



MEET YOUR MAKER

# Roger Sadowsky

BY ROD TAYLOR

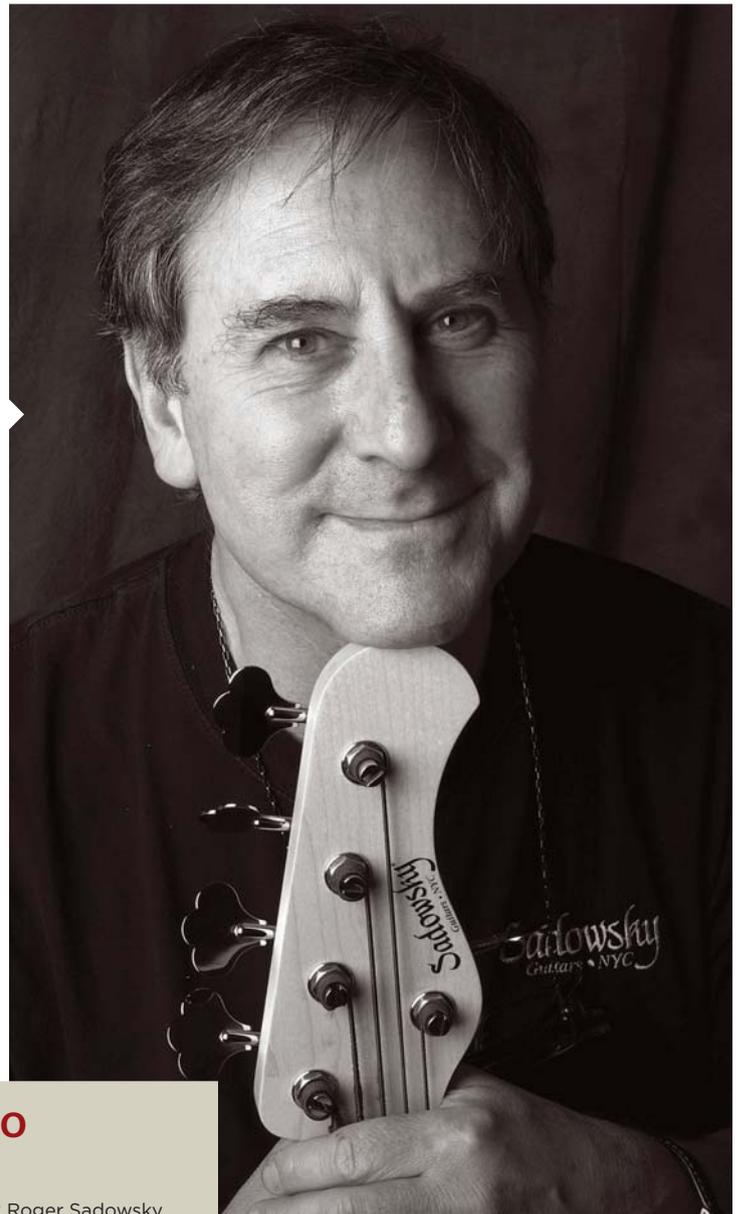
Welcome to "Meet Your Maker," a series dedicated to bringing you closer to the individuals behind the instruments that inspire us.

**IN THE WORLD OF BASS, FEW BUILDERS ARE AS CLOSELY** connected to a specific tone as Roger Sadowsky. His instruments are celebrated for their tight and clear lows, smooth midrange, and crisp treble response. As such, they remain a favorite among players in the studio and on the stage. Vintage in look and feel but powered by his signature modern preamp, Roger's basses represent a beautiful marriage of the old and the new, and it's a union that has clearly stood the test of time.

## FROM BASSOON TO BASS

Roger's musical journey began with a bassoon in elementary school, although his stint on this instrument was ultimately short lived. "I went through \$40 in reeds in two weeks," he remembers. "My parents just couldn't afford that, so they moved me to baritone horn." Roger enjoyed playing the horn, but due to a sudden vacancy switched to tuba a few months later, an instrument he continued play throughout his high school years. As a psychology major in college, however, he discovered his true passion: the guitar. "In 1969, I attended this folk festival on campus. There were all these acoustic guitars, banjos, concertinas, quilts, macramé, people with long beards and long hair, and I immediately felt at home." The next day a friend took him to a music store where he bought a \$40 Aria nylon string guitar, and Roger soon began teaching himself how to play via Gordon Lightfoot and Simon & Garfunkel tunes.

