

A man with glasses and a black t-shirt is working in a workshop. He is holding a piece of wood and appears to be sanding or finishing it. The workshop has a pegboard with various tools and materials in the background. The text "ROGER THAT" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font across the center of the image. The man's t-shirt has some text on it, including "Santorski" and "Guitars".

# ROGER THAT

## Roger Sadowsky, one of the world's leading bass luthiers, stopped by at the London Bass Guitar Show to talk to Mike Brooks about his bass building philosophy

**A** stroll around Olympia during the London Bass Guitar Show can be a noisy experience to say the least – yet on both days of this year's event back in March, there was a tangible buzz: an audible sound of hushed mutterings between those in attendance. "It is him, isn't it?"... "Is that really him? Here in London?"

Who could they have been talking about, you ask? Well, yes it was true – one of the premier luthiers of the bass world was there at the London Bass Guitar Show, and boy did Roger Sadowsky make a splash. We sat down with him over a much-needed caffeinated beverage for a chat about all things bass...

Roger began as a luthier back in 1972 building acoustic guitars, before taking over a repair shop in Philadelphia several years later and moving into repair, modification and restoration. He moved back to his own shop in New York in 1979, and later that year, Marcus Miller walked through his door. "My clientele in the beginning was really all the New York session musicians," recalls Roger. "Marcus came to me when he was 17, with his 1977 Jazz bass, and asked me, 'What can you do to make my bass as good as you can?'"

"I recommended a good fret job, shielding the electronics, a better bridge and a preamp – actually, only the second bass preamp I had ever installed. I was using a circuit by Stars Guitars from San Francisco, a group that had come out of the Alembic school. That's what I gave Marcus – but within a year, they went out of business and Marcus's preamp died! They told me when they were closing up that the closest thing to what they were making was a Bartolini TCT preamp. I used that until 1990, when I wanted to create my outboard preamp box and Alex Aguilar [of Aguilar fame] helped me to design my own circuit."

Back in those days, there was no internet or social media, so personal recommendation meant everything, especially among the session players of the day. Roger elaborates: "It was basically word of mouth from players, because at that time I didn't do any advertising. It was a gradual thing. However, in Japan, Marcus Miller was like the Beatles, they were fanatics for Marcus – so that opened up an opportunity for me, starting around 1987, to connect with a distributor in Japan. I was selling them modified Fenders and then my own basses."

Asked how Roger began making his own instruments, he says: "Back in 1979 to '81, you could buy a really nice early-60s L Series Jazz bass for \$850, and they would bring it to me and I would do all my work – so for \$1500 you would have a first-class working instrument. Once the vintage market began to take off in the mid-80s, I realised that everything I was doing to modify the instruments was actually devaluing them, and I felt a responsibility not to continue doing that. If it was a bass that had been refinished, then okay – but a clean vintage Fender? I felt I could build an instrument from scratch that would incorporate everything I had been doing."

**"I REALISED THAT EVERYTHING I WAS DOING TO MODIFY THE INSTRUMENTS WAS ACTUALLY DEVALUING THEM"**



The 80s was an incredibly productive decade in bass design and manufacture, and Roger readily identified a market niche which he could turn to his advantage.

"New products tended to be non-Fender-ish; Spector, Ken Smith, Fodera, and the more Fender-like stuff tended to be inexpensive imports, so there weren't too many people making high-quality Fender-style instruments. I want to point out that the reason I built in a Fender style was that in 1980, if you took the New York Union [session musicians] directory, there were two [categories of bass guitar sounds]. There was 'Acoustic Bass' and 'Fender Bass'. All electric basses were considered Fender basses.

"A lot of the studio work at the time was jingles or 40-minute studio sessions, and you couldn't walk in with anything but a P-Bass or a J-Bass [because] the engineer was not going to waste 10 minutes to dial in the sound on a bass that he hadn't worked with before. So there was a tremendous amount of pressure to show up with a Fender, but once they plugged one of my basses into a DI, it was as good as gold – and I've been grateful for how well engineers, front of house and sound guys have responded to my instruments. They're virtually plug and play."

It must be a constant challenge to stay relevant, to produce desirable products and to stay one step ahead of the market, we tell Roger. Indeed the instrument industry has never faced so many challenges as it does today. He's quick to offer his take on this. "One of the major challenges is wood. I approach solid body instruments as acoustic guitars, and I feel the better an instrument sounds acoustically, the better it will sound amplified. As early as 1980 and '81, the lighter-weight instruments always seemed to me to be the ones that sounded better. It was all about the resonance. I was bucking the trend, which at that time was for heavy basses. Many luthiers were using African woods that make great coffee tables... so I started focusing on lightweight acoustic resonances.

"We fit the necks to our bodies so tightly that you don't even need screws. We could just use a little bit of glue and they'd be perfect, but I think there's a practicality to a bolt-on neck joint, assuming it's done well. In terms of maintenance over the lifetime of the instrument, it's good to be able to make subtle adjustments to the neck angle, with the ease of refretting and the ease of touch-up finishing that I like. We're always tweaking, always looking for a new thing: we've just started developing a bolt-on singlecut bass, which is something we've never done before. That will be a nice project."

As a luthier of repute, Roger is forthright in his opinion that the process of buying and owning a Sadowsky instrument is a two-way conversation that lasts for the lifetime of the instrument. "I don't sell any of my instruments online," he says. "We devote a third of our monthly production to creating our in-house inventory, a third to fulfilling customer orders and a third is sent to Japan. We put the instruments that are available on our website only as an invitation for players to email or call, because we want to have a conversation with them. We want to know what they're looking for, what they currently have, what they like and don't like. It's the start of a conversation, and it's the start of a relationship. I'm really not interested in quick sales. That's why I've kept my business small, so that I can primarily sell direct and have that interaction. When you buy a Sadowsky bass, you get a Sadowsky sound, and that's why I don't offer every pickup or preamp under the sun; it needs to sound like a Sadowsky. I think a builder should have a voice. We



**"I DON'T WANT ANYONE OUT THERE HAVING A SADOWSKY BASS THAT THEY'RE NOT TOTALLY IN LOVE WITH."**

sell my instruments on a seven-day return. I feel a player needs a week: if you're not in love with the instrument after seven days, I want it back. I don't want anyone out there having a Sadowsky bass that they're not totally in love with!"

Roger left quite an impression on those who met him at the show – and looking at a selection of his instruments, it's easy to see why they are so well revered. Over to him for some final words of wisdom: "You're always learning – if you're not constantly learning, then you shouldn't be in the market. I'm still constantly learning and experimenting. I don't seek out artists for endorsements, I don't give away instruments to artists. My whole business has been based on serving working, professional musicians, so I treat everyone the same. I'm proud of our workmanship – but I had a bit of an epiphany in the early 80s that a bass, no matter how well I make it, is still an inanimate object, and there's no inherent satisfaction in that. I realised the satisfaction was in dealing with the person playing the instrument – so I really think the fairy dust is my willingness to engage on a personal level with everyone who buys my instruments. Again, it's not about selling a bass: it's about establishing long term relationships. I really think that's one of the things that sets me apart." ■

Info: [www.sadowsky.com](http://www.sadowsky.com).