





Sadowsky Will Lee

Model Bass

Roger Sadowsky has built a reputation for making some of the finest quality basses in the world. This signature model for New York session ace Will Lee looks like something special. Kevin Sanders reports.

Will Lee is a real 'bass player's bass player' and is probably best known for his long-term gig as bassist and MD for the house band of the Late Show With David Letterman. Now he and his friend and luthier of 30 years Roger Sadowsky have teamed up to produce a truly mouth-watering signature bass. It's obvious where the inspiration came from: Roger Sadowsky is the first to admit that there is so much that's just plain 'right' about Leo Fender's original design that it makes a perfect starting point and platform for a contemporary instrument.

Build Quality

Our review bass has a glorious vintage cream finish – much

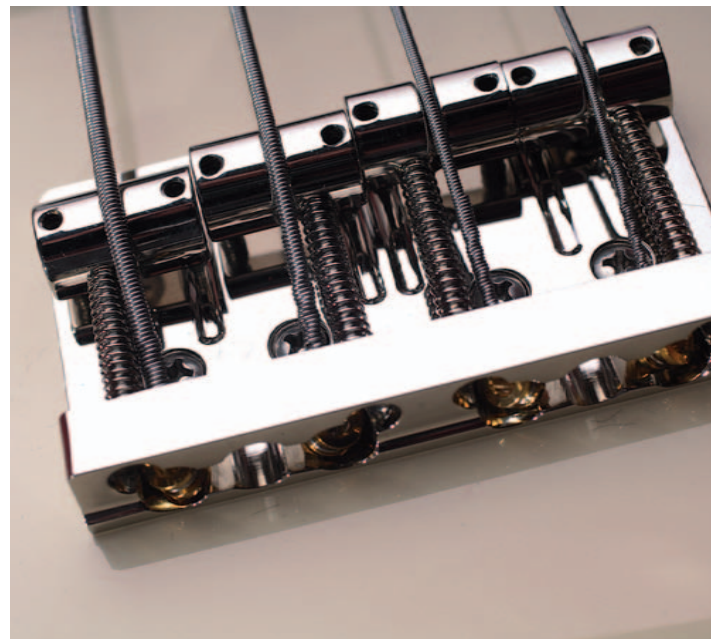
more subtle than the figured maple option and flawlessly applied and polished. Although ostensibly a traditional Jazz Bass shape, looking at the bass side by side with our stock Fender reveals a more 'petite' and ergonomic shape to the Sadowsky.

Everything about this bass screams quality, and the four-bolt neck joint, cut with airtight precision, is a good example, as are the frets; perfectly fitted and polished. All Sadowsky bass necks now have two internal graphite strips and a slightly thicker headstock to reduce any dead spots due to tiny inconsistencies in the wood. This kind of attention to detail is also evident in the exquisitely inlaid black ebony blocks on the fretboard. Finished to the

same satin sheen as the rest of the neck, they hardly drew a glance when we first picked up the bass, but like everything on this instrument the more you play it and the closer you look at it, the more the understated quality is revealed.

Truss rod adjustment is by a turn wheel at the end of the neck, the same system that's been used on StingRay basses for years, and as well as making adjustment quick and easy, it keeps the headstock of the bass looking uncluttered and also conserves as much 'meat' as possible at the vulnerable volute area where the neck joins the headstock – especially important given the extra-narrow dimensions of this neck.

Roger Sadowsky is almost as well known for his active preamps as for his instruments and he's been making his own two-band EQ preamp since 1990. His treble and bass





“On picking up the bass, the first thing you notice is how slim the figured maple neck is”

controls have always been FET circuits, which have a bit more character than the op-amp circuits more normally found on basses at this level. Sadowsky doesn't do mid controls – or at least he didn't. His reluctance was based on the fact that he could never get the purity of sound he achieved from his FET two-band system. However, Will Lee wanted some mid control, so as a compromise Sadowsky added an op-amp mid boost to his favoured FET two-band system – an elegant solution that provides the best of both worlds.

This mid has two settings:

a small toggle switch on the front boosts frequencies either at 500Hz or 800Hz. Which of these frequencies you choose is set via two dip switches, soldered straight onto the EQ circuit board and access to which is gained through the rear control cover. These also allow you to select the 'Q' or bandwidth of the mid frequencies. Also adjustable via the backplate are two mini controls: pots for overall preamp gain and mid gain, these set the mid-boost levels to match the bass's overall output. These backplate and internal controls are obviously designed



The Man Behind The Bass

I gave Roger a call at his New York shop to ask him about the Will Lee signature Model.

KS: You've had a close relationship with Will for 30 years – is there a reason you didn't do a signature instrument earlier?

RS: I was always sceptical of 'signature models' and felt they were little more than marketing ploys. But a few years ago I asked Will if he wanted to do a signature model and he said yes! It took a couple of years of making prototypes for him, but we finally got something we both like.

KS: Adding mid control to the Will Lee bass's EQ sounds like something you were initially against. Is this something you would consider adding to your other basses?

RS: I still believe in a two-band EQ. Maybe it's the 'Steve Jobs' in me, but I prefer simplicity on my instruments. What makes the mid boost on the WL model work is that it is very limited in regard to frequencies and 'Q' – all the settings are very musical.

to be adjusted until you achieve 'your' sound, then left set.

Unscrewing the rear control plate reveals the quality of the electronics and the neatness of their installation. Things like the tiny threaded brass inserts for the backplate screws show a real attention to detail, but perhaps more importantly, all the components are individually earthed back to a single point, rather than the more common practice of earthing one component and joining all the others to this. The benefit here is that should the earth connection on one component fail, the others will still be grounded, rather than a single fault rendering the whole circuit unearthed.

