

C&C New Vintage Genuine Abalone Drums Visions From The Sea

HITS drums are beautiful

18x24 bass drum offers big
yet controllable sound

7x14 1-ply walnut snare has
distinctive tonal characteristics

MISSES very expensive

Review by Rick Van Horn

Photos by Jim Esposito

I don't generally start a review by talking about the appearance of a drum. But it's just unavoidable here. C&C Abalone drums are, quite simply, drop-dead *gorgeous*.

C&C's Bill Cardwell is a drum builder from Kansas City whose personal taste runs to vintage sounds and styles. A few years ago he got to thinking about a finish offered by Ludwig in the 1930s, called Abalone Pearl. Although it was only a plastic wrap, it became one of the most sought-after finishes of the era.

New Vintage Abalone drums from C&C are not wrapped in plastic. Bill Cardwell creates the beautiful finishes on these drums by laying on small, ultra-thin sections of genuine abalone and sea-snail shell. It's practically a mosaic operation, using an adhesive process that took Bill three years to finalize. The natural shell material has myriad colors, along with depth and reflectivity that simply cannot be duplicated artificially. And no two pieces are alike, so every C&C Abalone drum is unique. The effect is enhanced by C&C's very small tube lugs, which don't distract from the beauty of the drumshells.

Sometimes Bill combines the natural look of the abalone with a coloring process of his own. Our review kit, for example, started with the same Paua Abalone finish that's on the additional 4½x14



snare drum we received. Then Bill applied a burnt orange finish. While the process took a lot of the natural colors out, it created a striking and totally original look.

In order to protect the color and depth of the shell finish, C&C Abalone drums are coated with very high-quality polyurethane, then sanded and buffed. When I questioned Bill about the durability of the natural-shell finish, he told me that the drums would fare just fine if given the same care that should be given to any high-end lacquered drums.

Drumkit Sound

Bill expressed his acoustic goals for our review kit as follows: "It's designed to articulate at all volumes, mike up easily, have *lots* of attack, and still be able to work in a small club (with no mikes) and not dominate the sound."

To begin with, Bill believes that because of the abalone shell's thinness and organic nature, it has much less of an effect on the sound of the drum than a conventional drum covering would. While I didn't A/B our review drums to any covered models, I did find that they all sounded incredibly open and resonant—much like the sound of drums with lacquered finishes.

Bass Drum

Believe it or not, in all my years of doing reviews for *Modern Drummer*, I've never reviewed a 24" bass drum. Up until very recently, big bass drums hadn't been in vogue for anything other than high-volume arena rock or big band jazz, so most manufacturers offered their kits with 22" (or smaller) bass drums. Thus those sizes have been the norm for our reviews.

Well, I may have been missing the boat. I really enjoyed the depth, projection, and, well...the sheer *bigness* of the sound of the 18x24 C&C bass drum. That's not to say it was inordinately boomy or uncontrolled. On the contrary, the head combination it came with—a self-muffled Aquarian Super Kick II batter and a ported smooth white logo front head—gave it a punchier and more "gated" sound than I expected. And this was with nothing inside the drum. That sound would allow it to meet Bill Cardwell's goal of being useful in an unmiked club situation, while still producing oodles of depth. The drum also retained plenty of power and volume, which allowed me to play in a very relaxed manner and still get a big sound. Now I know why this size is so popular with big band drummers.

Just to see what the other extreme might be, I swapped the Super Kick batter for a clear Remo Emperor, and put an unported (but slightly self-muffled) PowerStroke 3 head on the front. *There* was the BOOM I expected. This sound would be much more than most small clubs would call for, and would probably be more than most microphones could handle. But then I tried Simon Phillips' muffling method of taping rolled-up towels around the edges of the heads. I got a big, open sound that rumbled like thunder but didn't ring on for so long as to make miking impractical or quick pedal patterns indistinct. Now I know why this size is so popular with arena-rock drummers.

Toms

The 9x13 rack tom seemed in correct proportion to the 18x24 bass drum. Anything smaller would have looked (and probably sounded) positively *dinky*. Of course, with a big bass drum and a big rack tom, positioning becomes an issue. There was no tom mount on the bass drum. Instead, Bill



The rack tom's suspension mount is also covered in Paua Abalone.

