



Roger Sadowsky Crafts Frank Vignola Archtop

An Affordable Tool for Working Guitarists To Use on Stage, in Studio

For guitar maker Roger Sadowsky, it has always been all about the player, and he sees his creations simply as tools for musicians to utilize in expressing their art. Planting his roots in the heart of New York's active music scene, Sadowsky has surrounded himself with some of the world's top players, and his close relationships with those musicians has been a driving force in refining his craft. Sadowsky first entered the archtop market with the introduction of the Jim Hall model in 2003 and has since expanded the line to include numerous offerings. The newest member of his jazz guitar family is the Frank Vignola Signature Model, a fully hollow archtop featuring a slimmed-down body and dual pickup configuration.

Sadowsky started his luthier career in 1972, building flat-top acoustics under the guidance of Augie LoPrinzi. He soon moved into performing restoration and repairs for many of New York's top studio players. "Having to meet the needs of players of this level really helped me raise the bar in what I do," he said. He founded Sadowsky Guitars in 1979, initially offering solid-body electric guitars and basses and later expanding into archtops.

Sadowsky had been servicing Hall's guitars since 1982, and, as the archtop market really began to take off, he became frustrated with the high prices of both the vintage and new guitars on the market. "A lot of these instruments were 10 to 15 thousand dollars, and I just didn't know any gigging musicians who could afford that," he said.

With a clear vision of what he wanted, Sadowsky worked with luthier Dana Bourgeois to design his first archtop. Focusing on creating an affordable instrument that would meet the needs of gigging musicians, the decision was made to use laminate wood in the construction. After an extensive search, Sadowsky located a five-ply maple laminate in Japan that met his criteria. He needed it to be extremely light and capable of offering a decent level of acoustic response while also providing feedback resistance when amplified. This special laminate is used throughout the entire Sadowsky archtop line. In addition to supplying the laminate, the Japanese factory also manufactures the guitar bodies under the close supervision of Sadowsky's production liaison. With his materials and manufacturer in place, he began to design his first signature archtop, the Jim Hall model, followed by the Jimmy Bruno, and the Frank Vignola signature guitars. The archtop line also includes the Semi-Hollow and the SS-15.

The Frank Vignola signature model came about due to a backstage

meeting at the New York club Birdland between Vignola and Sadowsky. Vignola was hosting his regular "Guitar Night" , and Sadowsky mentioned that he had just come out with a two-pickup version of his SS-15 model. Vignola felt he needed a guitar that could produce more volume when playing against bass and drums, and after auditioning the guitar, "Frank absolutely fell in love with it," Sadowsky said.

Sadowsky's archtops follow a logical evolution beginning with the 16-inch-wide, 2¼-inch-deep Jim Hall model, which gave birth to the slightly smaller-bodied Jimmy Bruno model, followed by the thin-bodied Semi-Hollow, the SS-15. The Frank Vignola is essentially a two-pickup version of the SS-15 with an additional pickup in the bridge position.

Sadowsky is extremely selective when it comes to his signature guitars and does not actively solicit artists. In fact, there are only three artist signature models within his current archtop line. He seems to let the artist come to his guitars rather than the other way around. The Vignola model evolved from the guitarist's love of the two-pickup SS-15. Interestingly, he asked for no modifications from Sadowsky's original design. "I offered to dial the guitar in to Frank's specifications, but he said, 'No, the guitar is perfect — you nailed it,'" Sadowsky remembered.

As with other Sadowsky guitars, the Vignola model is constructed in Japan, but all hardware, fretwork and setup are done in the U.S. by Sadowsky, who said that a minimum of 20 hours goes into each instrument once it arrives from the factory. The guitar has a 15-inch bout and 1¼-inch body depth but remains fully hollow with no center block and sports a floating ebony bridge and suspended archtop tailpiece. The body is constructed from Sadowsky's five-ply maple laminate and the neck is mahogany. The two pickups are stock DiMarzio 36th Anniversary PAFs, "one of the finest pickups I've ever worked with," Sadowsky said. He has consistently utilized body-mounted pickups as opposed to floating in order to provide the player easier access to swapping them out.

"I want my guitars to be player-friendly, and being able to put a different pickup in is part of being player-friendly," he said.

Sadowsky sees the Frank Vignola Signature model as a tool for musicians to use, and he wanted it to be both affordable and functional. Priced at \$6,500 with a hardshell case, it is true workingman's instrument.

—Keith Baumann

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