

Inside Gretsch

100 Years of Gretsch

A Visit To The Gretsch Factory



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There's a certain mystique about Gretsch. Mention the name to a group of drummers and you'll start hearing about such things as "round badge" kits from the '50s; Gretsch/Gladstone drums; Gretsch Drum Nights at Birdland; jazz drummers such as Max, Art, Philly, Tony, etc.; various distinctive colors and finishes; K. Zildjian cymbals; and most of all, that *sound*. You would be

surprised by the number of drummers who, although they endorse other brands, have confided to *MD* that their favorite set is "this Gretsch kit that I've had since . . ."

Why are drummers so sentimental about these old drums? Surely, with all of the technological advances of the last ten years, drums must be better than ever. A lot of people don't seem to think so, how-

ever. In the same way that guitar players talk about Fender equipment that was made before CBS bought the company, drummers seek out Gretsch drums made before Baldwin took over. But did the drums actually change? Were the same people still making them? Why did their address keep changing? And now that Gretsch is no longer owned by Baldwin, what's going to happen? To put all of this in perspective, we're going to take a look at the 100-year history of Gretsch. The story involves both drums and people, starting with the man who put his family name on the drum.

Friedrich Gretsch was born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1856, the son of a middle-class grocer. At the age of 16, not wishing to be drafted into the military, he immigrated to America, and settled in Brooklyn with his uncle, who had a prosperous wine business. But rather than work for his uncle, he took a job with the Albert Houdlett & Son company, who made drums and banjos.

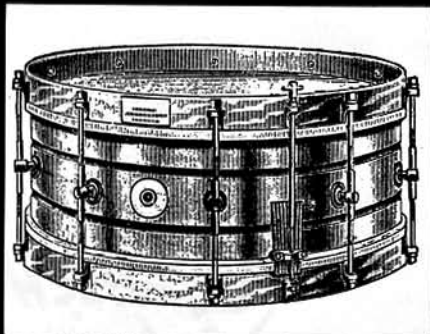
Following the example of his father and uncle, who had their own businesses, Friedrich opened his own shop in 1883, at the age of 27. He was soon turning out drums, banjos, tambourines and toy drums for various wholesalers. The firm only employed a dozen workers, and was located in a small wooden shanty on South 4th Street, in Brooklyn. At the time he began his company, he had a three-year-old son, Fred Gretsch, Sr.

By 1895, the business was doing well, and 15-year-old Fred was attending Wright's Business College, so Friedrich decided to pay a visit to his native Germany. But after arriving in his homeland, Friedrich suddenly died. His teenaged son—who was still wearing knickers—



Photo Courtesy of Manny's, NYC

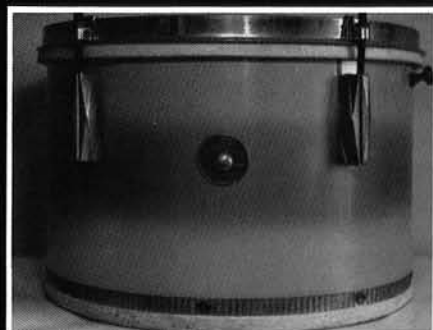
Jo Jones (center) and Phil Grant (right) at the Gretsch factory in Brooklyn. (The snare drum to the upper right of Grant is a Gretsch/Gladstone.)



A Gretsch separate-tension snare drum from 1906, as pictured in an early catalog.



An early sock cymbal as built by Gretsch in the '20s.



A 1930s Gretsch tom, with the old-style lugs.

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by
Richard
Egart

took over the Gretsch company.

Despite his young age, Fred showed remarkable business sense. Within five years, he had moved the company from the small shanty he inherited from his father to a three-story plant at 104 Middleton St., and he'd expanded the business to include mandolin making, and the importing of a full line of accessories and string instruments. As energetic as he was enterprising, Fred did not confine himself only to working at his desk in the plant. He also went on the road to sell, and could even be found up on the roof of the building tanning hides. (In those days, Gretsch bought skins from a New York slaughterhouse, and made their own drum and banjo heads.) Fred also brought his younger brothers, Walter and Louis, into the company after they finished school around the turn of the century. Walter stayed until 1921, and then opened a wholesaling firm. Louis only stayed a year, and then went into real estate.



Duke Kramer

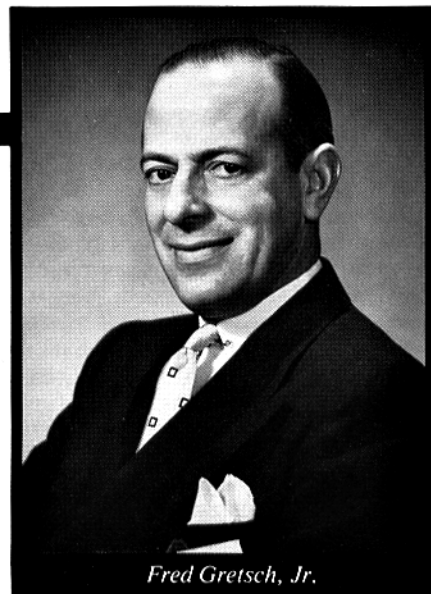


Fred Gretsch, Sr.

