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MY ACCOUNT

"It's a P! It's a J! It's Super P/J!" – Sadowsky Guitars – NYC Custom 4-21 Fret Bass Guitar

Posted by Tom Bowlus | Mar 21, 2024 | Full Reviews, Gear | 0 | ★★★★★







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The Company Line

It's hard to believe that my last (personal) Sadowsky review goes all the way back to *BGM* issue #4, when I reviewed the initial Will Lee Model 4-string bass. One of the reasons it's hard to believe is that, to a large extent, I feel like Roger Sadowsky and his basses have been a constant for me – in terms of the instruments I gig with, his presence in the industry, and our annual meetings at NAMM. A lot has changed since issue #4, but a lot has remained steadfast, and this is a great time to take another deep dive into the world-class bass offerings from Sadowsky Guitars.

To briefly address some of the changes in the last 14 years or so, Sadowsky Guitars has offered one form or another of "import" instruments (not made in the New York shop). There are currently two separate import lines available: the MetroExpress (manufactured in China), and the MetroLine (manufactured in Germany, at the Warwick factory in Markneukirchen – which is a stunning facility!). Over the years, there has also been some staff turnover at the New York shop, and numerous models have been introduced (and some discontinued). While this may seem like a lot of change, the items which have not changed are far more significant. First and foremost is the man, himself – Roger Sadowsky. Roger has always been passionate about consistent, non-compromising results, and his QA/QC tendencies are second to none. This leads to the second consistent factor, and that is the super-high quality of the instruments produced under the Sadowsky name. The import models have always been – and continue to be – on par with the best possible instruments available in their respective price ranges. The NYC Custom Shop, on the

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other hand, sets out to make nothing short of the very best basses available on the market, period.



Exhibit A

Ladies and gentlemen, I will prove to you beyond any reasonable doubt that the basses produced by the Sadowsky Guitars NYC Custom Shop are among the finest instruments available, worldwide. I present to you, Exhibit A: an NYC Custom 21-fret 4-string bass in beautiful Candy Apple Orange, with a matching headstock. This highly playable work of art features a chambered okoume body – which allows for a total instrument weight of under 8 lbs. – a quarter-sawn maple neck, with an ebony fingerboard, and the iconic Skyline inlay at the 12th fret position. For electronics, we have the standard and much-beloved Sadowsky boost-only preamp, and the (relatively) new Super P and Super J pickups. For additional range and ease of adjustment, this instrument features a Hipshot Xtender on the *E* string. To accentuate the ebony board, the hardware is all black, and a classic 3-ply tortoise shell pickguard completes the aesthetics, nicely complementing the CAO finish.

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As this Exhibit proves my point beyond any doubt, I rest my case.

Personal Connection

In the spirit of full disclosure, I must tell you that the bass I am reviewing is my personal instrument, ordered shortly before the pandemic hit, and built to my requested specifications. It was always the intention of presenting a review of this bass, and you will notice the "Long Term Test Drive" badge on this review. I have played this bass on almost every gig I have done since I received it, and for my personal preferences and gig needs, it is ideal. So, on to the details!





I have been a fan of fancy tops on custom basses for a long time, and I am also a fan of various tints or burst finishes which highlight, or at least show, the grain of the wood. I will admit in my younger, more foolish, days to exhibit some prejudice towards fully painted basses; believing, perhaps, that the body wood must be in some way sub-par, or else why wouldn't the luthier want to show it off? Surely, the best body blanks were destined towards a finish which showed off their greatness, whereas the less exceptional would be fated for paint, right? Later in life, something changed in my perspective a bit, and I started looking at painted instruments in a different light. I may still be foolish in many ways, but I started to come around to the beauty and attraction of painted basses, and if I had to pick one color/finish which definitely made me a convert, it is Sadowsky's take on a Candy Apple Orange finish. It looks stunning in any light, and it looks equally at home with chrome or black hardware.

For wood selection, I have always loved mahogany bodies, paired up with a maple neck and an ebony fingerboard. This combination tends to work very well for my personal preferences. Roger and co. suggested okoume as an excellent substitute for mahogany, and I have had very positive results using okoume on other basses. In terms of tone and response, this bass seems to land just where I was hoping it would. The black ebony fingerboard is unadorned by face dots, which really highlights the mother of pearl Skyline inlay. Classy!

