

# Roger Sadowsky

By Gio Maletti

Mention the name Roger Sadowsky to your average guitar player, and you'll likely elicit a "Roger Who?" But that name is spoken in almost reverent tones amongst working musicians. Sadowsky has built this reputation by giving the modern guitarist and bassist what he needs - a no-nonsense, versatile, and reliable electric guitar that performs great and sounds even better. Of course, these are claims made by every guitar company in existence; but Sadowsky Guitars is one of very few companies that can actually back it up.

Of course, the price of admission isn't cheap. A Sadowsky Guitar is dearly bought. But once you've bought that guitar, there's no going back. In fact, it's not uncommon to hear of guitarists who've replaced an entire collection with a handful of Sadowskys.

It's hard to imagine that 'long hair, beards, and macramé blankets' were the genesis of these outstanding instruments, but there you have it. It wasn't until his junior year at college that Roger Sadowsky even developed an interest in guitars. In 1965 he attended a folk festival, and it changed his life. Shortly thereafter he got his first guitar, a \$40 Aria

nylon string, and had fate not intervened, he probably would have joined thousands of others from that era; reminiscing and strumming chords on a Saturday afternoon.

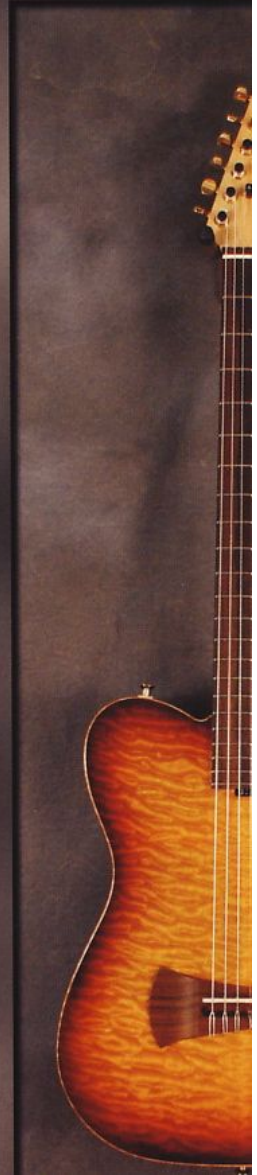
Luckily for his many devotees, the young Mr. Sadowsky was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his chosen pursuit of psychobiology. The more miserable he became, the more he played his guitar. Eventually he obtained a Martin, and devoted himself to serious learning and study of the instrument. About this time he began tinkering with his own guitars; making saddles for them and setting them up. Having become obsessed with the instrument, he spent a year writing to guitar makers all over the world asking for an apprenticeship - to no avail. In the spring of '72 he quit graduate school to take a job at Rondo Music in Union, New Jersey. One of the lines Rondo sold was Lo Prinzi, a small line of hand-made acoustics, and by fall he was working there as an apprentice. In 1979, he set up his own shop in midtown Manhattan, having spent the previous decade "perfecting my repair chops". And the rest, as they say, is history.

*Model 4405 - Vintage Strat*

*Model 4499 - Vintage Reverse P/J 5-String*

*Model 4614 - Standard 5-String*

*Model 4514 - Elec*





**TCG:** Initially you worked on flat-top acoustics. How did you progress from there to the instruments you make now?

**RS:** It was extremely difficult to sell a handmade acoustic guitar back then. The only company I remember even attempting to sell flat-tops outside of Guild, Martin and Fender was a company called Fylde. There was very little going on. Most of my clients were studio guys in New York; they had their acoustics, but they were primarily interested in electric guitars. So that's what I turned my attention to.

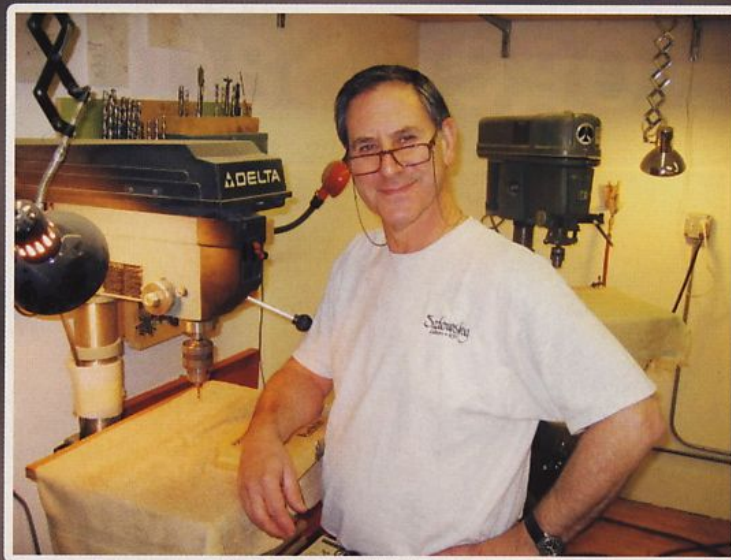
**TCG:** Exactly what repair chops were you honing during the 70's?