In 1916 the business moved to a ten-story building at 60 Broadway, in Brooklyn, and that is where the company remained until the early '70s. That building, with the Gretsch name at the top, still stands today, and can be seen as one crosses the Williamsburg Bridge from Manhattan to Brooklyn.

In 1928, Gretsch opened a branch in Chicago, which was headed by Phil Nash. According to Duke Kramer, who joined Gretsch in 1935, and took over the Chicago office in 1948, "Gretsch was broken up into two distinct units. One was the factory and the eastern sales office in Brooklyn; the other was the western sales office in Chicago, which handled everything from Ohio to the West Coast. New York had the factory operation, sales on the eastern seaboard, and exports. We each had an independent sales force, and our own payrolls, inventories and accounting. Our only involvement with the New York office was that we bought the factory merchandise from them, like a regular customer, and we sent Fred Gretsch a monthly statement."

It should be noted that, in those days, Gretsch's main concern was *not* the manufacture of instruments under their own

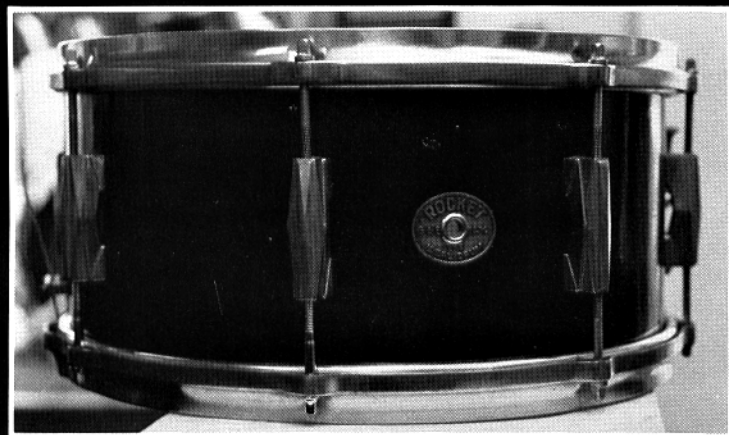


Fred Gretsch, Jr.

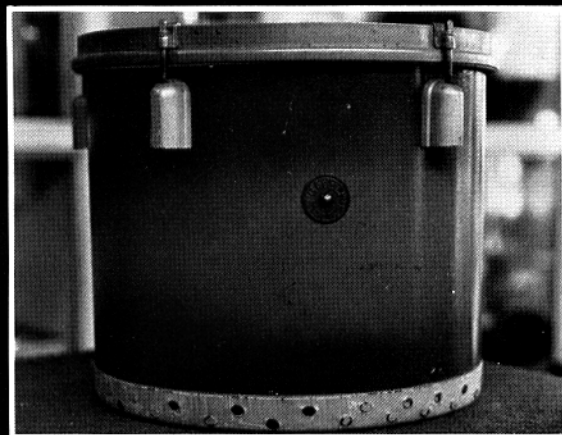
name. The drums that they made (as well as the banjos and guitars) were primarily for other distributors, who would put their names on them. Gretsch was more a merchandiser than a major-line company.

One of the people Gretsch made drums for was Billy Gladstone, who was known as much for his inventions as for his incredible drum technique. Back when all drumheads were calfskin, the biggest problem drummers had was keeping the heads tuned during a performance, because temperature and humidity changes in a room would immediately affect the heads. Gladstone devised a three-way tuning key: One section of the key tuned the top head; another section tuned the bottom head; the third section tuned both heads together. And what was really nice was that all of these tunings could be done with the drum mounted on a stand. Gretsch built these drums for Gladstone, and after Gladstone later began making drums himself, he still used Gretsch shells.

Fred Gretsch, Sr., remained president of Gretsch until 1942, when he retired to become president of Lincoln Savings Bank, and a director of Manufacturer's Trust Co. After Fred, Sr., retired, he appointed



"Rocket" snare drum, built by Gretsch.



World War II Gretsch tom, with wooden lugs.

his son, Fred Gretsch, Jr., president of the company. Fred, Jr., had started working at the factory when he was ten years old, coming in on Saturdays to pack phonograph needles. He became treasurer of Gretsch in 1931. (Like his father, he was interested in finance, and served as a vice president of the Lincoln Savings Bank, and a director of the Suffolk County Trust Co.) Shortly after becoming president in '42, however, he left the company to serve in the navy during World War II. His brother, William Walter Gretsch, had been running the Chicago Gretsch office, so he moved back to New York and became president of Gretsch. When Fred, Jr., returned to the company after the war, William remained president, but soon became ill and subsequently died in 1948, at which time Fred, Jr., assumed the presidency again.

