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Magstar Drums

by Rick Van Horn

Sometimes you *can* get what you want.

Rob Kampa personally builds every Magstar drum with the goal of achieving equal parts custom craftsmanship and no-frills affordability. A working drummer himself, Rob can relate to drummers who have a desire for a personalized instrument—and who also have budgets with distinct limitations. So Rob has turned his skills toward making drums according to the wishes of the buyer, using the highest-quality manufacturing standards throughout but employing cost-cutting measures wherever possible. The result is something that might sound like a contradiction in terms: an *affordable* line of custom-built drums.

The kit Rob sent us for review consisted of 9x8, 9x10, 9x12, 13x14, and 14x16 suspended toms (all fitted with RIMS mounts), a 16x22 bass drum, and two Suraya segment-shell snare drums that we'll examine separately. All of the toms featured 6-ply maple shells with 6-ply reinforcing hoops; the bass drum had an 8-ply shell without hoops. Magstar manufactures no stands; the rack system in the photo shown here is Rob's own. He can provide whatever hardware is chosen by the buyer.

Drum Construction

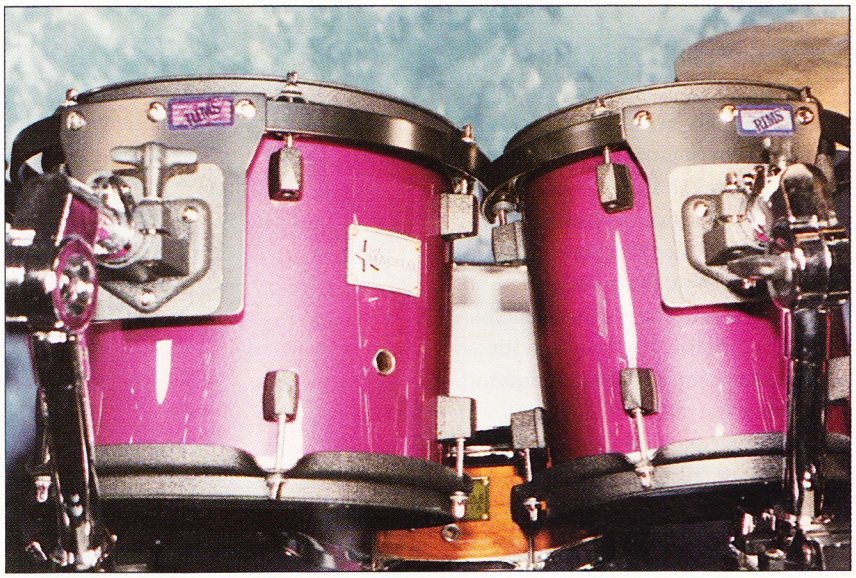
Kampa believes that the depths he chose for the toms on our review kit tend to produce "tone, decay, and overall resonance that are player-friendly." Although he will build drums with different ply configurations on customer request, he likes 6-ply toms because "the thin shells give a full-bodied sound." He uses reinforcing hoops because "they create a drum of high strength, and provide more contact between the head and the 'mass' of the drum's bearing edges." The bass drum is 8-ply for added strength, and

because "it's an often-requested ply configuration in the context of the 16x22 size."

Bearing edges on toms are cut on a very sharp vertex, resulting in contact between the drumhead and only the outer two plies of the shell. Rob believes that this provides "a high degree of tuning response due to head movement reacting to slight tension rod adjustment. Thick single- and 2-ply heads are easier to tune, and produce well-defined tones." Bass drum edges feature a slightly rounded vertex and 3-ply head/shell contact. The outside edge of the contact area is rounded slightly, thus "increasing the shell as a medium of resonance [resulting in a] beefy, well-rounded tonality."

To maximize shell resonance—and to help minimize costs—Rob has fitted the drums with low-mass, die-cast lugs, with special hand-cut gaskets between the lugs and the shells. Toms and snare drums feature 2.3mm rolled steel hoops. The bass drum also featured metal hoops, which Rob believes "eliminates the chipping or breakage associated with wood." The drums were fitted with Cannon generic Pearl-style tom-mount brackets, tom arms, spurs, and bass drum claws. Rob feels that the Cannon hardware is as functional as any on the market—while priced lower than most. The bass drum featured drumkey-style tension rods, and all the lugs featured Joe Montineri high-strength T-rod washers to decrease the possibility of de-tuning.

Batter heads on all the toms were Attack models with a *Tone Ridge* for sound control; clear 1-ply Attack heads were on the bottoms of the toms. Rob likes the Attack heads because they are not only affordable, but offer a "sharp, well-defined attack" that he believes complements the acoustic nature of the drums. The bass drum batter was an Evans *Genera EQ1*; the front head was a black single-ply logo head with a 4" hole.



Generic, low-mass lugs and a rich-looking covered finish make the Magstar kit attractive while keeping its price low.

Appearance

Although it looked for all the world like a hand-rubbed lacquer finish, the finish on the toms and bass drums of our review kit was actually a deep-purple metallic covering of polycarbon material, which, Rob says, "offers superior abrasion and chemical resistance due to hardcoat technology." I didn't deliberately try to mar the surface to test that claim, but I can say that the material felt very hard, smooth, and strong (and it did easily shrug off a few minor collisions between drums as I was working with the kit).

The covering material didn't interfere with drumhead seating, because it's butt-jointed rather than lapped over—meaning that the circumference of the shell stays perfectly smooth. In terms of shell resonance, my playing tests revealed no discernible restriction of resonance that might be attributable to the covering material. (Rob feels that the covering acts like another ply and might actually give the drums a little warmer sound.)

