



## Influences

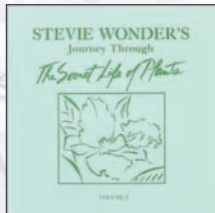
'The Beatles have always been my main spark,' says Will, who performs their music on a regular basis with his Beatles tribute band, The Fab Faux. 'Even though I grew up in a musical family – my mom was a singer, my dad a pianist and well-known educator – it wasn't enough to turn an undisciplined lazy kid into a musician. But seeing The Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show changed everything about me.'

Paul McCartney's playing was an integral part of Lee's bass education. 'It's kind of an endless fascination with learning McCartney's parts,' he explains. 'Even in songs as simple as 'Honey Pie' or 'When I'm 64,' with that old school charm, Paul plays extremely tasteful and supportive lines. He goes all the way from being melodic to almost unnoticeable, you know, just right for the song.'

Will's formal musical education was at the University of Miami, where he studied French horn for a year and then switched to a bass major. After classes he would work on bass fundamentals, listening not only to The Beatles, but also artists like Stevie Wonder, Jimi Hendrix, Steve Miller, The Rascals, Motown, and Sly & the Family Stone, and put it all into practice, six sets a night, gigging with various local bands. Today he continues to draw inspiration from his bass peers. 'I continually listen to everybody and get my ass kicked by doing so. You've got the Victor Wootens of this world out there, and all these other great influences that you can really get a lot of inspiration from. Oteil Burbridge – I'm fascinated by his ability on the 6-string bass and his beautiful chordal stuff. I continue to be inspired by Chuck Rainey even after all these years... Rocco Prestia, Marcus Miller, cats who play with a pick, cats who don't, you know...just everybody.'

# Take Five: Will Lee

**Bass veteran Will Lee** is seen and heard by millions of Americans every weeknight on *The Late Show With David Letterman*, where he performs with the CBS Orchestra. As one of New York's first-call studio bassists, Lee's discography spans four decades and reads like a *Who's Who?* of pop and contemporary jazz, from Barry Manilow to George Benson. We reveal the top five recordings that have influenced his career.



### Stevie Wonder:

#### *The Secret Life Of Plants*

'I always felt this was a sleeper. It has a melodic theme that runs throughout the album that's cleverly placed among the songs. It really is about plants! The melodies are haunting.'



### The Beatles

#### *Revolver*

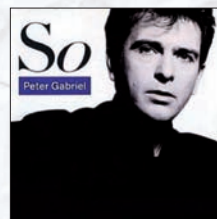
'Their first real plunge into psychedelia. This album – bridged from 'Pop Land' into 'Full Experimentation Land' by the previous album *Rubber Soul* – was the one where artistic control was really given to the creators of the songs, and they started to go to town in the studio.'



### Sting:

#### *Nothing Like The Sun*

'Nothing says humanity, evolution, and just plain class like the talents of Sting and the production on this CD. There is serious musicianship from all on this project and production to die for. It's a constant source of inspiration for me.'



### Peter Gabriel:

#### *So*

'Ditto the above. Peter Gabriel is at the top of the food chain!'



### Miles Davis

#### *Four & More*

'Miles along with George Coleman on tenor sax, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams, this album defines ensemble playing and soloing in a live concert like no other.'

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to read about the new Sadowsky Will Lee Model in an exclusive interview with renowned luthier Roger Sadowsky.





# Roger Sadowsky: Carving Out A Legacy In New York

Interview by Rick Suchow



in his Brooklyn workshop for the low down on the most recent addition to the Sadowsky arsenal, the Will Lee Model.

## Q: How did the idea develop for the Will Lee Model?

There were a few things that Will was looking for when we started talking about doing something special for him. I've always had to narrow down his necks a little bit at the nut because he likes a narrower feel. Some of the old Fenders are significantly undersized and Will's had enough of those basses pass through his hands to know that he was comfortable on them, so we took the nut down from 1.52 inches to 1.45. We also started off with a 24-fret neck, but when you do 24 frets with J-bass pickups in normal locations, the space between the end of the neck and the pickup is very limited, especially after adding a bell cover. Will had absolutely no room to slap, so we moved back to 22 frets as a

compromise, since a traditional J-bass has 20 frets.