During World War II, the Gretsch company had been somewhat inactive. In addition to Fred, Jr., other key personnel had also left for military service, including Duke Kramer. Because of government regulations and the shortages of materials, drums had to be made with wooden hoops and lugs. For a while, Gretsch even stopped making musical instruments, and the plant was used for the manufacture of war products.

After everyone returned from the war, Fred, Jr., called a meeting, which Duke Kramer remembers well. "We all met in New York to decide where the company was headed. We all decided that we wanted to develop Gretsch as a major line. After the meeting we split up into two-man teams. We covered every major nightspot in New York that we could find, and asked the drummers what they wanted in a drum. We were going to attack drums first, and guitars later. From that survey, we found that there was a need for smaller drums, because the New York drummers were al-



Louie Bellson with one of his first Gretsch double bass drum setups.

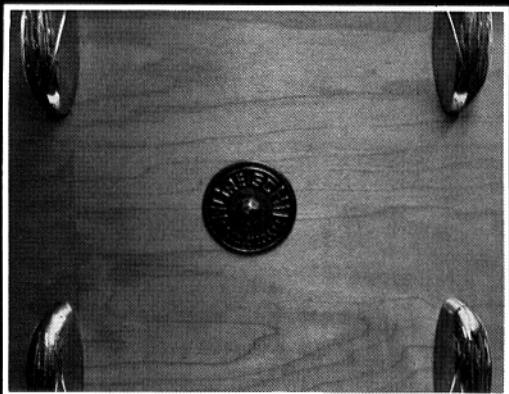
ways carrying drums around from gig to gig, and to recording sessions, and the large drums didn't fit into cabs. Plus, because of the way hardware was designed, it took them forever to set up and break down. These drummers wanted something that they could set up quickly, and that they could cart around easily. So from that, and working with Davey Tough, we developed the 20" bass drum, the shell-mounted tom-tom holder and cymbal arm, and the disappearing spurs. All of those things came out of that meeting, and they were all firsts. The hardware was all developed in conjunction with the Walberg Company, in Massachusetts."

One of the people at that meeting was a new employee named Phil Grant, who had just come out of the navy. Grant had been a drummer with the Pittsburgh Symphony, and with the famous Edwin Franko Goldman band. Phil was also an avid jazz fan who frequented the New York nightclubs, where he got to know the drummers personally. After the two-man teams had completed their survey, Phil Grant continued the direct contact with the

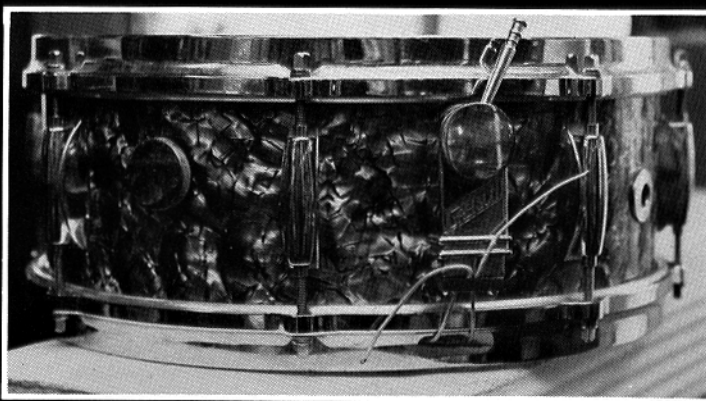
drummers, which was important, as Fred Gretsch, Jr., was not particularly knowledgeable about drums. Louie Bellson remembers going to the Gretsch factory in those days. "Fred was a very nice man, but he was not a musician. He was a businessman—a very smart one and a very good one. Whenever I went to Brooklyn, I would always stop in to see Fred. He would always ask, 'How's everything going? Do you have any problems?' If he didn't understand something, he would always turn to Phil Grant and say, 'Well Phil, this is your department. If you think this is right, go ahead and do it.'"

Phil joined the company as a salesman, and went on the road to sell and promote Gretsch drums. During a trip to Buffalo, he presented a clinic at East High School. One of the students at that school was particularly impressed—a young drummer named Mel Lewis. "Phil put on a fantastic clinic," Mel recalls. "He had a set of Gretsch *Broadcasters*, a Gretsch/Gladstone snare drum, bass drums, cymbals and timpani. He was a superb percussionist and he demonstrated all of the instruments well. In those days, Gretsch was really an ugly drum. They were mostly nickel plate and the rims still didn't have a flange on top. But when I heard the sound I said 'Wow!' And I liked the way he explained the shell. So a couple of weeks later I ordered a set of Gretsch drums in gold sparkle, and I took those drums on the road after I got out of school."

