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# Magstar Custom Snare Drums



Jim Exposito

by Rick Van Horn

## Sometimes you CAN get what you want!

When you buy a Magstar drum, you aren't really buying a drum. At least, not to begin with. What you're buying is the expertise of a master drum *builder*—namely Rob Kampa. Although Rob does offer drums in a few more or less established “series,” there's no such thing as a “production model” drum from Magstar.

Before he'll begin to make a drum for you, Rob will ask dozens of questions, like what type of sound appeals to you, how much versatility you need from your drum, how you like to tune, what sort of heads you favor, how much projection you require, how sensitive you like your drum to be, how much pitch range you expect from a drum...and on and on. Only when he is satisfied that you and he have agreed on *exactly* what sort of drum you want him to build will he begin construction. (And by that time you may discover that what you really want is a totally different drum than the one you originally were interested in.)

Rob's primary focus in building a drum is to base its construction on “the sonic/visual inspiration of the customer.” As he puts it, “All ‘optimum’ concepts of acoustics, mechanics, and visual appeal may not be the same. The true essence of ‘custom building’ is that form, function, and the resultant sonic entity that is the drum are *optimized* by the conversion of the customer's desires from concept into reality. To ensure that the final product reflects the closest possible representation of the drummer's vision, Magstar will always respect the philosophy that ‘beauty is in the mind, eye, and ear of the beholder.’”

Rob also realizes that at least part of a drum's beauty generally relates to the *wallet* of the beholder. Accordingly, he believes in economizing, wherever doing so does not affect the overall quality of the drum. In other words, not *every* component of a drum need be the most exclusive or expensive that can be obtained. (And if they are, there must be an acoustic and/or aesthetic reason for their being there.) Rob also believes that a customer's budget should be taken into account at the very outset, and that it's his responsibility to work with the customer to apply that budget in the best manner possible. We'll discuss this later when we look at prices for the drums reviewed here.

The format for this review is going to be slightly different from the norm. Rob Kampa delivered each of our review drums with a very specific description of the objectives it was designed to achieve. So I'm going to list Rob's objectives for each drum, and then comment on how well those objectives were met.

### 5½x14 10-Ply Bird's-Eye Maple

This drum was actually created to the specifications of a customer, who agreed to have us review it first. The objectives for this drum included:

- General-purpose performance, good for most playing situations requiring woody projection, yet retaining a modest amount of ring (overtone)
- The ability to cut and drive, with strong rimshots
- The ability to provide sharp snare response and sensitivity in all volume ranges, and to do so in both mid- and high tunings
- Player-friendly amenities, such as an easy-to-adjust/maintain throw-off, die-cast hoops that promote uniform drumhead seating, and an oil finish that's easy to maintain with household cleaner/polishes for long life and attractiveness
- Eye-catching visual appeal, with 24K gold hardware (and brass-



Jim Exposito

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This drum proved to be a real gem. With its mid-size dimensions and shell thickness, it really did offer the sort of all-purpose performance that Rob (and his customer) sought. I tried a variety of head tensions, and the drum offered excellent response and tuning consistency at each—with a nod toward special excellence at a medium-high tuning. The relatively thick (10-ply) shell provided plenty of reflectiveness and resonance. The drum was fitted with an Attack Terry Bozzio coated batter head (which has a thin dot on its underside). That head offered crisp response and a fair amount of ring; I switched to a Remo Powerstroke 3 batter and got a dryer, slightly mellower (but no less projective) sound.

I'm not a great fan of die-cast rims, for a variety of reasons, but I will say that the rim on this drum helped create solid rimshots, while really locking in the drumhead tension. (It was possible to back one lug off to almost total looseness and still maintain head playability.)

The oil finish over the bird's-eye maple outer ply, coupled with the all-gold hardware, made this drum visually stunning. The effect was in no way diminished by the use of fairly generic lugs, which were specifically selected by Rob because their smooth shape makes them easy to polish. (Rob believes in low-maintenance hardware.) Neither is the effect diminished by the equally generic, block-style, side-throw strainer. However, the use of these hardware items *does* have the effect of reducing the drum's overall cost. Again, a real gem.