Turning to the front of the bass, we have just four controls, all machined aluminium, black-anodised and perfectly weighted. The first is Volume, then Pickup Blend, which pans between the pickups. Somewhat confusingly this works in reverse to most basses in that turning the control clockwise dials in more bridge pickup, while anticlockwise adds the neck pickup. Next along is Treble Roll-off or VTC (Vintage Tone Control), which doubles as a preamp bypass.

KS: The spec alludes to the body being 'chambered' for lightness and resonance – this is intriguing! Are we allowed to know more?

RS: All of my instruments have been chambered for several years now. I started in 1972 making acoustic guitars, and as I worked on thousands of electric guitars and basses over the years, I always felt the ones that were lighter in weight were more acoustically resonant and sounded better to me. When my supply of ash and alder began to come in heavier than I wanted, I started chambering the bodies to reduce weight.

KS: I believe you first started making the Will Lee signature bass back in 2009. How have they been selling?

RS: They now account for about 25 per cent of our bass sales.

KS: Are there any further developments to the bass you and Will are working on that we may see in the future?

RS: Not at the present time. I still haven't recovered from the R and D on the first project!

Lastly, a dual concentric control for 40Hz bass boost (lower part) and 4kHz treble boost (upper part), each with +13dB of boost. The all-important mid-range boost on/off mini toggle switch sits on the chrome control plate between and above the Pickup Blend and VTC controls.

The pickups, unlike many on Sadowsky's basses, are a true single-coil design, again a decision taken for the purity of tone. The tuners and the bridge are simple and elegant designs, machined and finished like all the hardware with a watch-like precision and accuracy.

Playability and Sounds

On picking up the bass, the first thing you notice is how slim the figured maple neck is; with a nut width of just 1.45" it's even narrower than a standard Jazz Bass, and the 12" radius to the separate maple fretboard makes it fast and easy to play.

The 22 frets are all easily accessible thanks to the slim neck profile and contoured, slightly deeper lower cutaway. Increasing the range is the Hipshot D-tuner, and if you set this as Will Lee does to drop the E string to C, you almost have the range of a 5-string.



“...we finally settled on the 800 Hz boost, narrow ‘Q’...this gives a wonderful grainy focus to the mids, adding a taut punch to the sound that makes the bass just ‘sit up’ in the mix”

It takes a little while to get used to the slightly unorthodox layout of the controls, and the pickup pan in particular caught me out a few times. However, even without the mid function, there’s a wide range of beautiful bass tones that almost define that modern, taut and very ‘New York’ bass sound. Panning to the front pickup gives a fantastic slap tone that makes even a simple riff sound like it’s been played by Marcus Miller – with a perfect and even response across the strings.

After trying out various permutations of the mid controls, we finally settled on the 800Hz boost, narrow ‘Q’ as our favourite choice. When switched in this gives a wonderful grainy focus to



The EQ’s mid control is unusual for Sadowsky, but allows real fine tuning of your tone

the mids – not as aggressive as a classic Jaco solo tone, but adding a taut punch to the sound that just makes the bass part ‘sit up’ in the mix. Interestingly, Will Lee uses the alternative 500Hz boost, and this is the way the bass is set up when shipped. This gives a smoother sound, quite restrained, but very noticeable when it’s switched out.

So, two instant sounds: a perfect fingerstyle tone with punch and focus, then flick out the mid switch for a classic zingy slap tone. Comparing the Sadowsky to our stock Fender Jazz highlighted just how versatile the Will Lee bass is: it still somehow retains the essence of the traditional Jazz Bass sound, but with more highs,

more lows, and more harmonic richness in the mids too.

Conclusion

Picking up the Sadowsky is quite an experience. Even before you play a note, the bass sits in your hands feeling light, comfortable and familiar. At 7.9lb, the bass is less than a pound lighter than our Fender, but the impression is that of a bass that’s half the weight.

The neck in particular, despite its diminutive size, just feels ‘right’, and the satin finish feels cool and smooth under your left hand. If a bass neck can ever feel sensual – this is it!

In the interest of balance I should point out that the weight of the slightly thicker headstock and tuners, especially that D-tuner, coupled with the lightness of the body means the bass is a fraction neck-heavy, but it’s hardly noticeable, and even looping the cable over the back strap button – something that’s good practice anyway – was enough to alleviate this.

Having one of the world’s finest luthiers make a bespoke instrument for one of the most versatile and talented bassists around was always going to result in a good bass – but I bet neither expected it to turn out this good.

Kevin Sanders



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

SADOWSKY WILL LEE SIGNATURE MODEL

PRICE: £3,899

(INCLUDES HARD CASE)

Made In: USA

Body: Solid colour: swamp ash.

Figured top: swamp ash/maple

Neck: Maple

Nut Width: 1.45”

Pickups: Sadowsky single-coil

Bridge: Sadowsky chromed brass.

22mm string spacing

Controls: Custom Will Lee preamp

with Volume, Pickup Blend, Treble

Roll-off (VTC); Dual Concentric Bass/

Treble Boost (+13dB @ 40Hz & 4kHz);

switchable mid-range boost.

Frequency selectable at 500 or

800Hz, wide or narrow bandwidth;

trim pot for adjusting mid boost

Tuners: Sadowsky branded

Fingerboard: Maple

Frets: 22 nickel/silver

Inlays: Ebony block

Finishes: Sadowsky Custom

colours available

WHAT WE THINK

Plus: One of the best basses available today – at any price.

Minus: They want it back!

Overall: An aspirational bass made by one of the best luthiers in the world, to the specification of one of the most versatile and talented players around today.

CONTACT DETAILS

Instrument courtesy of Guitar

Guitar www.guitarguitar.co.uk

www.sadowsky.com

BGM RATING OUT OF FIVE

BGM RATING