Mel Lewis wasn't the only drummer to be impressed by Phil Grant. In 1947, Louie Bellson showed Phil an idea he had for a double bass drum kit—an idea that had already been turned down by other drum companies. "Phil looked at my design and said, 'That's pretty wild, but I don't see why it can't work,'" Bellson remembers. "So they built the first one for me. I was criticized at first by a lot of people, but



Originally, toms did not have vent holes and the badge was tacked on.



An early '60s snare drum, with Micro-Sensitive strainer.



Gretsch saw the possibilities and I always respected them for that.”

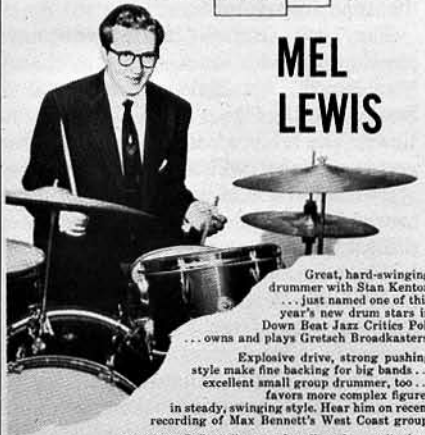
Phil Grant recalled another idea, that came from a drummer named Jimmie Pratt. “A lot of drummers used a piece of felt across the bass drum head to muffle the sound, but there was no way to regulate it. So the Jimmie Pratt tone control was developed, which allowed you to control the amount of tension on the felt.” Another drummer with an idea was Chico Hamilton, who wanted tom-toms with no bottom heads. So Gretsch made single-headed toms for him back in the '50s, long before rock drummers started removing their bottom heads.

In addition to the innovations suggested by the drummers, the Gretsch company itself was constantly refining and improving the way drums were made, starting with the shell itself. Originally, Gretsch made shells the way most other companies did. They bought three-ply wood, and molded it into a circle. Shells of that type required reinforcement rings at the top and bottom to keep the shell in round. But then, while Fred Gretsch, Sr., was president, Gretsch began laminating the wood themselves, as they molded the shell. By joining the plies in three different places, the shell no longer required the reinforcement rings. Those shells were made right there in the Brooklyn factory. Then, in the early '50s, they changed to the six-ply shell, which is still being used today. Despite the increase in plies, the shell did not get noticeably thicker, as the plies themselves were thinner. But the shells could now be joined in six different places instead of just three, and that added to the overall strength. Duke Kramer feels that the absence of reinforcement rings in the drums was what gave Gretsch its distinctive sound—“That Great Gretsch Sound.”

Gretsch started using die-cast hoops on their 14" snare drums prior to World War

BIG MAN ON DRUMS

MEL LEWIS



Great, hard-swinging drummer with Stan Kenton ... just named one of this year's new drum stars in Down Beat Jazz Critics Poll ... owns and plays Gretsch Broadcasters.

Explosive drive, strong pushing style make fine backing for big bands ... excellent small group drummer, too ... favors more complex figures in steady, swinging style. Hear him on recent recording of Max Bennett's West Coast group.

Uses Gretsch Broadcasters for all work ... calls them "finest drums I ever owned—sound real great, look terrific" ... own set is Birdland model in Cadillac Green nitron with 24-kt. gold plating.

Many top drummers play Gretsch Broadcasters ... try them yourself at your music dealer's—sets and models for all styles ... see them in color in FREE Gretsch Drum catalog—write for copy.

GRETSCH

The FRED. GRETSCH Mfg. Co., Dept. DB 956
60 Broadway, Brooklyn 11, N.Y.

A Gretsch ad from the '50s.

II, and after the war, they started using those hoops on the standard tom-tom sizes. The shell-mount tom holders that were developed after the war were also die-cast. Another simple but practical idea was their patented snap-in drumkey holder, which remains a popular feature of Gretsch drums today.

Also in the '50s, Gretsch was the first company to stop using nickel plating, going to chrome exclusively. Most companies offered a choice of the two, but according to Grant, “We said that the only way to make a drum was with chrome plating. It gave a little dignity to the drums, and was also a good selling point.”

One of Gretsch's most famous products over the years has been their *Floating Action* bass drum pedal. Interestingly enough, that was not originally a Gretsch product. Briefly, it started out as the Martin Fleetfoot pedal, and was then sold to Camco. Gretsch liked the pedal and made a deal whereby Camco made the same

pedal for Gretsch, with Gretsch's name on it. Nevertheless, drummers would argue about which was the better pedal.

As mentioned earlier, Gretsch was also in the business of importing instruments, and one of the companies they imported was Zildjian cymbals from Istanbul. Originally, Gretsch owned the trademarks *K. Zildjian*, *A. Zildjian*, and *Zildjian*. In order to keep a trademark, a company has to demonstrate continuous use of a product with that name on it. The Gretsch company soon gave up the *A. Zildjian* trademark, because of confusion with the Avedis Zildjian cymbals made in America. Later they lost the *Zildjian* trademark also. But until the '70s, when the Avedis Zildjian company finally made a deal with Baldwin (who then owned Gretsch) to get the *K. Zildjian* trademark back, the Gretsch company was the exclusive supplier of K. Zildjian cymbals.