### 4¾x14 8-Ply Bird's-Eye Maple



#### Objectives:

- To build a drum with a depth between "standard" 5½" and piccolo 4", in order to achieve the attack, resonance, and sustain of either size depending on the tuning range: crisp and sharp with short decay when "cranked"; more full-bodied when de-tuned to a mid-to-low tension
- To combine the relatively thin 6½ mm shell with nickel-silver tube lugs to create a comparatively "dry" and less "ringy" projection that is characteristic of drums with thicker shells
- To provide one drum that might possibly cover most types of volume/pitch/projection requirements of a general business gig

In order to meet his objectives, Rob fitted this drum with nickel-silver tube lugs based on a design used by L&S [originally Leedy & Sons, but generally known as Leedy and Strupe] in the early 1930s. A solid, cylindrical post attaches to the drum; a smaller-diameter tube passes through the post. (The lugs are custom-made to Rob's specifications by US Custom Drums.) Rob believes that nickel lugs lend a brighter resonance to the shell's acoustic chemistry than brass lugs, due to their higher density and hardness.

The drum features 2.3 mm steel hoops, 20-strand wire snares, and a very small side-throw throwoff. It came equipped with an Attack Terry Bozzio coated batter head.

The shell's interior is rubbed with a crude oil "just to keep the

wood from becoming overly dry." The exterior of the shell features a fresh orange shellac finish hand-rubbed with wax, over some striking wood-burning etchings hand-crafted by master carpenter/cabinetmaker Frank Thomas, who resides near the Magstar operation. Frank created a Native American motif for this drum, with intricate feather, arrow, wolf, and eagle designs that make it a work of visual as well as acoustical art.

In terms of sound, Rob definitely met one of his objectives. The thin shell tended to favor lower frequencies, making this moderately shallow drum actually a bit lower in fundamental tonality than the 5½x14 bird's-eye maple. That's not to say it couldn't be cranked up; I was able to get the "crisp and sharp" near-piccolo performance that Rob sought when I tightened the head a bit. But I really felt that the drum "shone" most when allowed to develop a more full-bodied tonal spectrum. I can't honestly say how much the nickel-silver tube lugs contributed to the drum's projection characteristic, but I can attest that it was, in fact, comparatively "dry" and less "ringy" than any of the other drums in our test group (all of which had thicker shells).

### 5½x14 Vintage Limited Edition



#### Objectives:

- To create a drum that incorporates some of the design and acoustic attributes of one-piece maple-shell snare drums from the 1930s through the 1960s, along with desirable characteristics of contemporary snare drums
- To utilize a solid, steam-bent maple shell with inherent tonal qualities such as excellent projection, dry, "in the gut" punch when hit hard, and controlled, sensitive snare response in low- to mid-volume situations
- To meet the needs of drummers seeking one drum to cover most playing situations, while also appealing to vintage aficionados

This drum features a steam-bent solid-maple shell, made by Suraya, an Easthampton, Massachusetts custom-shell company from which Rob obtains his solid-wood and segment shells. It's fitted with the same nickel-silver tube lugs as are on the 4¾x14 8-ply bird's-eye maple model, for the same reasons. It also features 2.3 mm steel hoops and a Ludwig P-85 throwoff. (The throwoff is Rob's personal preference; other models are available at the customer's request.) It comes equipped with an Attack Terry Bozzio coated batter head. Rob likes the brightness that these heads contribute to the drum's overall sound, because he believes that solid shells tend to eliminate some overtones. "This head choice is obviously a lean toward 'contemporary' acoustic performance elements," he says. "Otherwise, a Remo Fiberskyn 3 head might be used for a more 'authentic' sound."

All fasteners on the drum are made of stainless steel, and the shell interior is hand-finished with fresh orange shellac. The drum's exterior is wrapped in an ultra-white marine pearl covering.

Simply put, I *loved* this drum. It did exactly what Rob predicted: It offered the best of both "vintage" and "contemporary" acoustic



performance characteristics. I'm a great proponent of solid-shell drums, for their improved resonance and musicality. I like the way reinforcing rings work with such shells to stress the initial stick attack and then let the overall drum sound develop fully. (This is more obvious on toms, but the effect still exists in snare drums.) Rob's drum took full advantage of these properties to create a full-bodied, relatively warm and round sound, with tremendous pitch versatility. I could drop the drum down into "fatback" range and get a throaty, meaty sound, or I could crank it up achingly tight for a crisp, rudimental sound.

All of the above related to the drum fitted with Rob's choice of head, the Attack *Terry Bozzio* model. Taking his cue a bit further, I swapped that head for the thickest model of Remo's *Fiberskyn 3* batter series—in an unabashed attempt to get "back in time" to the days of mellow calfskin heads and the warm drum sound they produced. Well...it worked. I felt as though I had stepped into the drum chair of a swing-era big band. Warmth, depth, and character—yet no lack of snare sensitivity or overall crispness (most likely due to the drum's very contemporary sharp bearing edge). I also liked the added dryness that the drum had with this head; its overall resonance (or "ring," in this case) was more subdued—and I mean that in the most positive sense.

