

SoundLab No. 5

Craviotto Drum Company Limited Edition Solid-Shell Custom Snare Drums

by Jon Cohan

Details, Details

Sizes & Woods: American ash: 13" x 5 1/2", 14" x 5 1/2"; Birdseye maple: 12" x 5 1/2", 13" x 5 1/2", 14" x 5 1/2"; Black cherry: 13" x 5 1/2", 14" x 6 1/2"; Mahogany: 14" x 4", 14" x 5 1/2".

Price (all drums): \$1,495

Hardware: Craviotto "Diamond" brass tube lugs, butt-plate and air vents; nickel-plated hardware

Heads: Remo Coated Ambassador batter and clear Ambassador snare side

Throw-off: Nickel Drumworks piston model

Snare Wires: Puresound custom 21-strand

Extras: Heavy-duty padded drum bag

Finishes: Natural satin oil or hi-gloss lacquer

Counterhoop Options: Heavy-gauge 2.3mm triple-flanged steel, vintage-style straight brass, or die-cast



An incredible lineup of gorgeous wood (left to right): American ash, black cherry, birdseye maple, and mahogany

Price Of Perfection

Johnny Craviotto's name is well known to snare drum connoisseurs, originally through his work with the Solid (originally named Select) Snare Drum Company, and more recently through his collaboration with DW, making the exclusive Johnny Craviotto series of solid maple shell snares as well as other exotic and rare wood drums, including the Timeless Timber Series, which was fashioned from very old lumber salvaged from a shipwreck at the bottom of Lake Superior. Craviotto played a key role in reviving and refining the classic one-piece steam-bent drum shell construction method that American drum companies had employed for years, but abandoned in favor of plied shells, which were much easier and cheaper to produce. Slingerland with their legendary Radio King line made a solid maple shell snare drum for the longest period of time, but it too was eventually phased out in favor of multiple and mixed ply shells.

Craviotto, a drum industry legend whose genial California "dude" exterior belies his Zen master-like knowledge of drum making, started as a young drummer in L.A. in the 1960s, playing

with the likes of Ry Cooder and Buffy St. Marie. Over the years he collected many vintage drums and soon found himself wondering why certain old drums sounded so good and were so highly prized by studio players and others. He experimented with solid-shell construction and a few years later, backed with the money and interest of Huey Lewis and The News drummer Bill Gibson, he launched the Solid Snare Drum Company. Between legal hassles over the company's name and the financial burdens of outfitting an entirely new drum company, he was soon out of business. The relatively small output of the Solid/Select company coupled with the great sound of the drums, gave the Craviotto name an almost mythical aura, so in 1992 when he struck a deal with DW to build solid shell maple snare drums, collectors and players were excited. Now after 12 years with DW, Craviotto has embarked upon his most ambitious undertaking yet – he has launched The Craviotto Drum Company, which specializes in limited edition steam-bent solid hardwood snare drums. DW continues to offer the Craviotto-made maple snare drums, but now sells them under the name Solid Shell. →

Craviotto's brass tube lugs have diamond-shaped feet to match the badge



EEK! Don't look!
It's a naked
Craviotto shell



Craviotto has wisely chosen to focus on four hardwoods: American ash, black cherry, birdseye maple, and mahogany. Each one of these woods has a distinct sound characteristic that sets it apart from the others, and taken together, they cover a lot of real estate on the tonal spectrum.

For this review, I received four snare drums: a 14" x 5 1/2" white ash, a 14" x 5 1/2" mahogany, a 13" x 5 1/2" black cherry, and a 12" x 5 1/2" birdseye maple drum. All drums come standard with a Nickel Drumworks throw off, Remo Ambassador coated heads on the batter side and clear Ambassadors on the snare side, 21-strand Puresound snares, and a padded drum bag. Options include a choice of a natural satin oil or high-gloss lacquer finish, and 2.3 mm triple-flanged, die-cast, or straight vintage-style brass hoops with clips. Each drum is also numbered and signed by Craviotto, who has chosen a diamond-shaped motif for the other standard features, which include brass tube lugs with a wide diamond shaped foot, a customized Nickel Drumworks diamond butt plate, two air vents, and a simple diamond badge with the company's name in red-outlined white letters on a black background. All of these design touches are elegant and simple, and help to serve a larger purpose – they don't distract from the real star of the show, the wood. Each shell has a natural beauty that by its very nature is unique.

The first drum I used was the 14" x 5 1/2" American white ash, (Craviotto offers a 13" model as well) with triple-flanged hoops. Ash has a beautiful appearance – the large figuration and grain along with the light color reminded me more of oak than maple. Ash has been used by guitar makers for years and even baseball bats are made from the wood, but as far as I know, this is the first time a solid shell drum has been made from it. The American ash snare drum turned out to be the driest sounding one of the bunch, but it was noticeably brighter and had a higher fundamental pitch than the mahogany drum, the only other 14" diameter drum I reviewed.

