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# Magstar Snare Drums

by Rick Van Horn

**Here's a new company that can build the drum of your dreams—and still fit your budget.**

Rob Kampa is dedicated to the proposition that all drummers can and should be able to purchase drums that are exactly what they want, made the way they want them. Rob further believes that those drums should be made with a combination of old-world craftsmanship and ultra-modern materials and technology. And finally—and perhaps most unusually—Rob firmly believes that those drums must be affordable for the working drummer.

To put his philosophy into operation, Rob created Magstar Drums. Located “on the side of a mountain in Massachusetts,” Rob’s business is based on choices. According to Rob, “Every drummer should be his or her own judge of the ‘correct’ sound that a drum needs in order to convey his or her style and technique. Each drum must be treated as a separate entity—the end result being a sound and look that is unique and expressive.”

Since individuality is one of Rob’s goals, understanding the desires of his customers is a key element of his construction process. So he provides each customer with a “wish list” form to complete, requesting information on the customer’s sound objectives (tuning range, projection, articulation, etc.), playing situation, preference in rims and drumheads, choice of finish, and price range. This last item is unique, in that the customer tells Rob what he or she can afford, and the two work together to discuss design options within that budget.

In order to fulfill the desires of his customers as closely as possible, Rob offers a wide variety of choices in shell composition, diameter, depth, and thickness. Most of his shells are of New England rock maple, in six, eight, ten, or twelve plies. He also offers choices of bearing edges—after first providing the customer with information on what acoustic qualities can be expected from each different type of edge.

Magstar finishes are another unique aspect of the drums. Rob uses such materials as metal-based enamel (which gives a wooden shell a somewhat metallic projection), water-based lacquers (harder than other lacquers and totally environmentally safe), and hand-applied shellac (such as was used on furniture two hundred years ago)—as well as familiar plastic coverings. The insides of the shells are hand-sealed with a sealer that penetrates the wood—rather than being sprayed or lacquered with a material that sits on top of the wood.

As I said earlier, affordability is a key issue with Rob. So rather

than go to the expense of using proprietary lugs, tension rods, strainers, and rims—an expense that would have to be passed on to the consumer—Rob fits Magstar drums with generic imported hardware. To ensure that this economy measure has no effect on the quality of the finished drum, Rob personally reworks any element of the hardware that isn’t up to his standards. For example, he replaces the screws used to attach the lug casings to the shells with tempered socket-head screws—which are fitted with neoprene washers to prevent shell cracking from metal-to-wood contact. He also hand-cuts gasket material to place between the casings and the shells. Each tension rod is fitted with a fiber washer that both prevents metal-to-metal contact between the rod and the drum rim and also helps to prevent the tension rod from backing out and de-tuning the drum during heavy playing.

Rob re-packs every tension casing with foam to eliminate any noise. He also dismantles all the generic snare strainers, refitting them with washers and other components and reworking them to eliminate any “play” or sloppiness and thus improve their performance.

As a final nod toward both economy and performance, Magstar lugs, rims, and some strainer parts are powder-coated (in a wrinkle black finish) rather than chrome-plated. This provides a durable, rust-proof finish that is both attractive and functional. The finish doesn’t pick up fingerprints the way chrome does, cannot tarnish, and is much less expensive than chrome plating. On the other hand, parts that are required to move against each other (such as on snare strainers) are plated rather than powder-coated to ensure smooth operation and optimum functionality.

Any Magstar drum you might purchase would be designed by you to suit your purposes, and so would likely not resemble our test models. However, our test drums do illustrate the level of sound and construction quality that you might expect from Magstar. So let’s take a look and a listen.

## 5½x14 Misty Midnite Blue

This is Rob Kampa’s “general purpose” snare, in terms of what it is designed to do and how it is priced. It features an eight-ply shell, a medium-sharp bearing edge, ultra-light hoops, and a light mist coat of clear lacquer over the sealer on the insides of the shells to promote a bright response. I really liked this drum. It had a good tuning range from medium to quite high, yet it never sounded sharp or thin, and retained a good fundamental mid-range tone. Snare response was good and projection was excellent. The generic hardware, Yamaha-type snare throwoff, and lightweight hoops made the drum light and easy to carry. Rob suggests that this drum could work well for louder rock simply by changing to heavier hoops for stronger rimshot sounds. The drum was finished in a gorgeous deep midnite blue metallic lacquer.