The real impetus for this build, though, were the new (at the time) Super P and Super J pickups, which I first experienced at the 2020 NAMM Show. I've long been a P/J fan, and I enjoy both the "regular" and "reverse" configurations on the split-P neck pickup. My older Sadowsky P/J5 has the universal route, which allows for both regular and reverse configurations (though this does

require swapping out the pickguard, which is not super convenient). I also see merit in both the '60s bridge J-bass pickup location (my overall favorite), and the '70s bridge J-bass pickup location (which I agree is superior for certain styles/tones). While various luthiers have offered different setups which allow for selecting regular/reverse for the P-bass neck pickup and '60s/'70s location for the J-bass bridge pickup, Sadowsky's new "Super P" and "Super J" are the highest evolution of these concepts which I have seen, to date.


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The neck Super P has two sets of split coils, and a 3-way mini-toggle switch allows you to select sets of coils in "regular P" configuration, or in "reverse P" configuration, or all four coils in parallel. The bridge Super J has two stacked coils. J-style pickups, with one set of magnets/coils in the '60s position, and one in the '70s position. Like the Super P, there is a 3-way mini-toggle which allows you to select between the two locations, or run both pickups in parallel. I really love having these options available in such an easy-to-use fashion. I also appreciate the elegant way that the pickups are housed. Yes, it is a larger footprint than you would get with a straightforward P/J, and yes, the housings extend a bit further past the strings, but to my eyes, they still look great – and the pickup housings still make for a comfortable thumb anchor point.

Details, Details

You can get this pickup configuration any of the various bass models offered by the NYC shop. If you opt for a 20-fret model, you can select either a P-bass body shape or a J-bass body shape. The 21-fret model, here, is only available as a (slightly undersized) J-bass body shape, but it can be ordered with a "Vintage" control layout (as exhibited on this bass), with a pickguard and a control plate, or you can opt for the "Standard" layout (either in-line or "diamond" layout), which does not have a pickguard and features a rear route. There are many, many options available on the NYC custom order form (https://sadowsky.com/order/custom-order-2/), including multiple fingerboard radius and nut width options. I opted for a 1.5" nut width, and a 12" fingerboard radius.

The Sadowsky onboard preamp has long been admired and appreciated as one of the best bass preamps on the market. Its approach is very simple and straightforward, but – like everything Roger designs – very musical and effective. This preamp uses FETs, instead of op-amps, with boost only (+

18dB) controls for bass (40Hz) and treble (4kHz), combined with volume, blend, and the VTC ("Vintage Tone Control) passive tone roll-off. It is possible to add the "Will Lee" mid boost preamp to this setup, but I find that with most P/J's (and definitely this Super P/J), I can get all the midrange content I want by varying the pickup blend (and not boosting the bass/treble too much). In fact, this bass pretty much captures the ideal "tone in my head" with the neck pickup set to reverse P, the bridge pickup set to the '60s location, the VTC all the way up (no roll-off), and no boost on the bass or treble controls. As my strings age, I may add a touch of treble boost.

Rounding out the hardware choices, the 4-21 has a recessed cup ¼" input jack and employs a single, in-line string retainer for the top three strings. By contrast, my older WL4 has a single, round string retainer for just the top two strings, whereas my older still P/J 5 uses a string bar for all five strings between the nut and the tuning pegs. At first, I thought that the tuning pegs on the 4-21 are not quite as

tall as those on the WL4 or P/J 5 (though still plenty tall to get all the windings you'd want/need), but upon closer inspection, the pegs are the same height, but the headstock is thicker on the new 4-21.

Comparisons

To try and put the 4-21 Super P/J into perspective, I spent a good bit of time directly comparing it to my Will Lee 4 and Super P/J 5, through a variety of rigs. First up, I threw a fresh set of Sadowsky Black Label stainless steel strings on the basses. I do like the Blue Label strings, as well, but I slightly prefer the more tactile feel of the Black Labels. Both types of strings sound fantastic, IME/IMHO. As expected, there were some definite similarities between the three, especially between the P/J 5 and the 4-21 Super P/J. I was a little surprised, though, at how close the WL4 could sound to the two P/J's if you favor the neck pickup a bit, but even so, it was a bit more precise/dry than the other two. The feel and playability of the two 4-strings was very similar, and the thinner neck on the WL4 (1.45" at the nut, versus 1.5" for the 4-21) was only barely noticeable, and even then, only in the lowest positions.

Breaking out the P/J 5 (which I leave setup as a reverse-P), it proved to be slightly stronger in the "middle mids." The 4-21 Super P/J, by contrast, definitely seemed to go deeper and had a stronger low-end presence than either of the other two Sadowsky's; regardless of how I had the Super P/J coils set, the deeper response was apparent. For an additional comparison point, I broke out my Brubaker JXB-4 – which, like the JXB-4 I reviewed a couple of years ago, has

Ulyate P/J pickups, with a reverse-P. Compared to the 4-21 Super P/J, the JXB-4 proved to be a bit more clear/cutting up top, *slightly* scooped in the mids, and close, but not quite as deep in the lows.