The cymbals were warehoused in the Brooklyn factory, and drummers could go there personally to pick out cymbals. But a lot of drummers preferred to let Phil Grant choose their cymbals for them. As Mel Lewis remembers: “Phil knew K. Zildjians. He picked out a few for me that I still have to this day. He always knew where the good ones were. I'd start to look through a pile of cymbals and Phil would say, 'I think you'll find what you like right on top,' or 'There isn't a good one in the lot; don't even bother with this pile.' When Art Blakey was working at Birdland, Phil might walk in with a 20 or 22 under his arm and say, 'Here Art, I think you'll like this one.' It would be a typical Art Blakey-type cymbal.”

Phil Grant recognized the importance of having respected drummers associated with the company, and as jazz was becoming the prominent music of the '50s, Phil sought out all of the prominent players.



Mid-'60s concert snare with original Lightning Throwoff.



The Lightning Throwoff was redesigned in the early '70s.



Gretsch called their engraved, gold-plated snare drum “the most beautiful drum in the world.”

The 1954 Gretsch catalog featured such jazz artists as Louie Bellson, Denzil Best, Art Blakey, Jo Jones, Don Lamond, Mel Lewis, Shelly Manne, Charlie Perry, Max Roach and George Wettling. Mel Lewis recalled what it meant to be a Gretsch endorser: "They gave you drums and cymbals, and you could always stop by the factory if you needed sticks or brushes. But they didn't give you unlimited equipment. In fact, when you got a new drumset you had to turn in your old one. Gretsch never, ever paid anybody to play their drum. They even preferred that you already owned a set of Gretsch before they offered you an advertising deal. Fred wanted to know that you played the drums because you liked them. The only contract you had with Gretsch was that, in return for a set of drums, they were allowed to use your name and picture in their advertising, and that contract could be broken anytime. But all of these drummers wanted to play Gretsch drums.

"We were all close to each other through that company," Lewis continued. "We all loved Gretsch; there was a common feeling there. When one of us played somewhere, Phil Grant would come around to hear us, and he might bring some of the other drummers with him. It was like a fraternity."

That fraternal spirit was manifest in the Gretsch Drum Nights, which, of course, were Phil Grant's idea. "I think that was the best idea I ever came up with," Phil states. "I was a fan of Birdland. I would go there frequently, and most of the drummers were playing Gretsch. I got to know the manager, and one night I suggested that we make a special set of drums that could be used as the house set for anyone who played there. We came up with a set made of solid green shells, and I had all of the metal gold plated. I was able to do that because we had gold-plating facilities for our Gretsch guitars. So that set became quite a showpiece at the club.

"Then one night I suggested having a Gretsch Drum Night, with three of our drummers. The first one broke all attendance records at Birdland, so we continued it for several years." The second one, in 1960, was recorded and released on Roulette Records. It featured Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Charli Persip and Philly Joe Jones, who were all Gretsch artists at that time.

Mel Lewis participated in a couple of Gretsch Drum Nights, and recalled what they were like. "Those were fun. We had a rhythm section and a horn player, and we would each take a turn playing with the group. Then all the drummers would get out in front—we had four drumsets—and we'd work our way through trading choruses, then sixteens, then eights, down to fours, and then swing out together. We always agreed that nobody was going to try to overshadow anybody else. The idea was

to keep the continuity going. It worked out just great, and it was wonderful for Gretsch, because nobody else could boast that many top drummers."

The 1966 Gretsch catalog contained photos of Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Don Lamond, Sonny Payne, Chico Hamilton and Mel Lewis. The featured drumset was the *Progressive Jazz* kit, which was made up of a 5 × 14 snare, 14 × 20 bass, 8 × 12 mounted tom and 14 × 14 floor tom. In many ways, this catalog documents the reason Gretsch lost its position of supremacy in the '60s. In 1964, the Beatles had arrived in America, and started the "rock revolution." Suddenly, a lot of people started playing instruments and forming rock bands, but the drum that became associated with rock was Ludwig, largely because that's what Ringo Starr played. When jazz had become the dominant musical style in the '50s, Gretsch was right there. But when tastes changed suddenly in the '60s, Gretsch quite simply did not keep up with the times. Duke Kramer agrees: "We were always a jazz-oriented company, and when the rock thing came along, we really missed it. Yet, in the long run, not counting all of the dollars we could have made, it was probably the best thing to do, because during that time we developed the wood-finished drums, while everybody else stayed with the plastic and pearl finishes. When drummers eventually started going to wood finishes, Gretsch had a position of dominance."

