

roger sadowsky

From a small shop in Manhattan come the Sadowsky basses. On a glance, the basses look like a Fender Jazz, but a closer inspection reveals the distinctiveness that has attracted Will Lee, John Patitucci, Marcus Miller, Oscar Cartaya, and many others to use them. I spoke with Roger in his cozy shop and got his story, and answers to some of the questions bassists ask. —Dave Freeman

What is your business philosophy?

I've never tried to take a competitive attitude toward anyone else doing essentially what I'm doing. There's plenty of work out there for all of us. There's no need to get down into a competitive head, it's totally unnecessary.

Why do you build Fender style instruments?

I started as an acoustic guitar maker in '72 for a couple of years, then I concentrated on repair work for the next five in Philadelphia. Then, I started my own business in New York in '79. I decided to build my own instruments around '80 or '81. The first approach is to want to design a completely original instrument. But, after really looking at what my market was, and what my clients' needs were, which at that time was the hardcore New York studio scene, I realized that New York was totally a Fender town for guitars and basses. The overwhelming majority of my clients played Fender basses. There was also strong pressure from the engineers to see Fender instruments when a guy came into a session. There was a lot of jingle work being done at that time, which was before synths destroyed the jingle business for the players. The engineers didn't want to mess around with getting a sound out of a bass that they weren't familiar with, they wanted to see a Jazz or a Precision bass, anything else, they weren't interested. Then there's the aspect of the players themselves, they tended to be pretty conservative. There was a very strong resistance to an instrument that they weren't familiar with. So given all those considerations, I decided I would gain acceptance with my instruments much quicker if I built a Fender styled instrument.

What's special about your design?

Essentially it's a Jazz bass styled instrument with the body a little smaller all the way around than a Fender. I set out to build a lighter weight instrument with a little bit smaller sleeker body, with my preamp standard, and basically a Jazz bass size neck.

What is your approach to building your basses?

My premise is that the most important factor is the acoustic quality of the wood. The wood is more important than the pickups and it's more important than the preamp. If the wood is there and the resonance is there, no matter what pickups you put into



Dave Freeman

Roger at his shop in New York

it, the instrument will sound good. You take a mediocre instrument, I don't care what you put in it, it's always going to be a mediocre instrument. The wood is first, that's my foundation. The woods I build with reflect that.

Anything special about the woods you use?

We build an alder body that we primarily pair with a rosewood neck which is my 'L Series' style bass. We build a Swamp Ash body with a maple neck which is more or less my Marcus Miller model. It's punchier and brighter than the alder and rosewood combination. Our top of the line is a maple top on an ash body which is what Will Lee and John Patitucci play. Tonally, I don't find them significantly different from the solid

ash, but it's the beauty of the fancy maple that makes it aesthetically a very different instrument. I'll put a maple neck on an alder body or a rosewood neck on an ash body, if the customer wants it.

There are players that would like to have your preamp put in their basses. Why do you insist on having basses shipped to you for the installation, rather than having a technician do the job where the bassists live?

I could probably deal with a qualified technician doing it. What I don't want is people doing it themselves or a technician I don't know. One of the factors is proper shielding. It makes no sense to me to put a preamp in without properly shielding the instrument. The other thing is RF control. As soon as you put an active circuit in an instrument, you open yourself up to RF interference. You'd be amazed at what you can get from your amplifier once you plug in a bass that has an active circuit. I've spent literally a dozen years trying to nail how to control RF, and I've come up with a few key aspects to installing active stuff that really makes a difference. The bottom line is if someone else installs the preamp onboard, and has any problem whatsoever, their first reaction is going to be to blame the preamp rather than the person that installed it. So, that's why I came out with the Outboard Preamp, and that makes it available to everybody who wants it. It's not that difficult to send your bass here if you do need it installed. That way there are no problems. I'm not worried about the preamp functioning properly, but I'm really worried about it being installed properly. It's more than just hooking

up the wires to the right pots.

Is your Outboard Preamp identical to the installed preamp?

It's identical to what's inside my basses, the exact same circuit.

Can it be used with any bass?

I've got quite a few upright players using it now. Bob Cranshaw has been using it and I sent one out to Ron Carter, and he's experimenting with it now. The reaction so far of every upright player that has used it is very favourable.

How about with active electronic basses?

It does work extremely well with EMG's. I think it warms EMG's up a lot. I have so many clients who insisted they hated EMG's until they heard them with my preamp. Then they loved them.

Why does it look so similar to the Fishman?