For the next few years, Roger kept playing that guitar. He also kept going to school. The early '70 found him enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Rutgers University, studying psychobiology and practicing brain surgery. He did not



**i** INFO

SADOWSKY GUITARS

**BUILDER** Roger Sadowsky  
**LOCATION** Long Island City, New York  
**PRICE RANGE** Metro Line, \$2,350-\$3,100; NYC, \$3,775-\$6,000  
**MISSION** To build instruments that provide working bassists with a vintage-inspired tone that delivers in the studio and on the stage.  
**NOTABLE PLAYERS** Will Lee, Rickey Minor, Tom Hamilton, Hugh McDonald  
**CONTACT** [sadowsky.com](http://sadowsky.com)

enjoy his studies, however. "I was miserable. And the more miserable I got, the more time I spent playing guitar." In the little free time he had, Sadowsky began tinkering around with his own instruments, aided by a few articles from the 1970 edition of the *Whole Earth Catalog* (an American countercultural magazine published from 1968-72). "I suddenly got this notion that if I could learn to build guitars I could get out of the rat race. I would have my cabin in the woods, musicians would beat a path to my door, and I would live happily ever after." Roger continued his



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studies, but for a full year he contacted luthiers all over the world trying to find an apprenticeship—with no luck. Frustrated but not defeated, he finally quit school and took a job selling guitars at a music store in New Jersey, still hoping to eventually work with a builder. That opportunity eventually came via an offer to make \$80 a week working for Augie LoPrinzie on flat-top acoustic guitars, which he did for the next two years. After that, Roger took over a well-known repair shop in the Philly area, where he spent the next five years honing his chops on repair and restoration work.

**MARCUS & WILL**

1979 was a great year for Sadowsky. Building on his success in Philly, Roger moved up to New York and officially opened his own shop. Soon after, a friend introduced him to Marcus Miller. “Marcus came by the shop and gave me his ’77 Fender Jazz Bass. He told me, ‘Do what you can to make this the best bass it can be.’” Roger talked Marcus into letting him put one of his active preamps into it, and the rest is history. He also did the same thing for another rising New York player, Will Lee of the newly formed David Letterman Band. In those early years, players would approach Roger wanting advice on getting a good bass. He would have them buy an early-’60s L-series J-Bass, which at the time you could pick up for \$800. “They would bring the bass to me, and I would basically do what I’d done for Marcus and for Will: install a preamp, give it a fret job, shield the electronics, and maybe upgrade the bridge.” At the end of the day, for \$1,300–\$1,500 he’d provide

them with a first-class instrument.

By the mid ’80s, however, the vintage market was in full swing, and those \$800 basses were now worth three times the money. “At that point, I realized it would make more sense for me to just build an instrument from scratch that incorporated everything good about a Fender, plus everything I brought to the table.” Thus, the Sadowsky bass was born. Appropriately, two of his first customers were Marcus and Will. “I will forever be indebted to both Marcus and Will for giving me the momentum that basically led me to be primarily a bass maker. I didn’t set out to be a bass maker; it’s just where the current took me.” By the late ’80s, Marcus was all the rage in Japan and Will Lee was making his mark in the U.S., both factors that significantly contributed to Sadowsky’s growing reputation and steady increase in sales.

**A WORKING MAN’S INSTRUMENT**

Roger has always seen electric guitars as primarily acoustic instruments: the better they sound acoustically, the better they sound when amplified. “That is still my foundation in choosing lightweight resonant acoustic woods,” he says. About ten years ago, Roger noticed that his basses were getting heavier. Whereas they used to weigh eight pounds, now they weighed around nine. He talked with his wood suppliers, but they couldn’t seem to find lighter wood. It was at this point that he decided to chamber the body of his instruments (a process in which he routs a series of channels in the body). “Players like Michael Rhodes and Hugh McDonald—guys who had my older and newer instruments—commented on how much better-sounding these lighter, chambered instruments were. That convinced me I was on the right path.”

For Sadowsky, that path continues to guide the journeys of many working musicians, from Nashville to New York to L.A. He insists that there’s no magic to instrument making—and when this former doctoral student says, “it’s not brain surgery,” he knows what he’s talking about. “It all boils down to good materials, good workmanship, thoughtful design, and the ability to really listen to your clients.” Roger has clearly mastered the art of that combination and remains one of the most respected builders of Fender-inspired instruments as a result. We’ve all heard the expression, “Leo got it right,” but that doesn’t mean his creations couldn’t be improved upon. Of that, Sadowsky basses offer ample proof. **BP**