Tale Of Two Drum Companies

DRUM! VISITS DW & PACIFIC DRUMS AND PERCUSSION

Strawberry Fields (And Drums) Forever. A few hundred yards from highway 101 and across the street from strawberry fields stands a nondescript building in an Oxnard, California office park. Aside from the two-feethigh blue DW logo out front, no one would know that since 2002, this has been the home of the premier American custom drum company. In front of the blue logo, several other journalists buzz with anticipation about touring a drum factory.

Stepping in through the main doors, it doesn't look much like a drum factory. A few drum posters dot the cubicle walls, and employees walk back and forth going about their business. Perhaps thinking that every cubicle contained a custom drum set is a bit outlandish, but it all seems so ... normal. The giddiness of being in a drum castle hasn't hit yet. Then, Vice-President John Good drops a bomb and says, "Neil Peart was here yesterday."

Ah, yes. There's the giddiness.

The Drum Workshop story begins in 1972 when it really was, in fact, a drum workshop. Current president Don Lombardi opened a tiny teaching studio in Santa Monica, where he offered private lessons and monthly workshops. Good took three months of lessons from Lombardi until the mentor told the young buck that becoming a successful drummer may not be in his cards. Good then became his part-time sales manager, a friendship ensued, and their passion for drumming led them to develop the first DW product – a height-adjustable trapcase seat.

In 1977, DW's focus changed from selling to manufacturing with the purchase of Camco's machinery, tools, and dies. Lombardi reintroduced the Camco 5000 nylon strap pedal under the DW name, and thus the company's line of innovative hardware was born. Oh yeah, they also managed to get a nifty drummaking operation running.

BY BILLY RAMIREZ



Good's Good Wood. While Lombardi is the hardware guru, Good is the wood expert and today's tour guide. We are led past Lombardi's office, which is packed to the gills with every piece of hardware imaginable, and into Good's office for a lesson in DW's wood and their new thing – Vertical Low Timber shells.

Good pulls out a standard 7-ply DW shell with a 3-ply reinforcement hoop and

smaller drums sound bigger, which is really cool. A 20" bass drum in [VLT] will kill you. It's wonderful."

Although death by bass drum might appeal to some drummers, it might take a while for others to warm up to the vertical grain inherent in VLT shells. "I found that some people don't like this look," Good says. "I personally like the vertical look, but let's say you don't. Let's say you want of hands seals the lap joint. "The material is put all around the drum with a fast-bond material. When we come to this lap part here, we nuke the finish. We put a solvent in there, press them together, and melt the joint. It will bond hopefully forever," Good explains. "There was a period of time where we used double-backed tape. Some drum companies still do. Put the drum in a case, drive it down a cold road, put it under hot



an 8-ply VLT shell, which has a noticeably different vertical grain. He asks a volunteer to tap on the standard shell. "The thicker the shell, the higher the pitch. The thinner the shell, the lower the pitch," Good explains. "To follow the concept, this is an 8-ply shell." The volunteer taps on the VLT shell, which sounds noticeably lower. "The pitch should go up, but it is VLT," Good says while smiling like he just got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Here's why this is good. Often I get people who ask me, 'Can you make my drum shells lowpitched?' Instead of going and selecting shells that are lower, I can determine how to make their drums lower. I can also make your upper toms to have a higher pitch, but you want there to be a big separation to your floor toms. Now what we're doing on all of our drums in the near future is 'Built In Bottom.' We turn the *inside* vertical. It's not as extreme, but you get some benefits from that."

Wrap Artist. Our first steps into the factory lead to a wrapping station. Surprisingly low-tech, DW's custom tag becomes increasingly apparent as I notice the amount of hands-on work that the builders do. One worker carefully preps shells for wrapping, while a second meticulously aligns the wrap. Finally, another set

lights, back into the case and the cold road again, after a period of time [the joint] opens up. This prevents that."

Glowing about Champagne Sparkle, Good shows a sheet of his new glittery wraps. Brighter, richer, and extra-bubbly, this Champagne Sparkle garners "oohs" all around. "This is crushed glass. Look how beautiful these finishes get. It's fantastic. We're doing more things with glass. Some of my favorite finishes were always champagne, but I like my champagne in a glass. It's like sparkles on steroids," Good gushes.

Still beaming about the bubbly, he leads us to the custom finish area where kits like Peart's modest Rush anniversary drums are outfitted with customized designs. Custom graphics can be loaded on a computer, which is hooked up to a cutting machine that can produce a cutout in a few minutes. To demonstrate, a builder loaded a bat design on the computer and quickly had a cutout that can be applied on a drum.