**RS:** I did everything. What I specialized in when I started my shop in New York was customizing and upgrading instruments. The clients I was dealing with all had pretty good instruments, and what they wanted me to do was take them to another level. That meant shielding work and hum canceling electronics to minimize noise, live and in the studio. It meant first-class fretwork. I made my reputation as a repairman on my fretwork. I did tons of re-frets. I was one of the first guys to start installing active electronics in basses. The second preamp I installed in a bass was for Marcus Miller, in 1980.

**TCG:** Are there any lessons you learned building and repairing flat-tops that you apply to the instruments you make now?

**RS:** I decided during that time that I never wanted to accept second best, that I would do it until I was proud of it. I would do my work as if my life depended on it, and that was a very valuable lesson for me. I set extremely high standards for myself in my work, and in my attitude towards customer service; things like keeping my word so people would know they could rely on me.

On another level, I approached building an electric guitar with



*A man and his machine: Roger Sadowsky at the drill press. (Photo / G. Maletti)*

the perspective of an acoustic builder; I believed the wood was the most important element in the sound of an electric guitar. I am to this day convinced that solid body instruments are first and foremost acoustic guitars. As I customized more of the nice Fenders and Gibsons from the fifties and sixties, I noticed that regardless of the

*Model 4598 - 24-Fret 5-String*



*Jimmy Bruno Model in Natural*

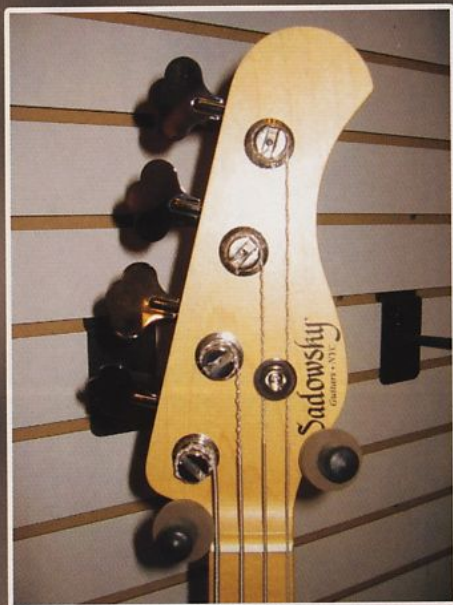


*Jim Hall Archtop*





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*The famous Sadowsky headstock*

work I did to them, the instruments that were lighter and more resonant acoustically were always the instruments that sounded better amplified. So by '82, while everyone was building with really dense hardwoods, using brass bridges and nuts to try improve sustain, I was trying to build my guitars as light as possible.

**TCG:** Your instruments offer numerous refinements on Fender-styled designs. Why did you take this approach?

**RS:** There were two reasons. My clients were looking for versatility; they didn't want to take a Strat and a Les Paul to the gig. So they'd ask me to put single coils into a Les Paul or 335, and humbuckers into a Strat or Tele. I found that putting humbuckers with a coil split into a Fender style guitar produced a more usable versatility, because of their longer scale length and maple necks. I found you just couldn't get a good single-coil sound out of a shorter scale length. The other reason is that the majority of the work in those days was jingle work. A jingle session lasted 45 minutes; you came in, played your guitar and left. It was really fast, and engineers didn't want to see a guitarist or bassist walk in with an instrument they weren't familiar with, because they didn't want to spend ten or fifteen minutes dialing in a good sound for your guitar. They knew how to get a good sound out of a Gibson and how to get a good sound out of a Fender. If you walked in with anything else, the chances were you wouldn't be asked back.

**TCG:** What differentiates your instruments from those made by builders with a similar ethic, i.e. John Suhr or Tom Anderson?

**RS:** I have the highest respect for a lot of my

colleagues. We're a small community, so we often share information, resources and suppliers. We all have people who think we make the best instruments on the planet, and it's perfect that way!

I think my guitars are alone in their active circuitry. It's a mid and gain boost that is completely bypassable, so it's tonally invisible when you don't want it. The majority of my customers find it very useful.

**TCG:** What differentiates your Standard, Vintage, and Ultra Vintage series?

**RS:** Vintage refers to instruments that we build traditionally, with a pickguard. Standard refers to instruments without a pickguard. The controls are rear mounted, through the wood, and there's no pickguard or control plate on the front. Apart from that, they're the same. Ultra Vintage is something we began several years ago, closer in looks and spec to a classic 50's or

*Jim Hall Model*



*A Bruno model ready for completion.*

60's Fender instrument. Our Standard and Vintage series bodies are slightly smaller than a comparable Fender; an Ultra Vintage has a full size body. The fingerboards on the Ultra Vintage are slightly more curved than on the other series, with a 9' radius as opposed to 12'. This is still flatter than a vintage Fender spec, so it's more playable while simulating the feel. On this series we offer nitrocellulose as an option on the body, Brazilian rosewood fingerboards, and true single coil pickups. It's still a Sadowsky, but it offers the vibe of a more classic Fender.

