

SADOWSKY Outboard Bass Preamp/DI Pedal

By E.E. Bradman

Since opening his shop in 1979, luthier Roger Sadowsky's setups, repair work, and custom instruments have endeared him to many of New York's busiest bassists. When Sadowsky unveiled his first Outboard Bass Preamp in 1990, passive and vintage bass owners who wanted Roger's trademark warm, crisp tone welcomed it as an alternative to modifying their instruments. Sadowsky based his updated version on feedback from customers who asked for more features.

The original preamp attached to a strap or belt; the VOLUME, BASS, and TREBLE knobs pointed up and out; and there were only two jacks: input and output. Roger has now added a bypass and mute footswitch, a tuner out, an AC adapter jack, an XLR out with a ground-lift switch, a low-battery indicator, and an easy-access battery compartment. Although the new preamp is a rugged floor unit that's built to last, we were surprised by the flimsy feel of the plastic knobs and worried about breaking the plastic battery hatch. Roger responds: "Part of my R&D was to remove the knobs and stand on the pots with my full body weight and to drop the unit from six feet onto a hard floor. No damage occurred. The more recent addition of the larger rubber knobs on the pots provides even greater protection. Out of the 700 units I have sold, only three were defective, and none of those involved the pots or battery compartment."

That Modern Sound

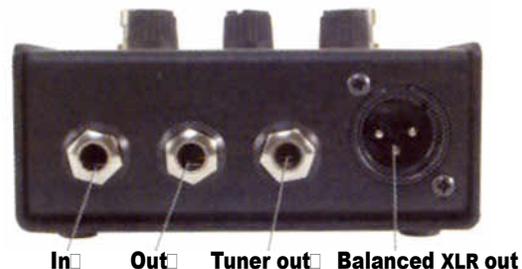
First things first: There is no midrange control, and Sadowsky likes it that way. "In all my prototype evaluations of preamp circuits over the last 20 years, I have never heard a 3-band EQ that sounded, to my ear, as good as a 2-band—even with the midrange set flat or bypassed," says Roger, who goes on to assert that "a midrange control can make a bass sound worse, especially out in the house or on tape, as opposed to in the player's monitor."

Because Roger built the unit with vintage basses in mind, I put a stock '62 Fender Jazz

through the Sadowsky and into our Hafler/Demeter setup with a Hartke 4200 4x10. I started by keeping the preamp's boost-only tone controls off and setting the volume so my level stayed consistent whether the preamp was on or off. Turning the unit on, I eased the volume up, and the Sadowsky gave me a clean, boosted signal with no detectable coloration. I gradually dialed in meaty lows and polite highs, and the preamp gave warmer, defined clarity to the '62's classic Fender tone. (A stock, flatwound-strung 1960 Fender Precision, however, benefited less.)

In a 12-piece R&B band, one staffer used the Sadowsky as a tone-shaping DI. At a small jazz club, a medium-size bar, and a 5,000-square-foot venue, he used the preamp to even out effect-pedal volume changes and add booty to an active Fender Jazz. The unit performed well as a DI, and the staffer appreciated having a mute (though he did mistakenly step on both the ON/OFF and MUTE controls at the same time). I also dug the Sadowsky's wide tone controls with two other basses: It warmed up a bright-sounding Ernie Ball/Music Man StingRay and a piezo-equipped Big Kydd electric upright. Those who crave "modern" bass tone—deep, fat 40Hz bottom and sweet, clear 4kHz top—will find plenty to love here.

The Sadowsky isn't cheap, but it is priced similarly to other outboard bass preamp/DIs. The unit is stacked with useful features, and most important, it offers subtle control of passive or active tone with minimal coloration in ON/OFF mode. If you're a dictator when it comes to tone management, the Sadowsky deserves your attention. **BP**



TECH SPECS

Dimensions:
4-1/2" x 4-1/2" x 2-1/4"
Weight (without battery):
1 lb, 8 oz
Made in: U.S.A.
List price: \$239; optional regulated AC power supply, \$20
Warranty: One year parts and labor
www.sadowsky.com
(212) 586-3960

Sadowsky Outboard Bass Preamp/DI

List price: \$239

Score 1 2 3 4 5

Construction: ●●●●●

Ease of Use: ●●●●●

Sound: ●●●●●

Electronics: ●●●●●

Value: ●●●●●

Pros: Tasteful enhancement, modern sound.

Cons: Built tough, but could be tougher.