All the drums have excellent snare response, but the ash drum had a pleasant raspy spray that held up even during heavy attack.

I decided to be brave and bring the drum to a recording session that I was teching, for Brain Failure, a punk rock band from Beijing, China (yes, that's right; Beijing, China). I brought along six snare drums, four of them metal (brass and bronze), figuring that although the ash drum had proven itself in my rehearsal space, the producer and drummer might want to go with a tried-and-true loud, bright sounding metal snare drum. We carefully miked up and compared four of the snare drums, and after listening to playback, we all agreed that the American ash drum was perfect for the music, which had elements of old school Clash-style punk, as well as some ska tunes and heavier rock songs. The ash drum had all the tone and much of the volume of the brass shell drums, but it also had a depth of sound and a rounder note that the other drums couldn't match.

Although I swapped the supplied Ambassador for a heavier Aquarian Studio X coated head to help control any unwanted transients, I later switched back to an Ambassador for a reggae song and had no problems at all. I was surprised by the drum's performance under such hard-hitting conditions. Where normally I would have gone to a brass or bronze shell to cut through the guitars, the Craviotto was tuneful and had power to burn, yet still possessed enough dynamic range to sing through the quieter, more articulated passages. It also yielded a pleasing side stick and showed no signs at all of choking when we cranked up the tuning for a ska -flavored song. Xu Lin, Brain Failure's talented drummer, was so happy with the sound that he had his picture taken with the drum to show his friends in China. Back at the rehearsal space, I tuned the drum fairly low and played along with some ballads using brushes and Acousticks, and again the drum performed like a champ. The sound of the ash drum falls somewhere between maple and birch. It's different enough from both to

deserve a spot as a leadoff player in any serious drummer's lineup – that is if you can afford the suggested list price of \$1,495, but more on that later.

Next up was the 14" x 5 1/2" solid mahogany shell snare drum, also with triple-flanged hoops. Unlike all the other three drums, this is the only one to use a different wood (maple) for its reinforcement hoops or glue rings. I'm personally very fond of the older, plied mahogany/poplar and maple drums Slingerland made for so many years, but I thought that a solid mahogany snare drum might be something of a one trick pony, given the wood's characteristically darker sound. This drum has a darker tone than the rest of the lot, but unlike other mahogany snare drums I've tried it had great projection, probably due in part to the maple reinforcement rings and the precision-cut bearing edges. (The company also offers a 14" x 4" mahogany drum, which might be interesting to play.)

I found myself in the studio again, this time with a hardcore band called Draw Blood. Very often when I tech on hardcore records I'll reach for a heavy bronze drum with die-cast hoops for clarity and strength. This time for fun, I threw an Evans Reverse Dot head on the mahogany drum and set it up on the snare stand. To my complete surprise, everybody was so happy with the sound we never even tried another drum. Some drummers can really bang the hell out of a snare drum and you often have to tension the heads very high. Even though I would like to use certain drums that have tube lugs on these types of sessions, the lugs don't always hold up to the player and will sometimes de-tune or even break or damage the shell. Craviotto has designed a tube lug that is more robust and has wisely incorporated a diamond shaped base with a wide footprint, which helps to reduce the stress and tension on the shell and the lugs themselves by spreading the impact over a larger area. He has even actually machined in a curve on the base to follow the contour of the shell. Nodal points my foot!

The snare bed on the mahogany drum seemed a tad deeper to my eye than the other drums, all of which share one of the most gradual and shallow beds I've ever seen. This is another sign of Craviotto's experience. The drums have some of the best snare response – at any volume – that I've ever heard. One big pet peeve I have is that so many custom snare drum makers out there will use the finest, most expensive materials available, only to pay little or no attention to the subtle details, like snare beds and bearing edges, both of which have as much impact on a drum's sound as the

type of counter hoops or snares used. There, I said it! My point is proven with the mahogany drum, where under a less watchful eye a drum could close up shop or have a limited dynamic range, the Craviotto is rich and full sounding with a nice wet snare sound that is pronounced but perfect in its proportional balance to the warm sound of the wood. This drum would also be ideal for use in jazz or with smaller bands and in rooms where sound reflection is a problem. It really blended in nicely with an older Radio King kit and vintage-style cymbals. It would be interesting to hear how the addition of die-cast hoops would affect the sound.

