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Letters from *America*

# SADOWSKY SEMI-HOLLOW GUITAR

Roger Sadowsky has been building unique star guitars for decades, each one imbued with a trademark dollop of New York cool. Dave Hunter checks out a semi with style...

Maybe it's in the water, but there's something about New York City that seems to breed luthiers who time and again manage to smoothly, yet rather unfeasibly, blend the qualities of old-world craftsmanship and modern workaday utilitarianism into a sort of 'boutique blue collar' ethos:

they're serving real, hard-working musicians, yet are doing so with timeless artistry and style.

And no-one better embodies that than Roger Sadowsky. Having grown up in New York City amid a family that was steeped in the

city's rich culture of jazz and Broadway, the young Sadowsky was first bitten by the guitar bug when he was a long way down the road toward doing something about as far from guitar-making as you

circuit, he became particularly obsessed with their gorgeous old Martins. He left his studies to begin a two-year apprenticeship building acoustic guitars with Augie LoPrinzi in New Jersey, then segued through several years of repairing and restoring guitars in Philadelphia, before returning to his native NYC.

There, he quickly

forged a reputation for highly functional, and often preamp-equipped basses that served the needs of stars like Marcus Miller and Verdine White. Sadowsky soon also captured the attention of top artists whose six-string needs

## SADOWSKY BUILT GUITARS FOR PAUL SIMON, AND SIX FOR PRINCE'S PURPLE RAIN TOUR IN 1984

can get: completing his PhD in psychobiology at Rutgers University in New Jersey. The folk boom of the late 60s was in full swing, and while Sadowsky was lured to the music performed by the many professional guitarists he got to know on the



Sadowsky has been building guitars and basses for New York's finest for decades

**KEY FEATURES**

**SADOWSKY SEMI-HOLLOW**

- **PRICE** \$4,895 including hardshell case (approx £3,475 plus shipping and any duties)
- **BODY** Semi-hollow laminated flamed maple with chambered lightweight spruce centre block
- **NECK** Mahogany, glued-in, slim-C profile
- **FINGERBOARD** Ebony, 12" radius, 24.75" scale length
- **FRETS** 21 medium-jumbo (15 frets to the body)
- **NUT** Tusq
- **PICKUPS** Custom Sadowsky PAF-style humbuckers by DiMarzio
- **ELECTRONICS** Master tone and volume controls, three-way toggle switch
- **FINISH** Iced tea 'burst, in polyurethane
- **HARDWARE** Gotoh enclosed tuners, tune-o-matic bridge, and stopbar tailpiece
- **STRINGS** Sadowsky 0.011–0.048
- **CONTACT** sadowsky.com

required a similar vision, building and repairing guitars for Paul Simon since 1982, building six guitars for Prince's *Purple Rain* Tour in '84, and so on. Fast-forward to 2018, and the roster of Sadowsky artists rivals that of any much larger guitar maker, including bassists and guitarists Don Was, Greg Lake, Jim Hall, Andy Summers, Dean Parks, John Abercrombie, Keith Richards, Tal Wilkenfeld, Walter Becker, Pat Metheny, Lee Ritenour and dozens of other major names.

**JAZZY HOLLOW**

Sadowsky's basses tend to follow the 'modified Fender J-and-P-Bass' model, but while he has also made several bolt-neck solidbody guitars, he is arguably better known for the hollow and semi-hollow archtop electrics he has supplied to so many contemporary jazz players. The model we're inspecting this issue, the Semi-Hollow, is one such guitar. A thinline, single-cutaway, semi-hollow that's in many ways more hollowbody than not, it has been designed for optimum versatility, cleverly engineered to retain the full-throated jazz tones that so many players have come to expect from Sadowsky, yet fully enabled for higher-gain rock, blues and fusion playing as well.

