



# New *The* Guitar?

## The Sadowsky LS-17

**R**oger Sadowsky recently introduced what may be his most challenging foray into the archtop guitar world. The LS-17 is aimed at those who play – or have always wanted to play – the legendary Gibson L-5 electric guitar. It's a discriminating group and includes Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, George Benson, Pat Martino, Tuck Andress, Hank Garland, Scotty Moore, Jerry Miller, Lee Ritenour, Tony Mottola, Grant Geissman, and many others. Even Elvis Presley strummed an L-5 on occasion.

Why? The L-5 has long been the standard by which archtops are judged. Luthier Bob Benedetto has called it *the* guitar. Designed by Lloyd Loar (that's where the L designation comes from), it was Gibson's first f-hole archtop, and the company's flagship instrument from its inception in 1922. It was responsible for the demise of the banjo and rise of the guitar in early jazz. Its electric incarnation, the L-5CES, defined the sound of modern jazz. It is the basis for all archtops to follow. For these reasons few have attempted or chosen to deviate from the original.

Fast forward to 2010, where Sadowsky has made purposeful and fortuitous deviations in his slyly named LS-17. With the traditional 17" body with an arched top and Venetian cutaway, he has opted for a thinner depth of 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (instead of 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>") and five-ply laminate flamed maple construction (instead of a carved spruce top). These changes are designed to make it more roadworthy, more resistant to feedback, and more comfortable to play.

The LS has a 25<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" scale with a 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" nut width. Gibson L-5 widths varied through the years, from 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" to much less. The LS has a nice, wide fingerboard like the finest L-5s, but it departs from the opulent ornamentation and reflects the modern penchant for a violin-style look. The ebony fingerboard has single ivoroid binding and no inlays, the headstock is similarly unadorned and has double-ply binding on the edge. The S-holes are also unbound.

The LS has a single pickup – a custom-wound PAF-style in the neck position, with individual Tone and Volume controls, reinforcing the sonic connection with classic instruments of the genre. In a subtle break from tradition, though, the pickup is housed in a black matte-finish cover,

underscoring the LS's streamlined appearance. The LS is equipped with Dunlop straplock buttons, which allow for extra-wide fasteners with a conventional strap or a safe stage strap, with the locking mechanisms.

Fit and finish are superb. The flamed-maple wood is gorgeous throughout and the finish is flawless, with no overspray. Visually, the LS has an understated elegance, with black metal and wood hardware – no plastic. Instead, it sports a narrow ebony pickguard, ebony bridge, tailpiece, control knobs, and tuner buttons. Our tester LS was set up perfectly and played beautifully right out of the box. On first impression, the guitar has a very inviting feel; it is wonderfully light, with a comfortable neck contour and well-balanced neck-body distribution.

With each LS, Sadowsky includes a set of his True-Tone archtop saddles because traditional compensated wooden bridges have always been problematic on jazz boxes and necessitate intonation compromises. Every Sadowsky archtop now uses True-Tone saddle sets, one for a wound G and another for an unwound G.

How does it sound? Acoustically, the LS is airy and open. It speaks with a clear, resonant voice, plenty of bass response, and richness that belies the flat-wound strings requested for our test. Harmonics were prominent and chiming with single notes and chords. Rendering a few complex jazz voicings confirmed its pedigree, while big, open-string chords rang like the proverbial bell. Switching to round-wound strings, you could record this guitar acoustically with pleasing results.

Plugging the LS into a 1961 Fender 2x12 Bandmaster piggyback amp and '61 Fender reverb tank generated the big, warm sound typical of a definitive jazz box, fulfilling the promise of the initial acoustic reaction.

Played in the studio through a variety of tube and solidstate amps ('65 Fender Twin-Reverb and Deluxe-Reverb reissues, '66 Super-Reverb, newer Jazz Master and Jazz Kat) against a vintage L-5CES with PAFs, the LS was competitive in tone and response. The output was slightly lower, allowing the amp to work a little harder (which is desirable for a richer jazz tube tone). The

sound was squarely in the Wes Montgomery zone with the Tone set midway and Volume at three-quarters. Adjusting the Tone and Volume controls provided the requisite liveliness and crisper timbre needed for Benson-esque funk-bop, R&B, and T-Bone Walker blues.

At a meeting of the San Diego Jazz Guitar Society, the axe was placed in the hands of some of the best players in the area – Mundell Lowe, Jaime

Valle, Bob Boss, and others – and elicited positive reactions from all. Then, in an organ trio playing blues, hard bop, bossa nova, and ballads, the LS excelled through a Roland JC-120, with a singing voice and chordal punch that admirably complemented the B-3/Leslie rig.

The LS-17 has everything a good guitar should have – vibe, tone, quality, feel, comfort. – **Wolf Marshall VG**

### SADOWSKY LS-17

Price: \$3,975 (retail).

Contact: [sadowsky.com](http://sadowsky.com).