The Bottom Line

This Sadowsky 4-21 Super P/J is about as close as I may find for a "desert island bass" – presuming said island had electricity and a killer bass rig. Except for the few songs I play which require something below a low D, this bass can cover darned near every style I need to play in my main band (rock/pop from the '70s through today). Every Sadowsky I have played has been extremely comfortable to play, and this is no exception. It is very light, and ergonomically spot-on. In fact, as I try to grade this instrument for my subjective scoring, I really can't find any characteristics where this bass is not on par with the best of the best. Accordingly, this bass receives perfect marks from me, which is an extreme rarity.

As the world changes around us, it is reassuring to have some stable elements, and the high quality and credibility of Roger Sadowsky and his instruments are

certainly some of these reassuring elements. The NYC Custom Shop has so many options, almost any player should be able to dial in their own personal dream bass. I know I found mine.

Sadowsky Guitars – NYC Custom 4-21 Fret Bass Guitar

GENERAL

Company:	Sadowsky Guitars 2107 41 Avenue, 4th Floor Long Island City, NY 11101 www.sadowsky.com
Country of Origin:	USA
Warranty:	2-year, non-transferable
Price:	$6,600 base price; $8,100 as tested
Accessories:	High quality gig bag, tool kit, guitar polish, polish rag
Options:	Numerous
Available Colors:	Numerous
Acquired From:	Sadowsky Guitars
Dates:	December 2021 to present
Locales:	Ohio
Test Gear (in-hand review):	Trickfish Bullhead .5k, Euphonic Audio NL-112, Ampeg V-12, Ampeg VB-112 & VB-115, Jad Freer Sisma, Jad Freer Venere 110 & 210, Glockenklang Blue Sky, Glockenklang Duo Art Light, Glockenklang Uno Rock Art Light, Sadowsky WL4, Sadowsky P/J 5, Brubaker JXB-4

CONFIGURATION

Strings:	4
Style:	Double cutaway
Overall Length:	45 3/4"
Body Dimension:	19 1/2" long x 13 1/2" wide at lower bout
Body Contouring:	Moderate
Weight:	7.99 lbs.

ELECTRONICS

Pickups:	Sadowsky Super P (neck) and Super J (bridge)
Pickup location(s), from 12th fret:	10 13/16", 1 11/16", 14 7/16", 14 7/8"
Electronics:	Sadowsky preamp (FET, boost only)
Controls:	Volume, blend, VTC, bass/treble stacked
Shielding:	n/a
Preamp circuit voltage:	9v

CONSTRUCTION

Body Woods:	Okoume
Neck Woods	Maple (quartersawn)
Fingerboard:	Ebony
Body Finish:	Urethane
Neck Finish:	Satin lacquer

HARDWARE

Strings:	Sadowsky Black Label Stainless Steel Roundwound
Gauge:	.045, .065, .085, .105
Attachment:	At bridge
Bridge/color:	Sadowsky / black
Nut (Guide):	Durlin
Tuners/color:	Hipshot / black
Knobs/color:	Metal / black
Control cavity cover:	Plastic / black

TEST RESULTS

1-5 (unacceptable to impeccable)

In-hand

Features:	5
Tonal Flexibility:	5
Ease of Use:	5
Aesthetics:	5
Ergonomics:	5
Tone:	5
Value:	5

In-hand Score
5.00 average

SONIC PROFILE:

Low: Very full and present, even without bass boost; tight and controlled
Mids: Balanced, and ready to "growl," if you dig in; very connected to lows and highs
Highs: Great clarity; nice "singing" voice, and never gets brittle

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TONE-O-METER

There is almost nothing this bass can't do, unless you really want to dial-in a super boxy, mid-forward tone (it doesn't do that, and you shouldn't want to, anyway!). It can really excel on massive low-end, reggae/dub, but it can also handle very clear, explosively dynamic tones, as well. As close to a do-it-all bass as I have found.



[Click here to read the Technical Review for Sadowsky Guitars – NYC Custom 4-21 Fret Bass Guitar]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Bowlus

Editor-in-Chief, Tom Bowlus, surprised his parents by riding home from grade school on his 10-speed with an upright bass. Thus began a life-long love of all things bass… After writing reviews in 18 issues of Guitar World's Bass Guitar Magazine, Tom founded Bass Gear Magazine in 2007. If there is one thing Tom loves more than playing all kinds of cool bass gear, it's telling people about cool bass gear!

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