Another thing Will was looking for, which he's always asked me about over the years, was a little bit more midrange punch. In the past we had tried all different kinds of pickup winds, but they never gave him what he wanted, so a couple of years ago we just sat down with an EQ and found that the spot Will

was most responding to was a little boost at about 500 Hz. Now I've always approached my preamp as a 2-band, I've never done a 3-band, and one of the complications with an FET circuit, which is what our preamp is, is that anything you do to change any part of the frequency affects everything else. You can't boost treble, bass, or mids totally independently, but it sounds great. When we were prototyping with Will on a 3-band circuit he would say that he liked what the midrange does but the bass or treble didn't sound as good as it used to. So what we basically had to do was stay with our existing preamp and piggyback a separate midrange circuit on top of it so that we didn't change the sound of the original circuit.

FET's sound great, they're the transistor equivalent of tubes, as opposed to op-amps, which are more solid state, hi-fi sounding. I've had dozens of op-amp prototype circuits that have separate midrange controls and





I think players will want to take the midrange boost out of the equation when playing slap and funk, and engage the mids when they're playing finger style.

Will didn't want too many bells and whistles on the bass, he really only wanted four knobs. We compromised with one of them being stacked, so technically it's five. We use an old Fender style tone control. I don't like an active cut control because they're too narrow, I think a vintage style passive tone control works much better than an active treble cut.

**Q: Is this the first artist model that you've done?**

Yes, absolutely. I've tended to avoid signature models, I think if you do too many it dilutes the significance of it. But if I have to look to anybody that I've had a continual 30-year relationship with it's Will, and I think he really personifies the kind of musician that we're known for catering for. I think the players people associate with Sadowsky are the groove players, not the solo bass players, and Will personifies the kind of working, professional musician that we've always worked with.

**Q: What are your thoughts on thru-body stringing?**

I don't think it makes any difference whatsoever, and I think that it just makes buying strings complicated. There are people who think that it either increases sustain or changes string tension, but I've



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done comparisons with players, and everyone that I've R&D'd with on that says there's no difference. And there's enough instruments out today that have bridges you can string either way, where it's easy to make an empirical test of that.

**Q: Regarding pickup placement, have you experimented with various pickup locations?**

We offer both Fender 60's and 70's locations, but 60's is our standard. In the 70's Fender moved the

bridge pickup closer to the bridge, ironically not for tone but for cosmetic reasons. With the 60's location, when they put that silver ash-tray Fender bridge cover on, the pickup stuck out in front of the cover. Someone at Fender decided it would look better if the pickup was under the cover.

**Q: Regardless of how it sounded?**

Exactly. So they moved the pickup so that it would fit under the ashtray, and what that does is when

they never sound as good to me as our basic 2-band FET circuit.

**Q: The Will Lee Model has a choice of mid boost at either 500 or 800 Hz?**

Right, I wanted it to be a little more versatile than just what Will was listening for, so we put a switch on the circuit that enables you to select between 500 and 800 Hz, as well as wide or narrow Q (the width of the bell curve of that frequency). Will likes 500 wide, but the bass is designed so you can spend a little time with it, open up the back plate and change the settings to how you want, and experiment a little. Find out what works best for you, and then set it and forget it. In general



the bridge pickup is soloed the tone gets a bit more mid-range sounding due to its location. And there are definitely people who have come to prefer that.

**Q: What kind of feedback from bass players has helped you improve your design?**

Well, it's been a constant process. My early years in New York were spent doing repairs and modifications, and throughout the late 70's and early 80's the bulk of my clients were everyday working session guys in New York doing jingles and record dates, and the touring musicians as well. A lot of the early feedback I got that required a lot of attention was hum control. Their instruments didn't employ any kind of shielding, and there were very few hum-canceling pickup designs in terms of single coil style pickups, so I became really good at shielding electronics, reducing extraneous noise from stage lighting, and all of that stuff. I was the only guy in New York who had a machine that could re-magnetize pickups and reverse polarities. I already had a reputation for fastidious fretwork and fingerboard trueing, so in a nutshell the bulk of my work was making instruments play as well as possible, and getting them to function electronically as well as possible.