Fading Into The Sunset. Our next stop is the airbrush room where DW's

ting painted, shells are dry sanded, primed, and dry sanded again. After lacquering, they are wet sanded with very fine sandpaper. Finally, they are sent for drilling and to be edged.

From The Ground Up. The wood room is where the magic begins. Many large metal shelves and several long tables are stacked with various sheets of woods is match the sound." The process sounds good on paper, but seeing it in action is a completely different story. Good leads us to a stack of shells wrapped in macassar ebony and allows us a few seconds to gaze at them the way a car aficionado drools over a classic GTO.

Behind us, a hot and powerful metal press opens up and reveals a batch of freshly cured sheets of maple. Workers remove



renowned fades are produced. Bare shells hang next to freshly lacquered zebrawood tubs, and today's finish du jour is a red fade. Good asks an airbrush artist to shows off his skill, and with a spin of his painting table, the painter blasts the drum with quick sweeps of red paint. Within seconds, the drum fades beautifully but the painter is not done. The shell looks great now, but he will apply more red paint on it until the fade is absolutely perfect.

Seeking relief from the lacquer fumes, we head into the sanding and buffing quarters. The noise levels make it difficult to hear what Good is saying, but his pantomime skills are top-notch. Before getthat will become a set of drums for tomorrow's next great drummer. "Lots of exotic woods here," Good gushes like a dad watching his little leaguer hit a homerun. He developed a new process that allows him to use exotic woods as an outer veneer, and has plenty of reason to gush. Even though some of these exotic woods are only available in narrow widths, his process allows him to slice the wood into sheets and glue the slices side by side to create a veneer. The process also allows him to speed up the building process. "That takes two steps away. All I have to do is make the intervalic relationship. If

the finished sheets, made of glued plies, and insert new ones between the powerful metal plates of the press. "They are under 3,600 pounds of pressure," says Good. "They will be in there for three minutes." A few feet from the press, a worker is stacking the cured and pressed sheets. He lays each one in a staggered fashion, as opposed to directly over each other, which will create a seam joint in the final shell. Then he folds the plies over and places the roughly round shell in a green metal cylinder that will bake in the wood at 185 degrees for five minutes. A shell in an adjacent cylinder has finished cooking, and as the worker pulls it out, the they all have the same face, all I have to do outer and inner plies of wood peel off.

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bunch of journalists looking for a scoop, but Good tells us that it is all part of his master plan. Those sheets of wood are there serving as our soundtrack, Good takes us to to protect the actual shell from the hot metal parts in the cylinder. The guy is always thinking.

We stroll past stacks and stacks of bare shells and enter the massive Gon Bops manufacturing plant. Granted, that is a bit of an overstatement since it is really

Disaster has seemingly struck in front of a a small detail, but that is precisely where DW excels.

> With the sound of drums being tuned see how their pedals are made. Like an automobile assembly line, minus all the machines, cars, and whatnot, employees build DW's popular pedals piece by small piece. One puts together the drive chain, while another assembles the rod. Another puts the cam and springs onto the pedal

"Tapshell Place." Here is where Good taps every single shell to find a set that has a proper intervalic relationship. This is perhaps the most important step in the building process. If the shells don't sound perfectly as a group, they don't get built into a drum set. "This is so important to us. We can't be casual about this." After a set of shells has been timbre-matched and selected for production, it is entered into DW's computer system and assigned a number.



just a small room, but these purveyors of percussion are pumping out the congas. While we did not get to see a conga being built from start to finish, we did see congas in their early stave stage as they were lathed and sanded down into their more familiar curves.

By this time, Good is hurrying us along because we need to get out on the road to the PDP factory before L.A. traffic, which is a redundant term, gets bad. The next stage of our tour takes us to the hardware stations where drums get fitted with all the necessary lugs and brackets and are readied for shipping. A lot of the metal tubing on shelves where drums are stacked is wrapped in plastic to prevent nicks on the shells. It's

towers, and then another employee affixes the footboard to the baseplate.

We come across the B.O.A (Bow Oriented Action) spring-less pedal and Good lights up. Built by DW, but sold as a PDP piece, all of the pedal's spring action comes from the flexible footboard. "The action is just ..." says Good, finishing by closing his eyes and kissing his fingertips like a satisfied chef. The pedal does indeed play very well, but its taste remains a mystery.

Knocking On Drumming Heaven's Door. With the tour winding down, we head up to the timbre matching area affectionately known as La Fabrica De PDP. (The PDP

"A customer can call here with the number and we can tell them where it is: order printed, if it's in production, finish ply, edged, assembled, and shipped.'

