

SADOWSKY
WILL LEE MODEL



by
Tom Bowlus





Cause to Celebrate

The relationship between a producer of goods and consumer of those goods has multiple levels, with the producer wanting to put out the ideal product for their target consumer, and the picky consumer looking at a variety of competing goods and trying to find the best fit for their particular wants and needs. When we are talking about the makers of musical instruments and the artists who make them sing, this dynamic takes on special meaning. Within this rarefied group, there are certain relationships which span decades, and which involve such deep mutual respect that others in the industry cannot help but take note. The relationship between Roger Sadowsky and Will Lee is one such story. But we'll get to that in a minute...



Yes, Roger and Will make for a great back story, but this review is all about a bass (or as Will would say, a **b**ass). The Sadowsky/Will Lee Model looks like a fairly straight-forward Jazz-style 4-string bass, but those looks can be deceiving. Roger Sadowsky always offers more than meets the eye, and Will Lee knows a thing or two about what makes an instrument work, both live and in the studio. When these two guys get together and put their mark on an instrument, you know it's going to be good.

You know him. You love him

Roger Sadowsky has one of the more recognizable names in the world of high-end basses and guitars, and for good reason. Roger has been building instruments since 1972, and is one of the founding fathers of the high-end, Fender-style instrument movement. Although initially known for his repairs and restorations, Roger has brought numerous innovations to classic designs. He was one of the first luthiers to embrace active electronics (first with active pickups, but Roger moved away from them in favor of passive pickups with on-board preamps as soon as this became viable). Roger felt that it was important to have a passive bypass mode (which you cannot get with active pickups), and he has been building his own preamps since 1990.

The Fender comparisons are unavoidable, and Roger addresses this topic head-on: "Fender is my inspiration – my platform – and I want to appeal to that crowd, but I'm not making copies." This makes a ton of sense, especially for a New York builder. When Roger

started building basses, the call sheet for studio musicians listed "Fender Bass" for the low-end stringed instrument position. If you wanted to work as a gigging bassist, you had better show up with a "proper" instrument. Plus, as Roger puts it, "Leo really did get a lot of things right."

That being said, Roger has made an art form out of improving upon Leo's platform. He's made numerous tweaks and improvements, such as chambering bodies for lighter weight, adding mass to the headstocks to help eliminate dead spots, and shaving a subtle drop-off to the fingerboard from the 15th fret to the end of the board (to help compensate for the slight raise in the fingerboard found on bolt-on or set-neck instruments). Never satisfied to sit on his laurels, Roger Sadowsky has been continuously refining his instruments over his 37+ years of building. Just recently, Roger and his crew went through a new round of listening tests which resulted in a slightly different design on the new hum-cancelling pickups and switch to 500kOhm volume pots. Both of these changes are intended to make their HC pickups sound as close as possible to single-coils.

Testing for banned substances

One of the hallmarks of Sadowsky basses is the amazingly high degree of consistency from bass to bass. Roger is very picky when it comes to the wood he uses in his basses, and I am sure that this is a large factor. Of course, many of the design tweaks that Roger has implemented are aimed at producing consistent results from instrument to instrument. Meticulous attention to detail and expert assembly and setup further insure that each bass that bears the Sadowsky name on the headstock will deliver the goods as intended.

Sadowsky Guitars does not offer a huge array of body styles, nor do they offer endless options. This helps with the consistency factor, of course, but in part, this is a reflection on Roger's position that a builder should have a point of view, and their basses should have their own tone. The hardware and electronics options on

Sadowsky basses have been carefully chosen to reflect Roger's point of view, which he expresses succinctly: "My basses appeal more to groove players than to solo players." That's not to say that a Sadowsky bass doesn't make for a great soloing instrument, but there are certainly a number of reasons why you see so many Sadowsky's in the hands of so many killer groove players (like Uncle Will). Roger spreads the groove around pretty evenly between 4-string and 5-string players, with very close to a 50/50 ratio of 4's and 5's coming out of the shop (sorry folks, no 6-stringers!).