I also loved the *look* of this drum. The nickel-silver tube lugs and the venerable Ludwig *P-85* are consistent with the "vintage" aspect of the drum, while the 2.3 mm steel hoops look more professional (and contemporary) than the single-flanged or straight hoops of yesteryear. Personally, I think that makes for a wonderful compromise appearance. And how can you argue with a white marine pearl covering?

### 7x13 Big Block Cherry Segment



#### Objectives:

- To combine aspects of metal sciences and wood technology in order to create a drum with good, inherent "wave transmission capability" throughout the shell and the lugs—thus

producing a highly projective acoustic entity

- To build a 13" drum that packs the punch of a 14" model, but still gives the response and speed that smaller-diameter drums can offer
- To take advantage of a segment shell's capability of being tuned at high tension without entering a "choke threshold," and to be de-tuned to a mid/low torque that yields thicker, more mid-range tonality

This drum features a segment shell, made by Suraya. It combines large, curved blocks of solid cherry wood that are laminated, stacked, and doweled for additional strength. Rob believes that segment-shell drums are fundamentally more "present" in tone and volume than other drums, due to their structure and mass. The shell itself is heavy and thick, and it features a sharp bearing edge that's carefully milled to provide 3 mm of head-contact area.

The drum is fitted with lugs of cast bronze, which Rob describes as "a metal that has wonderful tonal qualities that react in a harmonious manner with the shell without creating undesirable overtones

that other metals might produce." Rob designed the lugs himself, with a smooth, easy-to-polish "low maintenance" silhouette. The lugs are painstakingly hand-tumbled and polished. Then they—along with the 2.3 mm steel hoops and all the other hardware—are 24K gold-plated. All fasteners are of stainless steel. Attack *Terry Bozzio* batter and snare-side heads are used.

No doubt about it: This is a high-concept, high-tech drum. With its unique shell and hardware elements, along with a rather unusual size, it's intended to achieve some pretty impressive goals. Well, it does. This drum certainly offered the most sheer projection of any of our test models—largely owing, I believe, to the reflective properties of its dense, solid, block shell. I'm partial to 13"-diameter snare drums as a species, and I've had a lot of positive experience with block shells. Put those two together as in this case, and it's a winning combination that maximizes sensitivity, response, and sheer playability *along with* projection.

My experience with block-shell drums has been that they tend to favor high frequencies—but the Magstar cherry block drum proved an exception. Perhaps due to the ratio of its depth to its diameter, this drum offered a solid, underlying fundamental tonality at any head tension. When I tuned it down into a medium-tension range, it positively *growled*. Backing off a bit on the snares as well turned it into a greasy New Orleans second-line snare. Conversely, tightening both the heads and the snares created a pistol-shot crack that would be the envy of many a brass piccolo. (This was the one drum in our group on which I was never tempted to swap heads. The bright-sounding *Bozzio* heads seemed to maximize the drum's response, no matter what tension was applied.)

The big block cherry drum's very streamlined bronze lugs, block-style throwoff, and gold-plated hardware all complemented the natural-cherry finish to create the look of a "classic" instrument. Adding that to its acoustic characteristics, "classic" would be a most appropriate description of this unique drum.

#### Prices

As I said earlier, Rob Kampa believes in economy as an element of a custom drum's value. With that in mind, his pricing structure is as "drummer-friendly" as his design philosophy. For example, the 5½x14 10-ply bird's-eye maple drum carries a list price of only \$399, while the 5½x14 solid-shell *Vintage* model is priced at \$549.

The basic price for the 4¾x14 8-ply bird's-eye maple drum (with nickel-silver tube lugs, as described) would be \$450. Frank Thompson's fanciful etchings (which could be available on any wood-shell drum at \$25-\$50 per etching) add \$250 to this drum's price, for a total of \$700.

In addition to its inherent musical value, the 7x13 big block cherry drum's price reflects the combined costs of cherry wood, segment-shell construction, cast-bronze lugs, and 24K gold-plated hardware. But even with all that, the price is \$799—extremely reasonable for a drum with such unique construction elements.

Given Rob Kampa's absolutely fanatical devotion to custom-creation of every drum for every customer, combined with the quality and craftsmanship that his finished drums display, I'd say that his Magstar beauties are actually bargains! They're only available "over the counter" in a very few retail stores. Otherwise, you can contact Rob direct at Magstar Drums [Member APIA], PO Box 1172, Plymouth, MA 02362, (508) 747-3493.

by Mark Parsons

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