## 6x13 Cosmic Blue

This is a ten-ply snare with a 45° bearing edge and a very sharp contact point on the third ply from the top. It’s fitted with ultra-light hoops and finished with a “cosmic pepper,” which is a black/gray hammer finish. The look achieved by the metal-based enamel drum was fitted with an Ambassador snare-side heads. The sound was crisp and clear, somewhere between a metal drum and a wood drum—a result, Rob says, of the metal-based finish.

Similar to the drum with the cast hoops and finished with the “big gun” American projection and body, the die-cast hoops probably helped to give the drum its tones. And once a drum of this character of the wood-shell drum.

This ten-ply drum features a frequency cut. Fitted with an extra-thin snare throwoff, it sounds bright and featured a bright punch.

This was another drum that featured a bearing edge on the outer plies. The sound of the top head was bright as well.) The finish, which was applied in coats, sanded between coats. Then it was polished.



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### 6x13 Cosmic Pepper

This is a ten-ply drum, with a 45° bearing edge with every sharp contact on the third ply from the outside. It's fitted with standard hoops and finished in "cosmic pepper," which is a black/gray hammered metal look achieved by the use of metal-based enamel. The drum was fitted with *Ambassador* batter and snare-side heads. The sound was crisp and clean, falling somewhere between that of a metal drum and a wood drum—a result, Rob says, of

the metal-based finish over the wood shell.

### 6 1/2 x 14 Black Hammered

Similar to the drum above, this larger model was fitted with die-cast hoops and finished in a black metal-based enamel. This was the "big gun" among our test group, and it offered tremendous projection and body. Yet it was still quite crisp and sensitive. The die-cast hoops produced extremely solid-sounding rimshots, and helped to give the drum a very clean sound, with limited overtones. And once again, the metal-based enamel finish placed the character of the drum halfway between that of a metal- and a wood-shell drum.

### 3 1/2 x 14 Piccolo

This ten-ply drum had exceptional snare response and high-frequency cut. Fitted with an *Ambassador* batter head, a Ludwig extra-thin snare side head, and a Ludwig *P-80*-type snare throwoff, it sounded crisp and articulate—and *very loud*. It featured a bright pumpkin-orange water-based stain finish.

### 6x13 Orange Shellac

This was another personal favorite of mine. The ten-ply shell featured a bearing edge cut to allow head contact with the three outer plies. The sound was tight, crisp, and funky. (A little de-tuning of the top head allowed for a more full-bodied, fatback sound, as well.) The finish of this drum was a hand-applied shellac, which was applied in over forty progressively thinner and thinner coats, sanded between each eight coats, and then allowed to cure. Then it was polished with steel wool and rubbed with fine rotten-



stone, then waxed and buffed to a satin-gloss effect. This is the way antique furniture was originally finished, and some of those finishes are still beautiful after centuries. The Magstar shellacked drum is beautiful now, and one might expect one's grandchildren to be able to say the same.

### Prices

Pricing for Magstar drums will vary according to design, size, and features. But here's a quick reference chart to let you know what you might expect to pay for one of Rob Kampa's beauties. Prices shown are based on drums with eight- or ten-ply shells (six- and twelve-ply are available) and fitted with 2mm or 2.3mm steel hoops. (Die-cast hoops are extra.) I think you'll see that Rob's pricing structure puts the dream of a custom-built snare drum firmly within reach. And by the way, Rob also does custom re-covering and reworking on existing drums. For further information, contact Magstar Drums, P.O. Box 591, 12 Cooleyville Road, Shutesbury, MA 01072, (413) 665-7376.

Dimension	Covered Drum (35 choices)	Metal Enamel or Lacquer (any stain or solid)	Hand-Applied Natural Orange Shellac
4x13	259	279	299
5x13	269	289	309
6x13	279	299	319
4x14	269	289	309
5x14	279	299	319
6x14	289	309	329
7x14	299	319	339