



New York Bass Works

RS5-22 5-STRING & RS4-22 4-STRING BASSES

By Jonathan Herrera



SPECS

NEW YORK BASS WORKS

RS4-22 & RS5-22

Street \$3150.00 (RS4-22), \$4650 (RS5-22)

Pros Responsive; excellent ergonomics; balanced and elegant sound

Cons The RS5-22's knob arrangement may prove cumbersome
Bottom Line Builder David Segal clearly knows his Jazz Basses. The Reference Series evokes the best of the breed while introducing a few thoughtful modern upgrades.

SPECS

Construction Bolt-on

Body RS5-22, ash; RS4-22, alder

Neck Maple

Fingerboard RS5-22, maple; RS4-22, rosewood (graphite-reinforced w/ single-action trussrod)

Frets 22 (RS5-22, '70s-style medium; RS4-22, '60s-style small)

Bridge Hipshot

Tuners Hipshot

Scale Length RS5-22, 34.5"; RS4-22, 34"

Pickups RS5-22, Aguilar J-style; RS4-22, Dimarzio J-style

Weight Approx. 9 lbs, 12 oz

Made In U.S.A.

Contact newyorkbassworks.com

AT LONG LAST, I GOT MY HANDS ON two New York Bass Works (NYBW) basses to review. I first heard of the company over a decade ago, back when the world's best bass magazine came out once a month on paper. For reasons I don't quite recall, the stars never aligned to see one alight at my office door, but I've long held a desire to spend some quality time with the instruments. Perhaps it's my limitless fascination with Fender-Jazz-type

basses, or the fact that any New York-based luthier enjoys some locational cachet due to the singular demands of the local clientele. Regardless, this review was a long time coming.

The two basses here come from NYBW's Reference Series line. Builder David Segal uses the name to connote the basses' inspiration in his own collection of reference basses, namely early-'60s "pre-CBS" Fender Jazz Basses. As a player, Segal found

a ton of work through the 1980s wielding these golden-era J basses, and he's long been fascinated with investigating in detail what makes many of these highly sought-after instruments so successful sonically.

While the NYBW instruments' general aesthetic is clearly J-inspired, neither one is a clone of its ancestral DNA. Knowing that Fenders tend to neck-dive, Segal lengthened the upper horn to improve strap playability and shortened the lower horn to mirror that balance on the lap. To make the *B* string tauter, RS 5-strings like our tester utilize a 34.5" scale — as far as I'm concerned, a reasonable compromise between the standard length and the too-long-for-me 35" scale that some luthiers favor. The basses are also available with many more options than early-'60s Fender ever had, including fancy tops, numerous pickup and electronic packages, various finishes, and the numerous other *de rigueur* upgrades customers expect of modern high-end basses.

RS5-22

Like many builders modeling their work on Fender's iconic formula, NYBW envisions Jazz Basses as fitting into two primary molds. There's the '60s-style alder-body/rosewood-fingerboard format, here embodied by the RS4-22, and the ash-body/maple-fingerboard recipe, as found in our RS5-22 tester. NYBW differentiates the '70s-ish bass even further, sourcing larger frets than the 4, along with block inlays and a thicker poly-finished neck.

My first impression of the RS5 was that per Segal's design mission, the bass balanced exceptionally well — perfectly, actually. I believe that any energy dedicated to holding up the neck is energy not invested in ac-

tual playing, so this is a good thing. The bass was well built, too. It imparts a substantial, high-end vibe, and there's abundant attention to detail to help justify its lofty price. The hardware is all top-shelf, mostly from Hipshot, and it has one of the most hardcore string trees I've ever seen, ensuring that the *D* and *G* strings have firm witness points at the nut.

The RS5's electronics are a hybrid of single-coil Aguilar J-style pickups and a new-to-me 3 Leaf Audio Pike Amp Shapeshifter preamp. I'm a fan of 3 Leaf Audio generally, although I was only familiar with the company's superb stompboxes until now (full disclosure: a Doom Dynamic Harmonic Device is a permanent resident on my pedalboard), so I'm glad to see the company expand into the onboard preamp market. The control cavity was gorgeous, with extensive use of shielding foil to reduce RF interference, threaded brass inserts for the cover screws, and perfectly routed and neatly tied-off wiring.