**"I don't create new models just for cosmetic reasons, for a groovy retro-look or something like that."**

**Q: Over the years have you gone through any changes as far as what you want to hear in a bass?**

Good question... no, not a lot. I've always experimented with stuff but how do you break out of the Fender paradigm and still come up with something that's worthwhile? I've been making 5-strings with dual coil humbucking style soapbars for a long time, and not long ago I experimented with a switch that enabled the dual coils to be played in parallel, series, or single coil. The best of the three was always single coil, so why give people two extra sounds if they don't sound as good? I've never wanted bells and whistles if they didn't bring something to the table. I can make basses that make 30 different sounds, but if only two of them are good why bother with the other 28? So that's

always been my approach. Two construction things that we've done in the last eight years, and I've been very pleased with, is that we now chamber all of our bodies. I started having some issues with my wood suppliers about ten years ago, I felt the woods were starting to come in heavier than they ever had, especially alder. We were dealing with mills that were selecting lightweight swamp ash for us, but all of a sudden the alder instruments were getting way too heavy, and then before long the ashes were too. There wasn't enough wood for the mills to be able to put lighter stuff aside for people who wanted it, so I began to chamber the bodies.

At about that same time I also took steps to address dead spot issues. On 4-string Fender style bolt-on neck instruments especially, you have a tendency to get dead spots. Typically they're on the 7th fret of the G-string, but can also be on the 6th or 8th fret. Anybody who's played Fenders knows about it, it's always been there, and some basses have it more than others. So we began to add two strips of graphite in the neck and thickened up our headstock. I didn't do it for stability problems, I've never had stability issues with my necks, but just so that I could go to bed at night knowing I've done everything I can to reduce dead spots.

All of my long-term clients who've played our newer basses with the graphite, thicker headstock and chambered bodies have said that the basses never sounded better. And they're lighter as a result. I've always tried to build lightweight instruments; I've never felt that really heavy guitars or basses contributed much tonally. I know there are some people who still think that a 12-pound instrument has something to offer, but it's just not a weight range I'm interested in building. So we've gotten our instruments consistently lighter, I'd say our basses now weigh from 7 1/2 lbs to 8 3/4 pounds, and that's a weight range I'm very happy with. Building instruments out of lighter weight resonant woods has always been central to what I do.

**Q: What happens to wood as it ages, and how does aging affect its sound?**

Basically, any residual moisture in the wood gets to dissipate, but I don't think that's what affects the tone of an instrument. If you were to take an instrument made 30 years ago and put it in a time capsule,



## In The Groove

We asked Will Lee about his new Sadowsky signature model

'Working with Roger is a godsend. I kind of tell him in grunts and squawks what I like or dislike about a bass and he's able to translate those utterings into technical marvels. What I knew I wanted was a neck with more frets, a midrange boost that would allow the instrument to "cut through" the band, especially in a live situation, and finally, a slightly thinner neck than previous Sadowsky models had offered. Roger was able to accomplish those things and I'm a happy bassist!'

and then take it out, it's going to sound like a new instrument. I can't prove this scientifically, but I think everyone I know who builds is in agreement that the more an instrument is played and the more the wood vibrates and resonates, the more it opens up and the better it sounds. I've heard acoustic guitars that hadn't been played in 30 years that sounded like crap, but after being played for a month just opened up incredibly. So I think it's more a matter of being played than just aging by time.

**Q: What's next on the horizon for Sadowsky basses?**

We're always tweaking. One of the things that being a smaller builder

allows me is that I don't have to get sucked into that NAMM show pressure of having to come out with something new every year. There isn't enough worthwhile stuff to come out with something new every year. To me it's much more about maintaining quality and craftsmanship than creating new models. I don't create new models just for cosmetic reasons, you know, just to go for a groovy retro-look or something like that. I just do what I do, and try to do it better than I've ever done.