The Sadowsky tone has been described as "Fender on steroids." There is some merit to this description, though it is perhaps overly simplistic. Roger's choice of woods and electronics seem to produce instruments which have a bit more high end content than a typical Fender, which is of course intentional. You can easily dial this back with the Vintage Tone Control (VTC), if you so desire. Switching to passive mode, and possibly rolling back the VTC a bit, allows for a more vintage tone. With the preamp engaged, a Sadowsky bass can take on a much more modern tone, but they still retain a Fender-esque foundation.

For more information about Roger Sadowsky, his thoughts on bass-building, fretwork, what makes for a good setup, and more, check out the excellent video from *Behind the Notes* at this link : (<http://www.behindthenotes.com/index.php/Featured-Video/Features/Bass/Roger->

[Sadowsky/menu-id-17.html](http://www.behindthenotes.com/index.php/Featured-Video/Features/Bass/Roger-Sadowsky/menu-id-17.html)).

Speaking of Will

Roger and Will have known each other for over 30 years, and Will has been playing Roger's basses for about 26 years. It is worth noting that until this model was introduced, Roger had not made a signature bass (though he has offered signature model guitars in the past, and continues to do so). Equally noteworthy, Will Lee has not had a big endorsement deal from another builder. This is not to say that plenty of players wouldn't love to have a Sadowsky model named after them, nor does this mean that plenty of builders wouldn't love to put Will Lee's name on one of their instruments. In fact, the opposite is very much true. This is what makes the Will Lee Model so special – neither guy needs it. An established luthier at the top of the bass market, Roger Sadowsky does not need to attach any player's name to his instruments in order to help get the word out, or to communicate what his instruments are all about. Will Lee can play any bass he wants (and does play basses from several other brands, though not as frequently), and does not need an endorsement from anyone to help leave his mark.

When talking to Roger Sadowsky about this review, and when talking to Will Lee during his interview, I was struck by the deep respect and honest friendship that each of them has for the other. They have been through a lot together, and their

relationship has been beneficial to each of them. Will has provided honest feedback and insight that as undoubtedly been invaluable to Roger. For his part, Mr. Sadowsky has been listening to Will and delivering the tools he needs to ply his trade for decades. It dawned on me that as much as this model is about a killer and unique combination of features (and it is both), it is also a celebration of this friendship and respect. Roger wanted to do something to recognize Will's dedication over the years, and after thoroughly examining the results of his efforts, I can say that this is certainly cause for all of bassdom to celebrate.

On To the Bass

Okay, enough of the schmaltzy stuff. Let's talk about this bass! The Will Lee Model at first glance appears to be a vintage-style 4-string J-bass, but it has several defining characteristics. The nut is narrower than any other Sadowsky bass, with a width of 1.45" (1.5" is considered "spec" on a Jazz Bass). Many older Fenders were similarly under-sized, and as Will discusses in his interview, Jaco Pastorius knew a thing or two about this. Will wanted a tad more range on both the high-end and the low-end, so Roger added a fret (22, total) and a Hipshot D-tuner. They originally wanted a few more frets, but Will likes to use a bell cover over the neck pickup, and he wanted to leave room to slap, so 22 frets is the magic number. To give Will a little extra room, Roger cheats the bell cover down a bit so that it just covers the neck pickup (as opposed to centering it on the pickup). To allow equal access to that extra fret, the lower horn cutaway is a tad deeper than normal. Although dropping to *D* is the more common use of a D-tuner on an *E* string, Will likes to drop his to *C*, which extends the usable range of a 4-string bass even further. Will wanted to cover as much ground as possible with a single bass, and believe me, this is one deceptively versatile axe!