In 1967, Phil Grant and Duke Kramer made their annual trip to the Frankfurt Music Fair in Germany. When they returned, Fred Gretsch, Jr., met them at the airport and invited them out for dinner. While they were eating, he informed them that he had sold the Gretsch company to Baldwin, who manufactured pianos and organs. The announcement came as a total surprise to both of them. Duke Kramer explained: "Fred was very excited about it because he was 60 years old and didn't have a son to leave the business to, so he wanted to sell it, which was probably a smart thing for him to do. So Baldwin bought it, Fred was put on the board of directors of the Baldwin company, and Phil and I [who were both vice presidents of Gretsch by this time] were given long-term contracts, which Fred saw to. Then it was a matter of trying to fit into a corporate scene, after coming from a small, family-held company."

And what did Baldwin want with Gretsch? Like everyone else, Baldwin wanted to cash in on the music craze that had been going on since 1964. Their intention was to get into a full line of band instruments, so they began buying other companies. They bought such names as Burns guitars (from England) which were renamed Baldwin guitars; they bought Ode banjos; they bought Sho-Bud pedal

steel guitars; they had a line of band instruments under the name Baldwin. But despite all of these things, they still were not getting their combo division off the ground. Buying Gretsch gave them a successful line of drums (and guitars) and an already established merchandising operation.

As Kramer recalls, "The first thing they wanted to do was to close the New York factory, which was probably a good thing because we had outgrown it terribly." The factory operation was moved to Booneville, Arkansas, and despite all of the good reasons for making that move, there was also the negative side, which Phil Grant remembers with sadness. "They moved all of the machinery out, and they took the plant manager, but what they forgot to take with them was the knowledge of the people who had been making Gretsch drums. Some of those people had been there for years, and we had to tell them they didn't have a job anymore. Baldwin offered them severance pay, but they didn't want pay; they wanted their jobs." Baldwin eventually closed the New York sales office altogether, and moved it to Chicago. A couple of years later, the Chicago office was closed too, and everything was moved to Baldwin's main office in Cincinnati, Ohio. In the midst of all these moves, there were two major fires at the Booneville factory (in '72 and '73) which resulted in major setbacks for the company.

Phil Grant never made any of those moves. When the New York office was closed, Phil decided that he'd had enough, and moved to Vermont. Upon his departure, a lot of drummers felt that they had lost their best friend, and several years later it was common to hear them say, "Gretsch was never the same after Phil left."

The people at Baldwin had good intentions, though, and wanted Gretsch to be a success, but there are certain things inherent in a corporate structure which are not always in the best interests of the product itself. Perhaps the biggest single problem during the Baldwin years was that no one actually had the title of president of Gretsch. Duke Kramer was still an official in the company, but as he recalled, "I went through so many titles that I can't remember them all." A lot of different people had the authority to make decisions in different areas, and some of those decisions were based on the piano & organ business, rather than the band instrument business, which involves a different set of criteria. One very visible indication of this situation was the fact that, between 1979 and 1981, the logo badge on the drums changed four times. It was not uncommon for a single drumset to be made up of drums with two different logos, and you can see three different ones on the back of the '81 catalog.

Baldwin sincerely wanted Gretsch to be

big, so they were looking for things to add to the company. They decided that a major amplifier line would complement the Gretsch guitars, so in 1979 they purchased the Kustom amplifier company and merged it with Gretsch, forming the Kustom/Gretsch company. Along with the amplifiers, the company had some real estate in Chanute, Kansas, which became the headquarters for Kustom/Gretsch. Kustom also had Charlie Roy, who was put in charge of Gretsch.

Roy described what shape Gretsch was in when he became involved in '79. "The drums were the mainstay of the company, but there were a lot of problems with them. The hardware had not been changed for years. There hadn't even been a new catalog for seven years. The average delivery time was six months. There was a problem with the colors; we might have five different shades of a single color. There were other business problems that had nothing to do with the quality of the drums themselves. There were a lot of things that needed to be straightened out. We had to organize the company from a business standpoint and try to create some semblance of order. We also needed to get the quality of the product up to what it was supposed to be."

Charlie Roy was doing everything he could to improve the drums—such as junking a lot of old hardware—and finally, during a meeting at which the quality was being discussed, the Baldwin people asked Roy if he would like to buy Kustom/Gretsch. His answer was, "Yes, I would."

Roy officially bought Gretsch in the spring of 1982, and moved the corporate offices to Gallatin, Tennessee, which is just outside of Nashville. A year before that, the factory operation had been moved from Booneville to DeQueen, Arkansas. In 15 years, Gretsch had gone full circle from private ownership, to being part of a corporation, back to private ownership. And for the first time in 15 years, Gretsch had an actual president.

It's easy to look back at all of the problems of the Baldwin years, and wonder why a small company would ever want to be part of a large corporation, but there are a few reasons, which Charlie Roy explained. "In order to keep up with improvements and changes in the industry, a drum company must have a lot of tooling, which is very expensive. You could open an amplifier company tomorrow with parts from Radio Shack, but you couldn't open a drum company because of the amount of equipment involved. So one of the advantages of being with a large corporation is that they can give you the necessary backing to purchase equipment. Also, from a business standpoint, they can often provide better distribution, and can offer financing for the dealers. Plus, you can benefit from other people in the corporation who have business experience.