Cardwell shipped the kit with a short ball & socket tom arm, which I simply clamped to a heavy-duty cymbal stand.

The drum's already full sound was enhanced by a suspension system, giving it tons of resonance and projection. And in a nice cosmetic touch that I've never seen from any other drum manufacturer, that suspension mount was almost totally covered with the same Abalone material as was on the drumshells.

The rack tom and the 14x16 floor tom both featured white-coated Remo Emperor heads—which provided plenty of stick attack—as well as clear Ambassador bottom heads for resonance. Both drums offered wide tuning ranges, from a very "wet," fat, loose-head sound to very clean, pure tones when the heads were tightened up. This tuning range helped to keep the kit from being a one-dimensional "loud rock" instrument.

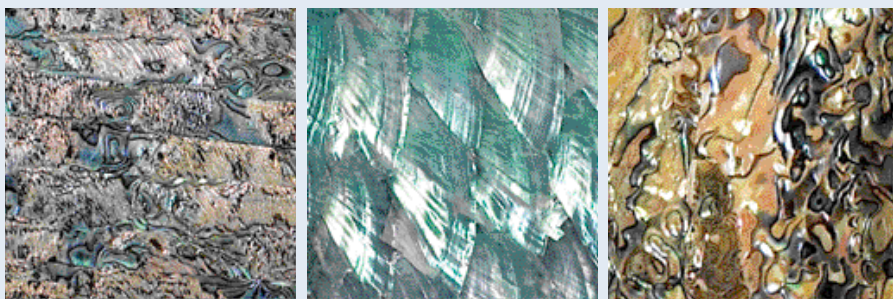
Snare Drum

Also appropriate for the size of the kit was the matching 7x14 10-ply maple snare drum. It was a ten-lug model fitted with a coated Ambassador batter, steel rims, a Trick GS007 snare throwoff, and Puresound Percussion 20-strand custom snares. Its warm and woody overall tonal character was consistent with maple-ply construction. It had a wide tuning range, but it really shone with the heads at a medium-to-low tension. With that setup the drum produced a great '70s/'80s arena-rock sound that went well with the size of the kit.

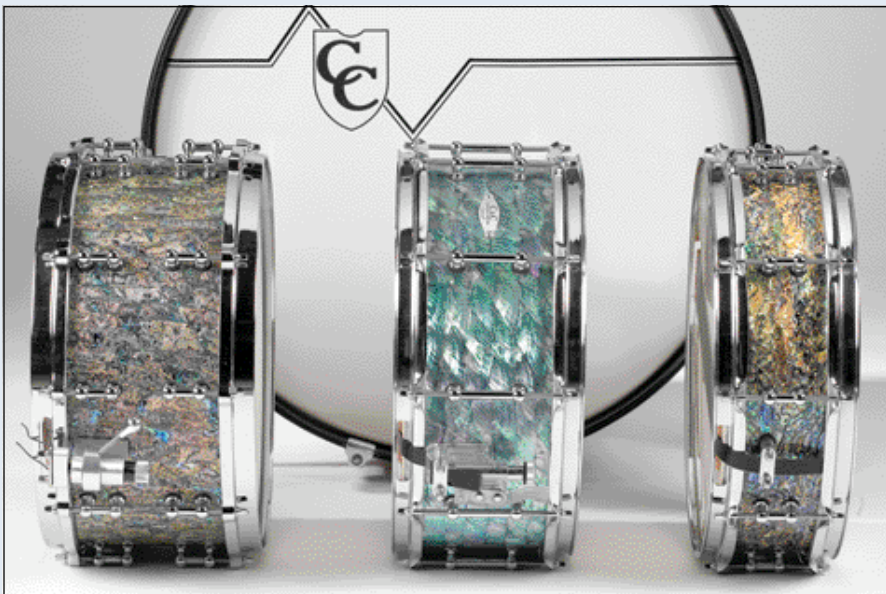
On the other hand, the drum was surprisingly crisp at higher tensions, producing a very contemporary, cutting sound while retaining the body that was provided by the 7"-deep shell. Rimshots were lively when the drum was unmuffled, while only a slight amount of muffling reduced overring for a distinct, articulate stick response. This was a very good all-purpose drum, which can't be said for all 7x14 models.

