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Rob Allen Custom Basses Lesson in marketing a high-end instrument?

By John Slog

As a leading-edge shop owner carrying 26 high-end bass-related lines, I'm regularly approached to become an authorized dealer for many products. I'm fair but skeptical with

the inquiries and always ask for literature on the instrument as well as the builder's advertising and marketing strategies. After an evaluation of price points and market targets, I decide if it's worth a listen. If the instrument looks good on paper, I ask for a taste test.

After I receive an instrument, I personally put it through its paces and pass it around to valued customers and my expert staff. When the first Rob Allen bass arrived, we all knew it was exceptional. This thing shined, in all aspects! The quality control was excellent, the cosmetics and figure of the wood were superb, and it played and sounded great! The kicker is it's totally comfortable! The average Rob Allen bass weighs in at a mere 6.5 lbs! "A feather with balls..." is a favorite description around the store.

The theory around Rob Allen basses is to first produce an instrument that sounds extremely resonant, and then amplify that sound. Allen makes each one at a time in his shop in Santa Monica. I've said in past columns, "You can't polish a turd," which means no matter how expensive and exotic the electronics package used on an instrument may be, you'll achieve no more than an average tone unless the husk produces exceptional resonance on its own – unamplified.

Allen came to the same realization, and he has taken every step to ensure the "tone starts here" philosophy is integrated into the wood of each of his instruments first, then the electronics are

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added to amplify and slightly enhance the sound.

He incorporates chambered alder or swamp ash bodies with a solid center and figured wood caps. This produces a lightweight but very resonant body that looks killer, with some of the worlds most beautiful exotic wood caps. And he dresses the package with tasteful ivoroid binding.

The bridges and fretless fingerboards are made of mostly ebony or cocobolo and add a nice compressed warmth to the quartersawn birdseye maple neck. The fret markers are inlaid in the fret positions and allow even the most inexperienced fretted players to explore the totally different sound. Listen to Jaco – then decide!

Pickups are a Fishman piezo under-bridge design with a matching wood knob countersunk into the acoustic guitar-style bridge. A Corian saddle is compression-mounted to the piezo in the bridge and the entire wooden bridge assembly then recessed 1/4" through the top into the body husk. There is a tone trim pot mounted in the electronics rear cavity (accessible through a small hole in the cover). This pot can be used by the player to custom modify the tone of his (or her) bass to a particular setting. Allen says because of this pot and the normal volume control, his basses are very compatible with others in anyone's arsenal. A simple tweak during soundcheck will allow the user to grab the RB at will and not shock the sound man with an abundance of volume. The only shock will be an overabundance of tone when you glide up the steel-core strings! The tone is very acoustic and the sustain is reminiscent of the standard double bass.

Per customer demand, fretted versions have been added. Potential future options include a piezo pickup.

The basses are built in a 34" scale length and both four and five-string versions are offered.

The list prices are a refreshing change from some of the sticker shock quotes we have to do on competitors high-end instruments. The four-string fretless MB-2 (Danish oil finish) lists for \$1,500, and the five-string is \$1,700. The MB-1 (gloss) lists at \$2,000 and the five-string is \$2,200. An optional ebony bridge/fingerboard package is \$100 extra.

In my opinion, this is the way to put a quality high-end bass on the market. If you need a big acoustic tone in recording or live work, strap on a Rob Allen bass and get ready for a truly

admirable alternative to the usual tree trunks on the market.

The MB-2 with curly maple top. Photo courtesy of Rob Allen Guitars.

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