While the Semi-Hollow has the NYC pedigree through and through, it's one of several models manufactured by Sadowsky in Japan, a practice he began in 2003. Fully designed in New York by Roger himself – with several extremely original

constructional elements that, as we shall see, take it far beyond just a 'jobbed-out chassis' – the guitars are constructed with oversight from Yoshi Kikuchi, Sadowsky's associate of 25 years, using custom US-made electronics. Each is then shipped back to Sadowsky for final fretwork and setup in NYC.

The Semi-Hollow on hand is an extremely elegant guitar, but one that manages (as per our premise, perhaps) to refrain from putting style ahead of performance. The body is made from bookmatched, five-ply flamed-maple, finished in an immaculate polyurethane gloss over

a subtly faded iced tea 'burst. At a width of 15 inches across the lower bout and a depth of 1.75 inches, it's an extremely manageable size, yet has a full and substantial feel on the lap, as well as a lively, balanced acoustic response when strummed unplugged. Upscale appointments – such as the multi-ply purfling that rims the binding on the body's top, back and sides contribute to the style factor, while chrome hardware and simple ebony knobs and tuner buttons balance out the glam.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the body's design, though, is what we *don't* see: a chambered, lightweight centre block that's made from a piece of solid spruce that has been

scooped, scalloped, windowed and routed to Sadowsky's very specific purpose of retaining the rich, full resonance that enables the jazz-approved tone of his neck pickup, while combatting unwanted feedback and aiding bite and sustain in rockier tones played on



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The attention to detail on the Semi-Hollow is plain to see all over, particularly the multi-ply purfling that rims the binding on the top, back and sides

the bridge pickup. The pickups themselves are Sadowsky's own custom-spec'd PAF-style units made by DiMarzio, wound to 8.85k ohms in the bridge and 7.43k ohms in the neck position.

The neck is solid mahogany, with a glued-in dovetail joint and a slender C profile. It wears a bound ebony fingerboard with petite dot markers, and the back-angled headstock is also faced with ebony – with multi-ply binding this time – inlaid with a mother-of-pearl Sadowsky logo. Tuners are by Gotoh, as are the ABR-1 style tuneomatic bridge and stopbar tailpiece.

#### GIRTHSOME ROCKABILLY

Amped up alternately through a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a Friedman Small Box and 2x12 cab, the Semi-Hollow excels at everything you'd expect a good ES-335 to do well, yet with a little extended range in all directions. Dialed up clean through the Fender with a hint of spring reverb, the neck pickup is indeed round, rich and full, and would undoubtedly satisfy players with far deeper

jazz credentials than your humble reviewer. Yet it is also bright, clear and articulate with the guitar's tone control up full, and is capable of much more than Sadowsky's stated design intentions might imply. Thick-yet-jangly pop balladry or girthsome rockabilly? Most

easy sustain, what with the way it all hangs between the combined punch and resonance of the semi-solid design and the hint of vibrational feedback that helps push it along.

Speaking of which, the Semi-Hollow only suffers unwanted feedback howl when I get silly about

## THE SEMI-HOLLOW EXCELS AT EVERYTHING YOU'D EXPECT A GOOD ES-335 TO DO WELL

definitely. In any mode, it delivers appealing playing dynamics, too, with just a hint of compression at the front of the note, but not so much as to squash out the attack.

Injected into the Friedman rig for more cranked-Marshall-style tones, the bridge pickup, funny enough, felt more instantly solidbody-like in many ways – given its aggressive roar and meaty lower-midrange chunk – and really doesn't shy away from anything you'd turn a good dual-humbucker solidbody towards. There's excellent bite and definition amid the crunch and sizzle, and very

my proximity to the amp with the gain wound up pretty high, yet easily achieves a very controllable musical feedback that merges into my playing. Even through a fairly hot amp, it all cleaned up nicely at the guitar's volume control; more often than not, I preferred dialing out just a tad of the natural highs by rolling the guitar's tone down to about eight out of 10, although even when up full, there was no harshness in the high end. All in all, Sadowsky's Semi-Hollow is a superb and well-rounded performer, and just an easy guitar to love in many ways. 🎸