Additional Snare Drums

According to Bill Cardwell, "C&C is really a 'have it your way' company. Our greatest satisfaction is having a drummer visualize a drum—in look



This collage shows the natural beauty of C&C's Abalone finishes. From left to right, they are: Blackheart, Sky Blue Donkey, and Paua.



From left: 7x14 1-ply walnut snare, 6x14 1-ply maple snare, 4 1/2 x 14 10-ply maple snare

and sound—and then being able to make that vision a reality.” Well, the Abalone snare drums he sent in addition to our review kit are certainly visions to *look* at. Now let’s talk about their sound.

4 1/2 x 14 10-Ply Maple

This drum came with ten lugs, steel rims, a Trick GS007 throw-off, Puresound Percussion 20-strand snares, and a coated Emperor batter. It was finished in Natural Paua Abalone.

Out of the box the drum had a medium head tension and loose snare tension, which gave it an old 1930s-jazz, N’awlins buzz-roll quality. Lots of fun, but perhaps not applicable to many gigs these days. But when the snares and heads were tightened up, this was the firecracker of the snare drum group. It sounded crisp and bright, with the crack and cut you’d expect from a drum this shallow. But it also had admirable body and warmth. Rimshots really sang out, and brush response was excellent.

6x14 1-Ply Maple

It’s not surprising that this drum had a very vintage sound, because C&C’s 1-ply solid wood shells are built to the old Slingerland Radio King specs. The edges feature a slightly rounded 45° back cut and a sharp 45° inside cut. Bill Cardwell doesn’t take the back cut to the center of the shell, but instead leaves it more toward the outside portion. This drum was fitted with 1” reinforcement hoops, steel rims, a Nickel Drumworks throw-off,

Puresound snares, and a coated Ambassador batter.

The solid maple drum had great snare response and sticking articulation. Its 6” depth provided body and a full tonality, but it didn’t take the overall sound too far into the lowlands. This drum also had my favorite finish (despite its name): Sky Blue Donkey Abalone.

7x14 1-Ply Walnut

This drum also came with reinforcement hoops, die-cast rims, the Trick throw-off, Puresound snares, and a coated Emperor batter. Generally speaking, it sounded brighter and a little less warm than the solid maple did. When I tuned it to a medium tension, its shell depth and the thickness of its batter head gave it full-bodied sound, without tubbiness. It also had outstanding articulation and snare response.

At higher tensions, the reflectivity of the solid walnut shell gave the drum “bullet-through-the-brain” penetration, without sounding thin or one-dimensional. And the die-cast rims helped rimshots to cut like crazy. This was my favorite snare drum for sound. Its Blackheart Abalone finish wasn’t hard to look at, either.

Conclusion

While I was reviewing the C&C Abalone drums, I happened across a copy of *Car & Driver* in which the new Porsche Carrera GT sports car was reviewed to gushing praise. I’ve never driven a Carrera, but I know just how that reviewer felt.

Of course, a Porsche is expensive, and so are top-quality custom-made drums. A handcrafted Abalone-shell finish adds even more to the cost factor. So C&C Abalone drums are unquestionably at the top of the price scale. But considering that they combine the best elements of vintage and contemporary drums, that they’re made with impeccable craftsmanship, and that their finishes are almost indescribably beautiful, I’m inclined to say that they’re worth every penny.

THE NUMBERS

Four-piece maple kit; Burnt Orange Abalone finish	\$5,600
<small>(includes 18x24 10-ply bass drum, 9x13 8-ply rack tom, 14x16 8-ply floor tom, and 7x14 10-ply snare drum. Hardware includes suspension tom mount, bass drum spurs, and floor tom legs.)</small>	
4 1/2 x 14 10-ply maple snare; Paua Abalone finish	\$1,125
6x14 1-ply maple snare; Sky Blue Donkey Abalone finish	\$1,425
7x14 1-ply walnut snare; Blackheart Abalone finish	\$1,675

(Note: Covered, striped, and custom painted finishes are available on all drums at lower prices. Snare drums are fitted with Nickel Drumworks or Trick GS007 strainers, depending on the customer’s wishes. All drums are available with die-cast hoops.)

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