Perhaps the most significant feature of the Will Lee Model is the addition of the mid-boost. There is more to this story



than meets the eye. Roger Sadowsky has been asked to offer a midrange control in the past, and he has routinely declined. He has several reasons for this, and to understand them, we need to look at how Roger makes his preamps. Most onboard preamps employ op-amps to handle the EQ boost or cut. After a lot of listening and experimentation, though, Roger prefers the sound of FETs to op-amps. However, you can't add a midrange band to a FET-based EQ without also changing the bass and treble curves. Roger did consider a number of op-amp-based 3-band EQs, but he was not happy with them compared to his FET-based preamp. Sometimes the best solution is the most

boost adds a bit more punch, and 800Hz adds a bit more growl, and for both frequencies, the narrow boost is not as dramatic, changing the attack of the note, but not changing the meat of the note as much as with the wider Q. At the end of the day, I followed Will's lead with #2, but I did back off the gain of the boost just a tad. Two trim pots are accessible through the control cavity cover. One adjusts the amount of the midrange boost, and the other allows you to roll back the overall gain, allowing you to maintain consistent volume whether the mid-boost is engaged or not. This gain control is only active when the boost is engaged.

This test model features a one-piece,

list a couple of nights before the gig – and I had not previously played the majority of the songs on the list – so having a bass that I felt comfortable with was essential. This band features two guitars and a very talented keyboard player, so I needed to get the job done while not getting in the way. Kicking in the mid-boost gave me the ability to punch through the busy mix efficiently, and I left it engaged all night (with a slight bump to both the bass and treble controls). All Will Lee Models ship with Will's preferred mid boost setting selected (500Hz, broad Q), and I left it set to this option. The next two gigs were with my more familiar rock band, which features drums, bass and just one guitar.

In this setting, I need to fill a lot more sonic space. Most of the time, I had the best results with the mid-boost off, allowing the big, wide J-bass tone to carry the mix, while our guitar player noodled around. However, a couple of times I needed a bit more punch when the mix got busier, and having this at my disposal with a flick of a switch was hella cool. The D-tuner allowed me to leave my 5-string in its stand for most of the gig.

Comparing this bass to my '73 Jazz, the first thing you notice is that the Jazz Bass is a lot heavier! A full four pounds heavier, in this case. That is a huge difference, but I guess we can't fault Leo for not chambering the bodies on production basses back in 1973. My '73 is also an ash/maple instrument, but of course, it does have the bridge pickup located closer to the bridge (the Will Lee Model sports a '60s Jazz pickup layout). The sonic differences between these two basses pretty much follow from the different pickup placements, with the Will Lee (in passive mode) being a bit bigger, wider, smoother and more round, and the Jazz Bass being more growly and aggressive. Tweaking the pickup blend knob, and then going active and adding in a little more high-end bite, allowed me to dial in a somewhat closer approximation of the '73. But even if I could get closer to



obvious: keep the stock FET-based Sadowsky preamp and add a separate op-amp midrange control!

The mid control is boost-only, and the four switches located on the inside of the control cavity cover allow you to control the center frequency of the mid-boost, as well as the width, or Q, of the boost. Only one switch should be on at a time, and the four options are: 1.) 500Hz, Q = 1; 2.) 500Hz, Q = 1.7; 3.) 800Hz, Q = 1; and 4.) 800Hz, Q = 1.7. Choosing the right setting is most definitely going to be a matter of personal preference and playing style. For me, it seems that the 500Hz

chambered swamp ash body (with a book-matched ash top), sporting the always impressive Sadowsky narrow-band '59 burst. The one-piece maple neck has a (separate) maple fingerboard. The parchment pickguard and chrome hardware give this bass a very hip vintage vibe. The setup and fretwork were, as expected, darned near perfect. It tips the scales at a feather-weight 7.8 pounds.

Field Testing

My first opportunity to play out with the WL4 came on a fill-in gig in a friend's country band. I had only received the set



the same tone, I could not get the same growl out of the Will Lee Model. At least not until I added the mid-boost to the equation. The mid-boost seems to add some growl, itself, but it also seems to accentuate the differences you get from varying the blend knob. Using the mid-boost along with the blend and EQ options, I was able to dial in a fairly close approximation of the '73 Jazz, which just goes to show you how very flexible this Will Lee Model can be.

If you have ever played a Sadowsky bass, then you know that they playability is always superb, and dead spots are virtually non-existent. This gets back to that whole consistency thing. This bass is extremely well balanced from string to string, and up and down the neck. The narrow neck feels very comfortable and fast (it turns out the nut on my '73 Jazz is the exact same width), and the slightly deeper cutaway provides excellent access to the upper frets.

