

Sadowsky PJ 5-string

by Michael O'Brien



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I know, this magazine is for bassists not brides, but the phrase “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue” seems to describe the Lake Placid Blue Vintage P-J 5-String Bass we borrowed from Sadowsky Guitars, Ltd., for this review. The “P-J” is based on the successful and venerable Vintage 5, but with a new twist on an old idea: a uniquely designed P-style pickup, “the brainchild of Kevin Beller at Seymour Duncan.”

This split pickup is a re-engineered 6-string pickup: the bass side has three pole positions (B, E, and A), but the treble side has only two pole positions (D and G). These two pole positions are set asymmetrically in the pickup’s case. Pickup windings must be symmetrical to provide humcancelling, so the treble side of the pickup presents an ingenious way of accommodating the asymmetry of 5 strings and the need to cancel hum. (The P-J is also available with the split P-style pickup reversed: the bass side is nearer the bridge; the treble side is nearer the neck. This reversed arrangement “provides a tighter B-string sound and improves the ‘pop’ on the G string when the bass is in the combination pickup setting.”

Sadowsky comments that both configurations have been favorably received, and orders are running about 50-50 for each configuration. The use of a universal rout under the pickguard for either configuration makes it relatively painless to reverse the configuration at a later time with the purchase of a new pickguard.)

While dozens of options are available, this P-J has an Alder body, a flat-sawn Maple neck with a Morado fretboard and inlaid ivory-colored Micarta markers, a traditional white pickguard, a Gotoh bridge, Sadowsky strings, Hipshot Ultralite tuners with traditional tuning keys, chrome hardware, and standard-equipment straplocks. The price tag for this configuration is \$3,300.00 (U.S.).

The P-style split pickup is what sets the P-J apart from the Vintage 5; there are no other visible differences. The 5-string P-J has the now fairly standard arrangement of B-E-A-D-G and a 34-inch string length. The nut-width is 1.875 inches (47.625 mm) and the string spacing at the nut is 0.748 inches (19 mm).

The preamp is the Sadowsky active 9-volt design with a single master volume control for both pickups and a pickup-pan control (with center detent). Next comes the passive tone control, which is also the preamp bypass switch; pulling up on this knob bypasses the preamp. (The passive tone control works in both active and passive modes.) Finally, the stacked bass and treble controls each provide 13 dB of boost (flat response is achieved with these controls rolled completely off). The battery is accessible via a rear, flip-top compartment

The P-J arrived in pristine condition thanks to the road-worthy case (standard). The first thing that got my attention was the Lake Placid Blue against the slightly henna hue of the Morado fretboard. (Matching headstocks are an option, and this bass

might look even better, if that's even possible, with a matching Lake Placid Blue headstock!) But oh my, is that finish perfect. There is no "orange-peeling," not a single buffing mark or fingerprint, nor any evidence of over- or under-spray. The fretwork is excellent. Gliding my hands up and down the neck's edges reveals not a single unfinished fret; all are well dressed and solidly seated in the fingerboard with absolutely no gaps. The finish on the headstock and neck was also flawless with a satiny surface, so sweaty stage fingers won't stick and stutter.

The Sadowsky crew believes in bolt-ons and knows how to build them. The P-J's neck joint uses four screws in a slightly asymmetrical arrangement. The neck joint's fit is almost air-tight: even a good solid yank yields no movement. The P-J has a sprung bar that presses down on the strings just above the nut providing downward pressure on the strings as they pass over the nut; this precludes string slippage and improves sustain. The truss rod is accessible below the neck.

Many J-style bass makers require control cavity access via the front control plate, but the Sadowsky builders provide a rear cover that obviates marring the front finish due to a caffeine-induced screwdriver slip. The control cavity is clean, all wiring is neatly soldered and routed, and shielding paint is used inside, as well as inside the cover. And while all of this should seem standard (an assumed minimum) for a bass in this price range, I know there are many of us who have played similarly priced basses that have sorely lacked this attention to workmanship and detail.

The P-J's end-to-end balance is wonderful. Considering this bass weighs approximately nine pounds, it nevertheless hangs at exactly the right angle with no neck-dive, allowing effortless playing without having to support the neck. The curved J-bass body provides a comfortable sitting position, and the ample string spacing offers plenty of room for your fingers.

The set-up is solid right out of the case. While the action is a little low for my aggressive (and some might say "ham-handed") plucking style, there is no noticeable fret noise or buzzing, the intonation is dead-on everywhere, the string tension is relaxed without feeling loose, and it sustains until tomorrow!

I played the P-J through my reference rig: an Aguilar DB-359 and an Acme Low B-2. Considering (but not wishing to again open) the raging argument about 34-inch-scale versus 35-inch-scale B strings, the P-J's 34-inch B string is focused, solid, and passes my personal, albeit less-than-scientific, test: Can the B string be tuned using the 5th-fret's harmonic? The answer is "yes!" I've played way too many 5-strings where this simply wasn't possible. All of the P-J's harmonics ring true. All notes seem to be the same volume

across the entire neck; there are no dead spots.

The pickup-pan control set to the center position provides the "classic" J-style sound: smooth, balanced, and round. Panning toward the J-style pickup accentuates the mids as you would expect. But the "P" is really what the P-J is all about, and while the standard Vintage 5 (with its two J-style pickups) provides an enormous tonal range, the Vintage P-J has the added dimension of sounding uncannily like a P-bass with the pickup-pan control set to the P-style pickup and the additional flexibility afforded by the passive tone control. And, while the PJ sounds even more "P-like" in passive mode, it really shines with active EQ. Having this kind of sonic flexibility in a single bass is a double win!

If you're a slap-and-popper, here's your bass! There's plenty of room between the neck and pickup. And the added harmonic variations the passive tone control affords allow you to sculpt the sound from a slap-happy "scoop" to an in-your-face-and-growling midrange. If you're a finger player, the pickup array affords thumb-rests aplenty, and if you're a pick player, watch out! The biting but always-warm edge could cut your drummer in half.

I've long been amazed by the abilities of the Sadowsky builders to craft basses whose delicate tones could emerge from even the densest wash of ambient sound (er... noise?). The P-J is no exception: it effortlessly expresses its entire sonic spectrum. And while this bass suggests "something old" and "something new," it proves that as much as change is constant and inevitable, subtle change is usually best.