**TCG:** Tell us about your pickups.

**RS:** They're custom wound for us by DiMarzio and Seymour Duncan. 95 percent of the instruments we build leave the shop with hum-cancelling pickups, because when you're working in environments like dinner theatres, stages, orchestra pits and clubs, a quiet instrument is much more important than the minimal difference in tone between these units and true single coils.

**TCG:** Your Metro bass line is expanding. What exactly is coming up?

**RS:** We've had a lot of requests for a P and a PJ bass, and guitars. We're looking at setting up a larger shop in Japan before we introduce anything new, but I'd like to do a couple of set neck guitar models -one, more Strat like with a longer scale, and the other a shorter scale instrument more like a Gibson. The Metro lines of instruments are the only Sadowskys available through our dealership network. The New York City instruments are only sold direct.

**TCG:** What sets the NYC and Metro lines apart?

**RS:** The Metro line is made in Japan and represents our most basic instruments, but aside from that they're almost identical. They're made with the same wood, pickups and hardware. The only constructional difference between the two is that the NYC bodies are chambered, and they have graphite reinforcement in the neck to help reduce dead spots.

**TCG:** How did your signature archtop series come about?

**RS:** I had been maintaining Jim Hall's D'Aquisto for some time. It was an all



laminated guitar based on his ES-175, and he was becoming increasingly concerned about the amount of punishment it was taking on the road. So when I asked if I could build him a laminated archtop he said yes, because he didn't want to travel with his D'Aquisto and he wanted a quality guitar his students could afford. I built a couple of variations based on his guitar, and when I was pleased with one I gave it to him. Apparently he hasn't played anything else since, and that was a real validation for me.

So after that I really wasn't looking to do anything else, but then Jim premiered that guitar at the 2004 World Guitar Congress in Maryland, and Jimmy Bruno came by my booth to ask if he could borrow one for a gig. I ended up designing a guitar for him, and that became the Jimmy Bruno model, which is a slightly smaller guitar with a mahogany neck.

My semi-hollow should be out soon. That'll be the same size body as the Bruno but only one and three quarters of an inch deep, with a spruce center block, two humbuckers and a tune-o-matic with stop tailpiece.

**TCG:** You use nitro-cellulose on your arch tops, and a polyester based paint on your solid-bodies. Why?

**RS:** There's something about the aesthetic of nitro-cellulose as it sinks back into the wood over time that is, to me, essential on an archtop guitar. We do use a polyester on our solid bodies, it's much more durable. The key to any finish is to keep it as thin as possible; if it looks like a bar-top or coffee table, it's got too much finish on it. All of our necks are finished in nitro, because I don't like the feel of poly on the neck.

**TCG:** Do you ever shim your neck joints?

**RS:** Yeah; you don't want to shim unless it's absolutely necessary, but I've got no problem using a shim as an adjustment tool on a bolt-on neck. We never use anything bigger than a 20,000th of an inch. Let me just add that in twenty years, I've never had a customer complain that a shim changed their sound.

**TCG:** You've just launched the SA 200 bass amp. Any plans for a guitar amp?

**RS:** I do. We've just launched a new division, so to speak, called Sadowsky Audio. And it's basically going to be a series of collaboration



*An assortment of Sadowsky hollowbody, solidbody guitars and basses in the factory showroom.*

projects, with amp makers I respect a great deal; taking my ideas to them and having them design and build amps for me. The first project was the SA 200, which I did with Dolf Koch, of Koch Amplification in Holland. The cabinets are made for me by Jim Bergantino up in Boston.

**TCG:** Anything else new or upcoming?

**RS:** We're working on a two channel version of my Bass D.I box; one channel will have my standard preamp and the other will have a new three-band circuit with cut and boost, which will enable the player to optimize each channel for a different instrument, say an upright and electric bass. I'm also working on a high-quality headphone practice amp. So there's a bunch of things happening on the Sadowsky Audio end of things.

**TCG:** What do you consider to be the milestones of your career?

**RS:** In the mid-eighties I got to see Paul Simon and Bruce Springsteen side by side on stage in Madison Square Garden, both playing my guitars. That was really the moment when I felt I had achieved my goals professionally.

**TCG:** You've had many notable clients. Who have you most enjoyed working for?

**RS:** The issue with celebrity clients is that they tend to be the least pleasurable to work for. A lot of the time you're not dealing with them, you're dealing with their roadies, or techs. That's number one. And many times, you as a builder are no different to them than the guy they hire to fix their sink or do carpentry round the house. They do make great PR, but I'm really much happier working with everyday musicians. Backstage passes are just not what they're cracked up to be, man. ■



*Some solid bass bodies ready for assembly and finish.*



*The new Sadowsky bass amp*