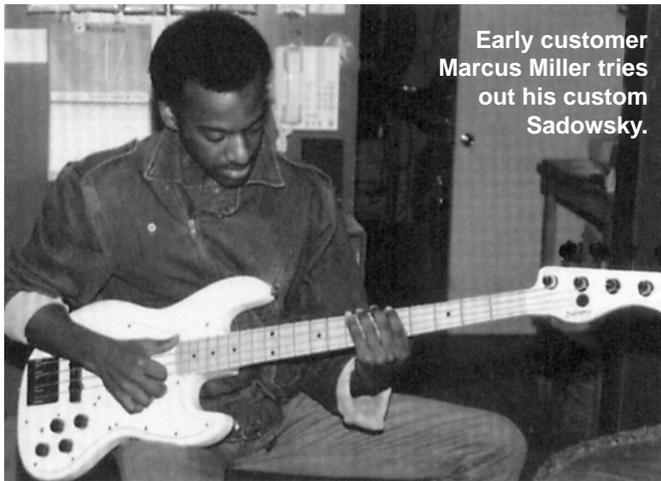


By Jim Roberts

Getting to First Bass: Roger Sadowsky



Early customer Marcus Miller tries out his custom Sadowsky.

When Roger Sadowsky approached luthier Augie LoPrinzi about an apprenticeship, he had an unusual pitch. “I said to him, ‘If I can implant an electrode in the lateral hypothalamus of a rat’s brain, I think I can build a guitar.’ I’m sure he didn’t have a clue about what I said, but he took me on.”

At the time, Sadowsky was pursuing a Ph.D. at Rutgers University’s Institute of Animal Behavior. But lutherie looked a lot more appealing. “I started playing acoustic guitar in 1968, after going to a folk festival. Later on, as I was getting more and more miserable in grad school, I developed this romantic notion that if I learned to build guitars I could have my cabin in the woods and musicians would beat a path to my door. So I quit school in ’72 and went to work for a music store in Union, New Jersey. We were selling acoustic guitars built by a local guy, LoPrinzi, and one day I said to his sales rep, ‘Look, man, I don’t want to be working here. I want to be building guitars. Can you hook me up with Augie?’”

That led to Roger’s “rat brain” interview and a \$65-a-week job in LoPrinzi’s shop. Sadowsky soon realized it would take years to establish himself as a luthier—and there wasn’t much of a market for handmade acoustic guitars to begin with. Feeling the economic pressure, he took a repair job at Medley Music, near Philadelphia. “I spent five years there getting good at being a

repairman. I had a client who moved to New York, a guitarist named Craig Snyder who was a busy session player in the late ’70s. He kept bringing me instruments, and he said, ‘There’s no one as good as you in New York.’ I found that hard to believe, but I started commuting to New York every weekend and using his apartment as a base. His friends brought their instruments to me; I did simple repairs there and took the bigger jobs back to Philly. After six months I had established contact with enough players and developed enough confidence to open my own shop, so I moved to New York in September ’79.”

Sadowsky’s business there flourished, and many of his customers were bass players looking for better sound. Ron Armstrong of San Francisco’s Stars Guitars suggested a solution. “He turned me on to active electronics; the first circuit I installed came from Stars Guitars. I sold it to Tony Conniff, and the response was tremendous—engineers immediately noticed how much better his bass sounded. My next guinea pig was Marcus Miller. He brought me his ’70s J-Bass in 1980; I retrued and refretted the fingerboard, put on a heavier bridge, and installed the same Stars Guitars circuit. Again, it was hugely successful.”

After a couple of years hot-rodding Fenders, Sadowsky decided he was ready to make his own instruments. “The first bass I built, in 1982, was a PJ instrument that went to Will Lee. Then I built one for Marcus that had a slightly smaller body—it was reduced in the arm-contour area. That bass now belongs to Matt Garrison. The craftsman in me wanted to make a more original instrument, but the reality of Manhattan was that nobody was interested in anything but a Fender-style bass. That’s what led me down that path—

some people have said my instruments are like a Fender on steroids.”

Sadowsky basses are known for their consistently rich tone, which Roger attributes to his training as an acoustic guitar builder. “Even in the early ’80s I believed solidbody basses and guitars were, first and foremost, acoustic instruments—and the better they sounded acoustically, the better they sounded through an amp. Nobody else believed that in those days. The philosophy was: It’s a plank of wood, and it’s all about the pickups and bridge mass. People were making basses with all these exotic hardwoods—they were wonderful coffee tables, but they were horrible instruments. I focused on the wood’s acoustic qualities, and I think that point of view is recognized as correct today.”

Although his shop on Broadway is not exactly the “cabin in the woods” he originally envisioned, Roger is pleased with the way his career turned out. Today he focuses on building a limited number of premium basses and guitars he sells directly to musicians. The close contact between builder and player means he can help customers find the right instruments—and they can help him create new models.

One of the latest Sadowsky designs, developed with input from Nashville studio ace Michael Rhodes, is a vintage-style 5-string. Its PJ configuration recalls Sadowsky’s first bass, yet this new 5 has several innovations, including an option for reversing the coils on its P-style Basslines pickup. “It tightens the B-string sound because it pushes the bass coil closer to the bridge, and it also helps popping on the G, because it puts the treble coil where a neck-position J-Bass pickup would be. It’s a good example of the little things that make what we do meaningful.”

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