a Sears Silvertone bass, and he would still sound like Marcus Miller. The magic is in one's hands and soul, not the equipment."



**Sadowsky's associate since 1985, Jay Black asserts that it's better to buy a good quality guitar and make small adjustments than to try improving a student-level instrument.**