The Bottom Line

Roger Sadowsky and Will Lee have a long relationship, with a deep level of appreciation and admiration on both sides. The Will Lee Model reflects that relationship, and its very existence tells a compelling story of friendship and respect. More importantly for the rest of the bass-playing world, it also brought us one amazing instrument. When you combine Roger's relentless attention to detail, and his years of subtle refinement to Leo Fender's "platform," with Will Lee's deep insight and keen understanding of what tools help him do his job the best, one should expect fireworks. This bass does not fail to deliver. 🎸





SADOWSKY 2009

WILL LEE MODEL 4-STRING BASS GUITAR

CONFIGURATION

Strings	4
Style	Double cutaway, offset
Overall length	46"
Body dimensions	19.5" tall x 13.5" wide at lower bout
Body contouring	Moderate
Weight	7.75lbs

CONSTRUCTION

Body woods	Chambered Swamp Ash
Neck woods	Maple
Fretboard	Maple
Body finish	Urethane
Neck finish	Satin Lacquer

HARDWARE

Strings	Sadowsky Blue Label SS Rounds
Gauge	.045, .065, .085, .105
Attachment	At bridge
Bridge/color	Sadowsky chrome-plated brass
Nut	Durlin, self-lubricating
Tuners/color	Hipshot Drop-D / chrome
Knobs/color	Dome / black
Pickguard	3-Ply White
Cover attachments	Screws with threaded inserts

NECK

Scale	34"
Width at nut	1.453"
Width at 12th fret / joint	2.201" / 2.389"
Thickness at nut / 1st fret	.925" / .865"
Thickness at 12th / joint	1.02" / 1.056"
String spacing at nut	.33" to .396" (8.4 to 10.1mm)
String spacing at saddle	.80" (20.3mm)
Radius / Shape	12" / C-shape
String break nut / bridge	5 to 14 degrees / 25 degrees
Afterlength nut / saddle	6.75" to 1.5" / 1.375" to 1.625"
Attachment	Bolt-on
Pocket gap	Too tight to measure
Truss rod style / access	Single compression rod / neck-end with turn-wheel adjustment
Fret count	22
Fretwire	92 x 43

ELECTRONICS

Pickups	Sadowsky single coil
Pickup placement	2.5" from bridge to center of bridge pu; 6" from bridge to center of neck pu
Electronics	Custom Will Lee preamp
Controls	Master volume, blend, treble roll-off bass boost, treble boost, midrange boost on/off switch, preamp bypass
Shielding	Foil
Power	9-volts

GENERAL

Company	Sadowsky Guitars 20 Jay Street #5C Brooklyn, NY 11201 sadowsky.com
Country of Origin	USA
Warranty	2 year, non-transferable
Listed Price	\$3,800.00
Street Price	\$3,800.00
Options	Figured wood top
Accessories	Ultralight case, tools
Price as Tested	\$3,800.00
Available colors	Numerous
Available options	Matching headstock, fancy woods

CONDITIONS

Acquired from	Sadowsky Guitars
Dates	August through October, 2009
Locales	Ohio
Test gear	Genz-Benz ShuttleMAX 12.0, Genz-Benz Uber410/Uber212, Bergantino HT112ER, Mesa/Boogie Walkabout, Ampeg SVT-210AV, Solid Cable instrument cables, Genz-Benz Shuttle 6.0/12, Sadowsky NYC P/J 5, '73 Fender Jazz.

TEST RESULTS

1-5 (unacceptable to impeccable)

in-hand

Dynamics	4.5
Dead Spots	5
String-to-string balance	5
Access to upper register	4
Ergonomics	5
Left-hand feel	5
Aesthetic appeal	5
Tone	5
Value	4

SONIC PROFILE

Lows – big, warm, clear & tight
Mids – smooth to growly, the WL4 is a midrange chameleon
Highs – brightness & rich harmonics without harshness or brittleness you don't

on-bench

Overall construction	5
Wood choice	5
Materials choice	4
Joinery	5
Fretwork	5
Fit & Finish of adornments	5
Quality of finish work	5
Ease of repair	5
Potential range of setup	5
Balance on knee	4
Balance on strap	4
Overall electronic quality	5
Solder joints, wire runs	5
Clarity	5
Noise	5
Shielding	5
Quality for Price Range	5

IN-HAND SCORE
4.7 AVERAGE

ON-BENCH SCORE
4.8 AVERAGE

TONE-O-METER

The Sadowsky Will Lee Model naturally falls into a sweet '60s vibe, but you can dial in some '70s growl, and much, much more.





