

San Francisco Chronicle

Sunday, March 23, 2014 Section W NI N

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Photo by Dan Evans / Special to the Chronicle

Above: Colorful drums are displayed on the walls of A Drummer's Tradition in San Rafael. **Below:** Drummer, collector and store owner Robert Bowler opened A Drummer's Tradition in 1996. The store features many unique and historic drum sets.



SAN RAFAEL

The drumming tradition keeps on kicking

By Carey Sweet

When Sam Faw went shopping for his most recent drum kit, he took one look at the latest and greatest models on the market and walked away.

The 19-year-old musician instead chose a nearly 50-year-old set he found at A Drummer's Tradition in San Rafael.

He claimed that the 1966 Blue Sparkle Ludwig kit wasn't about price. It may have something to do with the trend toward celebrating reclaimed and vintage products in everything from furniture to fashion. But mostly, it was about sound and feel.

"I've been playing vintage sets for my whole life, and I don't think I realized how different new and vintage drums were until I was 13, when I played a modern drum kit at school and found it to be big, loud and ugly," Faw said. "A lot of new drums are being engineered to have the perfect sound, but to me, the small imperfections in the sound of vintage drums are what made so many classic recordings what they are. They're what make the drums so amazing."

Faw's is a story A Drummer's Tradition owner Robert Bowler is very familiar with. As proprietor of what Bowler says is the only vintage drum shop within 100 miles, he caters to a specific clientele committed to preserving history. And more and more, it's the younger musicians embracing the past.

"I'm getting 14- and 15 year-olds in here who see a 1960s Ludwig set and think they've died and gone to heaven," he said. "They understand the difference in aged wood. The tone mellows, and it gets a sweeter sound. It's like the tree has decided to relax after being cut down. It thinks, 'I'm not vertical anymore, and that's okay. I'm happy to be

round.'"

As a member of the Bay Area psychedelic rock band the Electric Magpie, Faw knows a thing or two about what magic a percussion set should achieve.

"My dad is a professional drummer and concert percussionist, and a former drum tech, drum repairman and drum teacher," the San Rafael native said. "So I was introduced to drumming very early on and have been playing since before I could walk."

New drums can be so carefully balanced that they almost sound stripped, said part-time staffer and longtime customer Paul Johnson. As an electronics and drum musician, he said his turning point came

when he attended the Monterey Jazz Festival in 1998 and heard vintage instruments. “The tone — oh wow. I got it,” he said.

“Some of these drums are older than I’ll ever get,” Bowler laughed, gently patting a pair of 1920s snare drums. The instruments are true works of art — one Slingerland model is enrobed in sea green mother of pearl, the other, a Ludwig-Chicago brand, is trimmed in meticulously engraved metal. Both feature solid brass frames, since back in the day, a drummer planned on using one instrument for life.

When Bowler first opened his store in 1996, securing the one-of-a-kind drums was a time-consuming labor of love.

“It was before eBay,” he said. “I have birds and dogs around the country looking for me, and I go to schools and garage sales. We’ve sold and shipped drums to every continent with the exception of Antarctica. And I’m working on that.”

While plenty gleaming drum kits welcome customers as they walk into his store, the models on the floor are mostly new. The top shelf running halfway around the store holds the real treasures, including some of the world’s rarest sets from the 20th century, like a 1936 Slingerland Radio Kings Black Diamond Pearl kit that was played by Ray McKinley’s big band.

“All of them have stories,” Bowler said. “The Great Depression really made music.”

A stunning 1941 Ludwig Top Hat and Cane “Swing Sensation” celebrates the swing era, the shell appropriately decorated in art deco illustrations of top hats, canes, white gloves and musical notes superimposed over a white marine pearl base. There are only 13 or 14 of the sets in the world, said Bowler, and he has had three of them. Johnny Depp owns one, as does Charlie Watts of the Rolling Stones. U2 producer Daniel Lanois, reportedly purchased one for around \$40,000.

Bowler is now down to one



Bowler disassembles a snare drum to make repairs at his store in San Rafael.



Oddly shaped drums build to project sound outward are displayed in the front window.



This Ludwig drum kit was the first set of drums played in the White House in 1962.

set, which he has treasured for 20 years.

“I might sell it, but it would take a good prying away,” he said. “Still, I’m paying for my kids in college, so...”

Another showpiece is a Ludwig Silver Sparkle set that is owned by Harold Jones, a legendary drummer who played the kit with the Paul Winter Sextet at the White House in 1962, marking the first time contemporary drums were performed there. Jones played the kit with Count Basie’s big band from 1967 to 1972, then with big names like Frank Sinatra and

Natalie Cole, and now, the Woodacre resident plays with Tony Bennett.

The Silver Sparkle set is on display at the store but will eventually go the Percussive Arts Society Museum/Rhythm! Discovery Center in Indianapolis.

As Bowler spoke, customer Tymber Cavanaugh picked up the sea green Slingerland snare, cradling it like a baby. Another vintage convert, she drums with her group the Deadlies, playing surf rock around the Bay Area. The San Rafael resident used to play contemporary drums made by

Yamaha and DW, but now says she has “a love affair with a 1925 snare.”

She also adores her Zildjian Ride cymbal, which is two decades old. “The vintage sets sing for days,” she said. “And call me crazy, but they have ghosts. They’re channeling joy.”

The gorgeous retro style doesn’t hurt, either.

“Vintage drums have a much better aesthetic than most of the newer drums being produced today,” said Faw. “The colors, the simplistic hardware, and the sizes just look so much more natural to

A Drummer’s Tradition

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me. The dimensions of new drums are ruining the way they look, and the hardware is typically very bulky and unattractive.”

Besides selling new, vintage and custom instruments and hosting on-site music classes, Bowler’s shop also became a destination for equipment repair and restoration help.

“I needed a lug for an old ’53 Slingerland kit,” said Scott Mathews, a Mill Valley record producer, songwriter and drummer. “He disappeared in the back, and came out with an impossible piece. I couldn’t believe he had it. I’ve built up a vast collection of drums of every kind, but it brings the kid out in me to be able to walk in his store and find the rarest instruments anywhere. It’s a passion for him.”

In fact, Bowler always knew he wanted to be around drums. He began drumming in high school, then in his 20s, became interested in the instruments’ history. “I got a fever,” he said.

One interesting fact: orchestra members used to play each drum and cymbal type separately, as specialists. But in the 20th century, the half dozen-plus instruments were all combined together in a kit, and musicians had to learn to play them all at the same time.

And for those wondering why drummers, with their remarkable skill and agility, are often hidden in the back of the stage, there’s this. A cocktail kit exists that lets the drummer play out front, yet musicians prefer the powerful sound to come from behind.

“I don’t mind being back there,” said Cavanaugh. “We get so much attention anyway, since our instruments are so magnetic.”

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