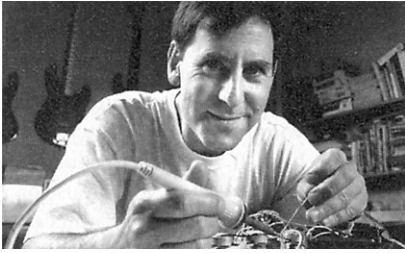


# Roger Sadowsky

Maintaining The Relationship Between  
Guitar Builder and Guitar Player

BY BAKER RORICK



**Roger Sadowsky runs a busy guitar repair shop in Midtown Manhattan, catering to the needs of pros and building instruments of uncompromising quality. Sadowsky's guitars and basses have a worldwide reputation, but you can't walk into any music store in the U.S. to try one; he prefers to maintain a direct relationship between the musician and the maker. A "folkie finger-picker" with the "naive notion that if I could learn to be a guitar maker, I could live an alternative lifestyle," Roger first apprenticed with August LoPrinzi for two years and then, from 1974 to 1979, ran the repair department of Medley Music in Bryn Mawr, PA, before opening his own New York shop in September 1979.**

*How did your first Sadowsky guitars come about?*

In '79 and '80, all these studio guys could go out and pick up a nice L-series, early '60s Fender Stratocaster, or a '50s Strat or Tele, for about 800 bucks. They would bring it to me and I would do a great fret job, mod the electronics, and shield it, and for 1,400 bucks they would end up with a really, really good working instrument. Once the vintage thing started to take off, the "raw material" instruments started to get too expensive,

and everything that I was doing to them was devaluing them. That's when I felt that I could build an instrument that would be every bit as good, if not better, than the vintage with mods, and be able to do it for

less money and with more integrity about not destroying any more of these vintage instruments.

*Your instruments do have a distinctive Fender bent.*

Definitely. That was the result of the pressures put on me by my clients. When you're putting your name on it, the natural thing to want to do is to make an original-style instrument. But at the time, New York was primarily jingle city as far as the studio business. There was a lot of pressure on the players not to bring anything but a Fender or, at the most, a Les Paul or a 335 into a studio. The engineers knew how to get a sound quickly, and they had no interest in spending extra time to get a good sound from something with which they weren't familiar. In addition to the pressure from the recording engineers, right away I also noticed that the musicians were comfortable with just a handful of instruments: Strats, Teles, 335s, Fender Jazz basses, Fender Precision basses. So I essentially took my cues from that, and I started building primarily Fender-style instruments. I got acceptance much faster from doing that. Also, Leo was really on the money in so many ways, so all we've done is try to take the best of what he hit on, and incorporate the various modifications we've been doing as a custom shop, and meld the two together.

*How does your business work?*

It's essentially 50/50 repairs and building. We make about 15 to 20 instruments a month.

*Why don't you sell through music stores in the U.S.?*

One of the reasons I've kept my business small is that I want feedback from musicians, not salesmen. I enjoy the interaction with the player, which constantly enables us to build a better instrument. I do have some dealers overseas. A third of our production goes to Japan, a third to elsewhere in the world—Denmark, Norway, Germany, Australia—and the remaining third to the U.S.

*Have you noticed any recent trends in players' wants or needs?*

One of the problems with the guitar market right now is that it's kind of trend-less. A guitar player will pretty much always be satisfied with a great vintage instrument, whereas a bass player won't. One reason is the 5-string thing (there are no vintage 5-string basses), and another reason is that active electronics have done more for bass than for guitar. Again, nothing sounds better than a good passive guitar blowing through a low-wattage amp, but prior to active electronics, bass players always had trouble cutting through and being heard. I think that's the reason our business has gone to the point where we do more basses than guitars—the newer instruments speak to bass players a little more. We're still 50/50 on 5-strings and 4-strings.

*You don't offer any endorsements or discounts to the big-name players who buy your stuff and*

*everyone seems to aspire to someday owning a Sadowsky. What do you think makes your instruments so special?*

It starts with a personal commitment to make the best instrument that we can possibly make. This is something I need to do to be able to go to sleep. My craft means more to me than my income. There's that issue. Another issue is wood selection. My whole approach is that the acoustic resonance of wood is the most important thing, and pickups and hardware are all secondary to that. Then when we go to build, we tap the bodies, and test and reject anything that doesn't sing.

Next, we're very demanding about all our hardware and electronics. Even though I'm not difficult to deal with, I'm extremely picky. We put a lot of R&D into our electronics, a lot of listening. I'm blessed that aside from being a great builder, my right-hand man, Ken Fallon, is a great musician. We have compatible ears and subject everything we do to every possible listening test you can imagine, and we always agree on what sounds best. And we're always open to the feedback we get from our customers, so it's a continual process; all of that combined with some of the best craftsmen I've been able to assemble in one space is why the instruments are what they are.

We put an incredible amount of time into each instrument, taking as long as it takes to make each one as good as we can make it. And when people ask me how long does it take to make an instrument, the truth is that the day I have to hire a bean counter to answer that is the day I don't want to make guitars anymore.