"The advantage of private ownership is that if you see something that needs to be done, you do it. You don't have to wait a month for somebody to check it with 15 other departments. You *do it*. That's a terrific advantage, because it helps you bend to the marketplace quickly. Also, if we were part of a large corporation, and the drum business suddenly went under, the corporation would still go on. But with a small company, everyone is directly affected, so that gives us a sense of urgency, and a sense of pride. That's an intangible asset that I value highly."

Over the past two years, Charlie Roy has proceeded to do it, addressing every problem from how the business is run to how the drums are made. And he's very proud of those drums. "The truth is," he states matter-of-factly, "the best drums Gretsch ever made are the ones we are making now. Everyone who works at the factory is proud of the product, and we are constantly walking through and talking to them, asking, 'What can we do to make this product better?' We also get feedback from our artists; in fact, if we don't get feedback from someone, then there's little reason for that person to be with us. The reason we hired Karl Dustman was so that we would have someone totally dedicated to working with the artists—someone who would always be here if they called in with a question or a comment, although they are also free to call in and talk to me, or to anybody here for that matter. I think the way for a company to stay on top is through the artists, because they set the trends. One of the reasons I wanted the office near Nashville is because that gives us access to a lot of artists. We all catch a lot of acts, and spend time talking to the drummers. New York or L.A. can be so hectic that the drummers don't always have time to sit down and talk, but this is out of the way enough that often they're looking for someone to talk to."

Despite the various improvements that are being made, Gretsch is determined to maintain the tradition of the company. As Charlie Roy explained, "We don't improve things to the point that they end up like the ancient cathedral which is renovated to the point that it loses its warmth and becomes a monument to modern architecture. We like to improve things that aid the function of the drums, without interfering with the sound, because if there's anything Gretsch is known for, it's 'That Great Gretsch Sound.' We'll never change that."



A Visit To The Gretsch Factory

It's funny how things can change. Not too many years ago, products that were made in America were considered to be the absolute best, while "Made in Japan" was considered a joke. And yet, today, many people seem to hold the opposite view. For all of the reasons given as to why American products have lost their former position, the reason that seems to be quoted the most often is that the American workers have lost their personal pride in the products they produce. That's probably true in some cases, but it's not true everywhere, as a visit to the Gretsch factory will attest.

DeQueen, Arkansas, is made up of a variety of industries, ranging from rubber, to paper, to a major chicken-processing plant. Because of all this industry, the labor market is strong. And Gretsch, because of the nature of its product, attracts the best. As plant manager Ben Johnson explained, "Our people are very proud of the product, and we have 500 applications on file of people who want to work here. We have no trouble getting the best of the crop when we want it. This is the finest labor market I've come across in a long time." As our tour of the factory progressed, the pride and skill of the workers was very much in evidence, and I was reminded of a comment Charlie Roy had made: "You'll be able to judge my commitment to quality control when you meet the people who actually build the drums. All I can do is let them hear my thoughts. They are the ones who have to emulate those thoughts."

We began our tour of the factory at the loading dock, which, of course, is actually the final step in the total process. But the very

beginning of the process is reflected here also, in the form of a label that is attached to each box.

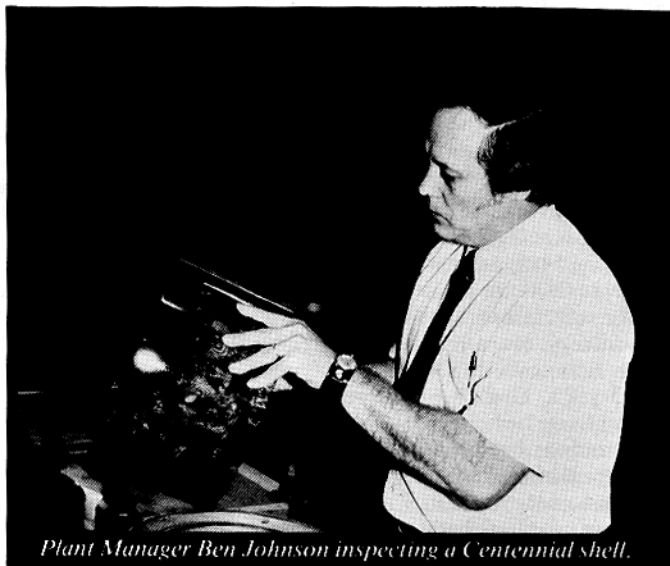
"This is our control tag," Ben explained. "It carries the model number and color, the serial number, the order number, and the customer's name. The drum is tagged once it comes out of finishing, and the tag stays right with it all the way to the customer. That's how we control our orders, so we can find out where a customer's drum is in the process and come fairly close to delivery dates. We have three loading docks, and every order is rechecked prior to shipping."