Phil Maneri's

BASS LAB



2009 Sadowsky Will Lee Model 4-string Bass Guitar

Opening caveat: I've been a fan of Roger Sadowsky for a long time. Everything I say here should be viewed through the understanding that I respect him quite a bit and have had several of his basses as my own property over the years. I logged a whole mess of gig miles on one of his first "Will Lee" models. And I normally hate everything, so that's saying something.

This is a really nice bass, but I can't believe he caved in on the midrange control. Roger has long held that his basses do not need a mid control. Will probably has more clout than anyone else with Roger, though, so if anyone was going to get a midrange control out of Roger, it was Will Lee. With or without the mid-boost, it still sounds like a Sadowsky bass. It's a great sound and very hard to complain about. The "Sadowsky sound" is very "New York," with its fat warm bottom, crispy top, and mids that cut. It weighs nothing, even in the case. If you only have one bass, this is a great choice. This bass paired with a micro amp and micro cabinet could get you to a gig on a motorcycle.

Part of what is so good about these basses is the attention to detail that makes them perform so well under duress and continue to look and sound good. It's the only bass that you can take to any gig you ever get, from a wedding, to a country dive, to an arena and back to a biker bar again, and never get a sideways glance. It's the ultimate sleeper bass. You never see it coming, but it pumps out great tone everywhere you go; in a lot of ways better than my beloved vintage Fenders.

Alright, enough smoke-blowing for now. I have to bitch about something. Honestly, I think this bass might be too light. It had me feeling a bit more neck in the weight than I'd like. I could wear this bass all day and half the night, but I always have that feeling that I'm holding up the peghead. Perhaps going back to the Ultralights would be enough.

This bass does sport Hipshot vintage-style keys and traditional Jazz Bass appointments, down to the well-shot sunburst finish. The classic Will Lee maple fingerboard/neck is mated with a chambered swamp ash body. The mix of satin lacquer on the neck and rock hard poly on the body gives you a comfy feel with your left hand, and some serious durability under your right.

I really like the spoke-wheel type truss rod adjustment. A tech can adjust the relief between sets, or even between songs. It's nice to have that ability on the fly when you don't know where you are going to be night after night.

Cracking open the electronics cavity is a thing of beauty. Machine screws into threaded inserts make battery changes easy, even after a decade. Everything is neat, well-run, and perfectly soldered. With so much stuff in a cavity, this attention to detail is very handy at keeping things running for a long time, and makes it easy to service, if need be. The shielding is perfect; the star-ground concept is right on the money. Star ground is where all the components' ground connections run to a central point, rather than ganged serially. The concept is improved RF rejection, which is debatable, but more importantly, the failure of one ground strap doesn't bring down the whole system. You can keep on playing and make it through a gig. The serial ground kills the whole circuit when it breaks down. In short, this is a perfect control cavity.

I'd love to have a discussion about 9-volt circuits vs. 18-volt circuits. My preference is the latter, however I'm sure he has researched that with real world gigging pros and has an opinion that kept

him with the 9-volt. And I guess that's why I respect him. His is constantly tweaking all of these tiny details all over the instrument that are hard to notice at first glance, but all add up to a ridiculously good-sounding bass that lasts forever. These efforts ultimately result in a tool that players lean on so much, they forget to worry about all those little niggling issues that used to bug them with other instruments.



Top: A neck joint that defies measure – and we couldn't measure and gaps between the neck and body

Above: The Custom Will Lee preamp is perfectly shielded. On the rear of the bass and accessed through the rear cover, are trim pots for adjusting preamp gain and mid boost.