I have contracted Fishman to manufacture my preamp. I wanted my preamp to be made in the United States just from a quality point of view. My feeling was I knew the quality coming out of Fishman and that would be a good place to do it. It seemed obvious to go with that to control costs since the Fishman box is virtually what I would have designed anyway. It was cheaper to use what they had already been going with.

How does your preamp differ from the Fishman preamp?

The circuit inside my box is totally different and it was designed by us. It was designed by Alex Aguilar who is my electronics consultant and myself. We spent about a year researching a dozen different circuits that Alex came up with, the majority of which were OP amp circuits, and that's Fishman's circuit too. I found myself listening to all these OP amp circuits and the sound just wasn't right. So, I had Alex design a FET circuit. Basically, FET's are to OP's what tubes are to transistors. The FET circuit produced a much warmer sound. We also pushed up the peak for the highs, higher in the FET circuit, than in the OP amp circuit.

Why no mid boost?

We did a lot of experimenting with whether or not we should have a midrange boost. Everytime I tried mid boosts ranging anywhere from 250Hz to 750Hz, I felt all it did was muddy up the sound of the instrument. As you boost the treble and the bass on our preamp, it attenuates the mid at about 300Hz. That's where there's no overlap between the low and the treble bands. Even though you're boosting bottom, because you're attenuating the mids, the bottom gets tighter rather than boomier. All a midrange boost does is counteract the sound that I've been known for, for many years. So, that's why there's no midrange boost. My feeling is that anyone who needs extra mids can control that on their amp, or with an external EQ device. I could have put more bells and whistles on the preamp, but I think its value lies in its simplicity, and it gets the right sound.

Some instrument manufacturers give away basses for promotion. What's your policy?

Honestly, I've only given away two instruments in my life. One was to Will Lee and one was to Marcus Miller. My endorsers are clients who want to support what I'm doing. Nobody endorses me because I've given them a deal. What I give them is a level of service and attention that they just can't get from any manufacturer. I give them absolute full service on the instruments, and they'll get same day service from me when they're

in town. All the service and maintenance is on me, and the little things. Darryl Jones lives in Chicago and there are times when he'll come to New York for a few days, and somebody will ask him to do a date, and if he doesn't have his bass with him, I'll lend him a bass.

I've been with Will and Marcus for such a long time and their exposure level for me is so high, I've given them gifts of a bass each as a way of saying thank you for all their support. Marcus has four or five of my instruments and he still loves his old Fender, the first bass of his that I worked on back in '79. I put the preamp in and did a fret job. That bass is like an old girlfriend to Marcus and no matter how many of my basses he has, he'll never give that bass up. I don't have a problem with that, I understand those types of emotional attachments.

The users of your basses seem to be primarily four string players...

I would say ninety percent of my clientele are still four string players. A large percentage of them have a five string because there are times they get called for a recording session, and the producer or the arranger tells them to bring a five string. So for professional reasons they have to have a five string. Still, ninety percent of them consider the four string their main axe. I think there's a couple of reasons for it. What I've noticed in researching my own five string is when you put a five string in a bass players hand, they don't relate to it as a four string with a lower register. They relate to it as a soloing instrument as opposed to a rhythm instrument. Part of it is because the slap isn't the same on a five string as a four. I think the presence of the fifth string alters the way they attack the fourth string. They just don't nail the string on the five because they're avoiding hitting the fifth string. Subtle things like that may contribute to this sense that they can never get their E string to sound the same on a five as on a four. Regardless of the reasons, I see when they've got a five string in their hand, they're thinking soloing and when they've got a four string, they're thinking rhythm section.

What do you want bassists to know about you and your shop?

Although my basses have done well over the last few years, I still don't see myself as a manufacturer. I'm still a very service and client orientated operation. If I had to move my operation to where manufacturing space was cheap, so I could sell more instruments, I would probably not do it. For me, the importance is the one-on-one contact with the players and that's why I'm located where I am, paying the kind of overhead I am. I have to be where the players are, I think that's the most important thing. I don't sell my instruments to dealers because I don't produce enough to do that, and my overhead doesn't permit me to give the necessary discount to the dealer. I think the kind of feedback that I get on a one-to-one basis from working with the Will's, the Marcus's, the Darryl's, and the Patitucci's—it's out of that relationship that the instrument refines itself to where it is. It's a willingness to learn all the time from the players. Ultimately the players are always right. It's never a matter of me trying to impose what I think a good bass is on somebody else. It's a constant process of me listening to what the players want and need, and trying to give it to them. I think that's incredibly essential to what we do here, and to what I'm trying to put out there as our work.