All tapped out, Good leads us into the Showroom. A dozen or so fully decked out kits gleam beautifully in the lights, including a new jazz kit that will be unveiled at the next Winter NAMM. The kid-in-a-candy-store analogy applies here and we all get behind our own kit for an impromptu jam session. Curt Bisquera joins the group for an impromptu interview and miniclinic to round out what has been a fantastic morning.

Factory). Kilometers away from the tourist traps and silly bars that attract American partiers with cheap drinks stands the Pacific Drums And Percussion factory. After a drive through the heart of Ensenada, finely piloted by Mexico Project Manager Tivadar Horvath and Mexico Operation Manager David Leoncavallo, we arrive at the plant and are greeted at the door by Plant Manager Victor Ballesteros. He takes us into the tiny showroom, where he gives a quick explanation of the PDP product line and lets us wail away a bit to satisfy our drumming hunger pangs.

With the drumming temporarily out of our systems, we headed off into the roomy factory that hasn't yet been packed to the gills like the DW plant. Elbowroom is abundant in the new factory as Ballesteros takes us to a set of large orange shelves that hold sheets of maple. Like the DW wood, each sheet is 1/36" thick, and eight of them are used to make PDP shells. "It's different than DW. It's two 3-ply cores and an inner and an outer ply," DW Marketing Director Scott Donnell says. "Plus, there's no reinforcement hoop.³

Affordable as they are, PDP doesn't make low-end drums. Unfortunately, some drummers hold a misconception that the woods used by PDP are leftovers from DW's operation. "A lot of people think it is lesser wood, or the second wood - the stuff we didn't use for DW. It's not true. It's the exact same quality of maple that we use on DW," Donnell states. Leoncavallo adds, "When we order wood, the truck comes to Oxnard, drops off wood there and goes down to San Diego for export. It's the same wood."

The factory is very open and many parts of the operation can be seen from a single vantage point. Next to these metal shelves, a builder is cutting sheets of maple that will then be run through a machine that covers the entire wood with glue. Another builder takes the sheets and stacks them into plies of maple that are then placed into a huge metal press like the one in Oxnard. Within minutes, these plies are folded over and inserted into the shellbaking cylinders. The process is faster than at DW but no less exact.

After shells are made, they are prepped for finishing and take different routes. Some head over to a station where they will be stained and then sent to the airbrushing room for some sweet fading action. Others will be sent to a machine where they get groovy. "We put a groove in the shell where one layer of the FinishPly gets wrapped

around and comes over," Leoncavallo says. The groove allows the outside circumference of the drum to remain round as the wrap overlaps for seam strength.

Sometimes, the wrap doesn't overlap, and PDP has to resort to some cleverness. The FinishPly sheets aren't long enough to completely cover a bass drum, so the wrap is patched to be able to go around completely. The patch is placed on the bottom of the bass drum and becomes almost invisible.

PDP does not sell drums in custom fin-

until all the holes are drilled. To finish the job, another arm drills a vent hole right through the middle.

Once the shells are dusted off and outfitted with vent hole grommets, they are sent to the finishing production line. Right now, Blue Onyx CX snare drums are being finished. One worker screws in the lugs, and sends it to another worker who adds the badge. The next guy pops in the strainer, butt, hoops, and snare wires. The last guy tunes the drum, shines it up, and packages it. Toms and bass drums go through a few



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ishes, but that doesn't mean they don't more steps in which they're fitted with exist. Next to stacks of bare shells, a beautiful Red Oyster FinishPly set of shells stands out beautifully, not only because they look absolutely amazing, but also because that's the only set made in that wrap. Donnell says that PDP experiments with new wraps and finishes that may or may not make it to production. Later on, we see a Tobacco Fade that doesn't make it because it's too light, but here's hoping the sweet red finish goes into production and sees daylight someday.

Plenty of sets will come to fruition today, and they are cruising along from one station to another. After shells are finished, they are buffed, sanded, and have their bearing edges cut. They then have their lug holes cut in a machine resembling an iron maiden torture chamber. The machine contains arms that creep up and drill a set of holes at the top and bottom of the shell. It then turns the shell, and drills some more

STM mounts, spurs, leg brackets, and other such goodies.

To conclude the tour, Ballesteros takes us to the far end of the factory, where PDP is working on some new toys that are to remain a secret at this point. What is not a secret is that as DW and PDP continue to grow, they will retain their tremendous attention to detail and continue to innovate. "We've enjoyed tremendous growth over the past several years, but we're still rooted in a small custom shop mentality," Donnell says. "Our passion and mission statement haven't wavered. With the PDP brand, we've raised the bar in terms of value and pro features, and with DW, we're extremely proud of our reputation as an industry standard. We feel a responsibility to drummers, not just to make drums pedals and hardware but to further the art of drumming."

That is some serious drumming love.