The 13" x 5 1/2" black cherry drum (also available in 14" x 6 1/2") is a good illustration of how the right blend of components can create a one-of-a-kind sound. I've played one other cherry drum, and it was very bright and sharp – a little too much for the ears to deal with. In the interest of full disclosure I think it's important to say here that I'm generally not a big fan of smaller diameter snare drums. I feel that because of their tendency (more often than not) to have more attack with less body, they are of limited musical value. That, and the fact that almost every young drummer goes through a piccolo phase at one point in his or her playing career, have really closed my mind to what some drum snobs like me like to call "the wee drums." Well, this drum and the even smaller 12" birdseye maple snare made me rethink my ridiculous prejudices. If I didn't have to adjust the basket of my snare stand I would have never known I was playing a small diameter drum. This cherry drum was the only one that came with cast hoops and it was a good choice. The hoops helped to focus and enrich the sound, rather than choke it, as I was expecting. It was probably the most musical of all the drums, with rich, clear tones and ringing rimshots. It sounded more like something Charlie Watts would play than anything else. The 5 1/2" depth allowed me to get that high-end crack if I wanted it, but also afforded me the opportunity to mess around with the pitch and I was able to get sounds I never would have thought possible. A guitarist friend and I jammed on some Stones songs late into the night. I had more fun with the cherry snare drum than I've had in a while.

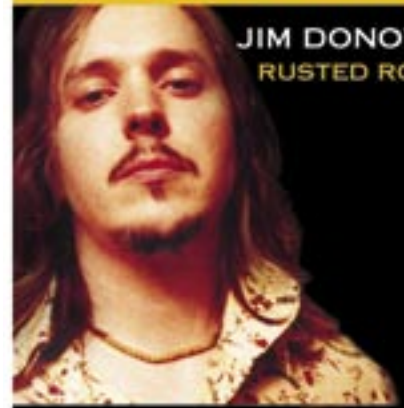
The 12" x 5 1/2" birdseye maple drum was the last drum I tested. I almost felt I needed to cleanse my palate after the black cherry snare by taking a few days between drums, but time was rolling on and I had kept the Craviotto company waiting a long time while I indulged my selfish desires. The birdseye maple drum was the most eye-catching of all the drums. Unlike some multiple ply drums that have a

thin veneer of Birdseye Maple as a finish ply, this was one thick piece of lumber. It had such beautiful figuring that it looked like it was handpicked by the patron saint of drums himself, Saint Bonham. The sound was a little wilder than the black cherry drum, brighter without being brittle, but it was a snap to tune and a blast to play. I expect it could find many a home as an auxiliary snare because of its size. That would be a shame, because it has more than enough tonal and pitch variations to be a main snare drum. (Good thing Craviotto offers 13" and 14" versions.) It also has power and punch to burn, but again, not at the expense of any body or tone. Because it is one piece of hard maple and is perfectly crafted, there is an integrity of sound that is not always present in multiple-ply maple drums. Solid, steam-bent wood seems to handle dynamics better (or at least more consistently), and it is at the loudest and softest volumes that the true character of a drum is exposed.

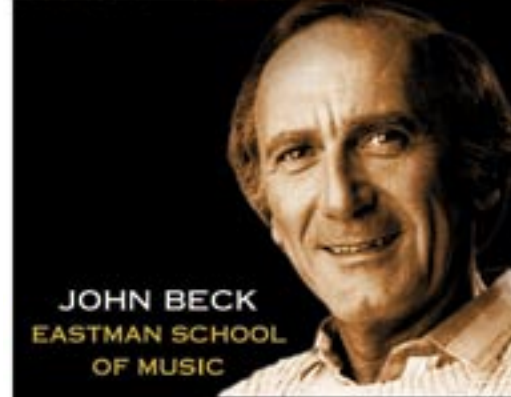
The visual appeal of the Craviotto snare drums hints at the sounds that are carried within. All four drums I reviewed were finished in a low-key lustrous satin oil. This finish is nice because it doesn't gloss over the character of the individual woods. It is almost porous in nature, and the wood isn't oversanded to a perfect smoothness. You can literally feel the grain of the wood. All the drums have a three dimensional quality that gives a timeless look to the wood. The mahogany seems darker than the black cherry, but both woods have a faint amber red cast along with the natural wood color. All the hardware is nickel-plated, as opposed to the more flashy chrome many other makers use. The difference is generally a matter of quality. I find nickel-plating, especially when done so well to be elegant, again in keeping with every other aspect of these drums. The strainer is mounted over the lap seam and there is an air vent at the butt plate and in the panel next to the strainer, each with a grommet that looks to be made of stainless steel.

I have gushed freely in this review, but as someone who has made drums and makes his living with drums, it is rare to find such a high level of craftsmanship in such a seemingly simple instrument as a snare drum. Yet it is in those little details that the true value of a drum is found. This is what makes these drums worth the asking price. There are production line drums that cost more than these drums, and there are solid shell drums that cost less, but I've rarely seen a snare drum that has brought together so many elements of quality in such a beautiful and classic way. And when that happens, it ceases being just a drum, and becomes a work of musical art. 🙌

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