In terms of pure aesthetics, the depth of the finish was remarkable. Under stage lights, the drums looked incredibly rich and lustrous. And the *real* beauty is that the use of the covering material keeps the cost of the drums significantly lower than they'd be with a lacquered finish that looked this good.

Although chrome-plated hardware is standard on Magstar drums, the rims and lugs of our review kit were finished with an optional black wrinkle epoxy powder coating, which looked striking against the purple drum finish. (Powder-coated hardware also has excellent durability, and it won't rust, chip, peel, or tarnish the way chrome-plated hardware can.)

Bass And Tom Sound

Of course, the big question is, does Rob Kampa's use of low-cost components and high-quality construction methods result in drums that sound good? Absolutely! I had the opportunity to listen to the drums on a high-energy club gig, both from a playing point of view and (for a change) also from the audience. (A very talented guest drummer sat in for a set.) With only the slightest amount of muffling (and a small hole in the front head) the bass drum sounded big and powerful, yet had plenty of well-defined punch. The toms sang out clearly, with *lots* of resonance and with distinct pitch differentials that I had been able to achieve with a minimum of tuning effort. The Attack heads performed just as Rob said they would—with the accent on the "attack." To be honest, this wouldn't be my first choice of tonality, and I later experimented to see if the drums would sound as good with other types of heads. I found that I preferred them with clear, twin-ply heads; I thought these added a bit of roundness to the tom sound that had been missing before. But this is admittedly a matter of personal taste, and only serves to illustrate how versatile the drums themselves were.

Segment Shell Snare Drums

The snare drums Rob Kampa sent for review with the drumkit both featured segment drumshells made by Suraya. These shells are created from segmented arcs that are laminated, stacked, and reinforced by vertical dowels. The result is a shell that is more dense and solid than a ply shell, with exceptional strength and a unique appearance.

The lighter-colored drum in the snare-drum photo features a $4^1/_2$x14, $^7/_{16}$"-thick, 30-segment teak shell, with a bearing edge that allows the head to make contact with one-quarter of the shell thickness. This drum was fitted with 2.3mm chrome rims, ten die-cast black wrinkle powder-coat lugs, Joe Montineri T-rod washers and high-strength snare cord, an Attack 1-ply coated batter head, and an Attack medium snare-side head. It was finished with six coats of hand-applied orange shellac, rubbed out with steel wool, and then coated with butcher wax. According to Kampa, "this 'open-faced' shellac finish lets the segments of the shell 'move' and allows the drum to produce as natural as possible a tonality—[as opposed to] loading the exterior up with a lot of lacquer." The interior of the shell is given a hand-applied coat of "sealer," not lacquer.

The darker snare drum features a 4x14, $^3/_8$"-thick, 24-segment wenge shell. The drum was equipped with black wrinkle powder-coat rims and lugs, Joe Montineri T-rod washers and high-strength snare cord, an Attack 1-ply coated batter head with *Tone Ridge*, and a Remo *Ambassador* snare-side head. It was finished with twelve coats of clear nitrocellulose lacquer and four coats of sealer over the natural wenge, which is a dark, tropical wood.

In keeping with his desire to keep costs down wherever possible, Rob uses generic snare strainers. However, he personally dismantles and re-works every throw-off mechanism—replacing inferior components (such as washers and other fittings) with higher-quality parts in order to bring the performance up to his standards. So in essence, each throw-off is custom-built.

My favorite of the two drums was the teak-shell model. I found it incredibly sensitive, with an optimum tuning range from medium- to high-pitch. The drum had a rich, woody tone with lots of crisp projection. A little bit of snare-tension adjustment went a long way with this drum, allowing me to go from a tight, military sound (nice for articulate syncopations) to a washy, New Orleans/fatback sound. In general, this was an extremely versatile instrument that provided me with everything I like in a snare drum.

The wenge drum was more limited in its acoustic capabilities. But within those limitations, it performed remarkably. Owing to the density of the wood shell, the drum had less "woody" character and a lot more crack—getting into the territory of a metal snare. This characteristic, along with the shallow shell depth, caused it to perform best when the heads were cranked well up. The drum produced lots of ring (even though Rob has attempted to control that somewhat with his choice of heads), which you might consider positive or negative depending on your taste and musical situation. Suffice it to say, the wenge drum would take a back seat to no other in the projection department.

Conclusions

I like Rob Kampa's approach to drum building. He focuses his attentions on those elements that are integral to the acoustic performance and function of a drum, and keeps everything else simple. The result is a line of drums that look and sound great, are easy to work with, and are priced within the bounds of reality. The pricing for our review kit (including the optional RIMS mounts, black wrinkle powder-coated hardware, and Cannon tom brackets, arms, and plates) is as follows: 9x8 tom—$349, 9x10 tom—$399, 9x12 tom—$429, 13x14 tom—$499, 14x16 tom—$549, 16x22 bass drum—$799. (Drums with chrome lugs and rims and/or with other types of covered finishes are available at lower cost. Any tom-mounting components can be obtained and adapted.) The wenge snare drum as described above has a list price of $699; the teak snare is priced at $799.

Remember, the drums in our review kit were not *the* Magstar drums; they were samples of *some* Magstar drums. Rob Kampa builds 'em to suit *you*. If you're considering a new set, why not consider something custom-tailored to your needs, your fantasies, and your budget? You can contact Rob at Magstar Drums, P.O. Box 461, Athol, MA 01331, (508) 249-6028.