The RS5 utilizes a volume/volume/tone arrangement coupled with a 3-band preamp. The accompanying switches are for shifting the mid-range filter's center frequency and for switching the bass into passive mode. I am a fan of V/V/T, especially in a J-style bass, but I'm not sure I prefer the choice to place the EQ controls above the more important volume and tone controls. For me, the mildly greater hand precision required to manipulate the V/V/T knobs is a slight inefficiency that would be easily cured by swapping their location with the EQ's. I am glad, however, that NYBW used smaller knobs for the EQ — that helps.

The RS5 arrived with an ultra-low setup that required a slight

trussrod tweak. This is to be expected, given it traveled from balmy New York to my drier Northern California studio. Its playability was excellent, although the neck is not especially Jazz-like. It's obviously impossible to compare a 5-string to a '60s Fender, as there's no comparable historical reference, but I found the neck to be a touch deeper, with a flatter fingerboard, than what one might expect on a J-style bass. The fingerboard radius is in fact compound, meaning it gets flatter in the higher registers — but still, it's pretty flat down low. The bass has impeccable high-fret access, a welcome change from the blocky neck heel characteristic of the Fender design. Overall, I found playing the NYBW to be an altogether pleasant experience, but I would probably not opt for the poly finish on the back of the neck. It's subjective, but I much prefer the smoother feel of a satin finish (like the one on our 4-string tester).

Plugged in, the RS5 immediately impressed with its responsive and immediate attack. Notes veritably leapt off the bass. It felt extremely fast and articulate, great for players seeking dynamic sensitivity and transient response. The tones are certainly drawn from the traditional J-style spectrum, with the soloed bridge burping, the soloed neck barking, and the blended sound offering a balanced and burnished combination. Regardless of pickup position, the NYBW has the zingy highs and slightly hollow mids that are often associated with the '70s-style J formula (think Marcus Miller). The preamp is musical and well voiced, although users should be judicious with their tweaks, as each filter is immediately impactful even with the slightest twist of the knob. While I don't think the RS5 sounds much like a vintage

Fender, it's an incredibly capable and versatile bass that would easily cop the range of tones needed to cut most gigs. It has the sort of do-any-thing vibe that made the Jazz Bass famous to begin with, and it's all delivered in a durably built, luxuriously appointed package.

RS4-22

As opposed to the RS5, the RS4 is much closer related to the reference '60s Jazz Bases that Segal used to develop the Reference Series line. It's passive, features a simple bent-plate bridge and '66-Jazz-style lollipop tuners, and most obviously, has four strings and a 34" scale.

The RS4's construction was just as impressive as the RS5, so I won't waste time trying to dream up a different way to say the same thing. It's just

heartening when a pricey bass feels and looks pricey. One area I'm glad got the modern update was the control cavity, which is lined with shielding foil, unlike the Fender original.

Interestingly, the RS4 didn't balance quite as well as the RS5, perhaps due to the body's reduced mass. That isn't to say it was poorly balanced, merely that it felt more like a traditional Jazz-style bass than the RS5, which seemed to magically strike the right position strapped or lapped. Also notable is that the neck is a touch deeper and thicker than my own '66 Jazz Bass.

While the RS5 is highly responsive, the RS4 is somehow even more so. That responsiveness, coupled with an evenness both note-to-note and string-to-string, is a quality I often admire in my own vintage Fend-

er, and it's one Segal has obviously decoded to great effect in his Reference Series. The RS4 sounds slightly more scoopy and modern than the full-throated bark of my '66 J, but just slightly, which might be of value to a player more inclined to utilize a full spectrum of contemporary techniques. I loved the smooth and graceful sound of the RS4's blended-pickup tone, the delicious and syrupy texture of the neck pickup, and that appropriately aggro bite of the bridge pickup. No matter the pickup setting, the RS4 beguiled me with its colorful, rich, and alive timbre, particularly in the mids, where it matters most. It's a truly musical instrument that evinces the time and care Segal put into evoking the best of his own reference collection. ●

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