I asked Ben how much time elapsed between the time the tag was written, and the box appeared on the loading dock. "Normally we complete the entire manufacturing process in about four weeks. With the equipment we have and with the way the layout is now, I don't feel we have any capacity problem here—none whatsoever."

The next stop was the machine shop, where Gretsch has the facilities to develop their own fixtures, patterns, and hardware, as well as research and development of prototypes. "We can do everything but make castings," Ben boasted. "And I have the talented people to do it—pattern makers, machinists. So we feel we have a lot of



The Gretsch main office in Gallatin, Tennessee.



Plant Manager Ben Johnson inspecting a Centennial shell.

The round badge, which was used until 1971.



The octagon-shaped badge was first used in 1971.



Around 1979, the wording on the badge was changed slightly.



In 1980, due to the popularity of multiple-tom outfits, the badge was changed to a squarer shape, which would look the same no matter which way a tom was mounted.



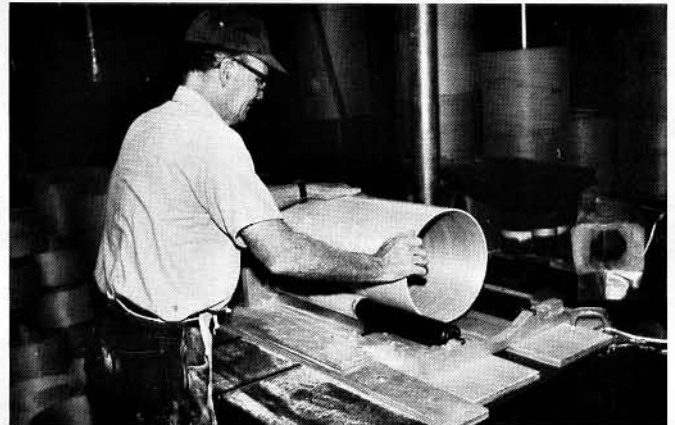


(left to right) National Sales Manager Wayne Summers, International Sales Manager Randy Houck, Operations Manager Walt Jordan, President Charlie Roy, and Marketing Manager Karl Dustman.

flexibility.”

Passing into the woodworking shop, the first thing we encountered was a huge stack of raw drumshells. These shells are manufactured at a separate facility, which Gretsch was reluctant to have photographed, as the shells are, after all, the core of the Gretsch sound. The people at Gretsch are no more willing to talk about the exact process by which their shells are made than the people at Zildjian are willing to reveal how they blend their metals. But this much can be said: The shells are still being made by the same process and people that have been used since Gretsch changed from the three-ply to the six-ply shell. And the shells are *definitely* made in America.

The shells are manufactured in 13 different diameters, and, except for large bass drums, a number of drums are cut from a single shell. A 14" diameter shell which is 32" long could produce two 14 x 14 floor toms, or up to six 5 x 14 snare drums. The cuts are planned carefully, to avoid waste.



The shells are divided according to the visual beauty of the grain. The better looking shells are used for the natural-wood lacquer finishes; the shells of poorer visual quality are used for the drums with pearl finishes. Gretsch emphasized that this is *only* a visual separation, based on the grain pattern. Coverings are not used to hide defects in the wood. If a structural defect turns up, the shell is destroyed.

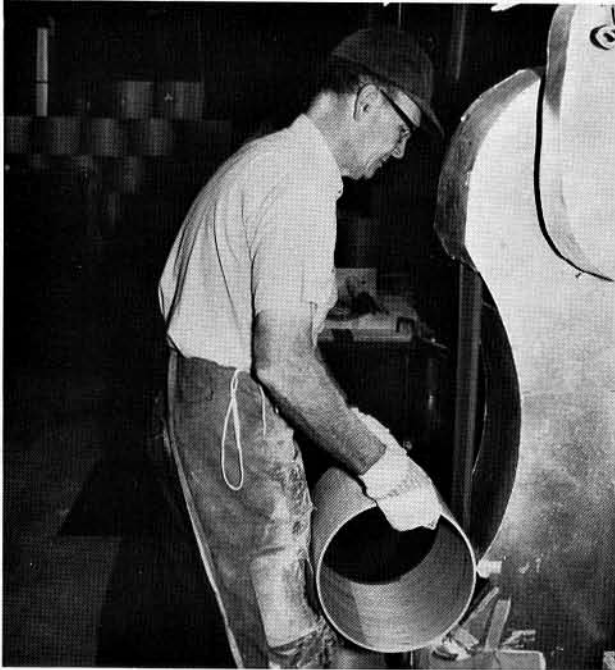
In early '81, a redesigned octagon appeared.

By late '81, the square badge had returned, and is still being used today.



This is the special Centennial badge, which only appears on 100 drumsets. Each badge was numbered and personally signed by Gretsch president Charlie Roy.

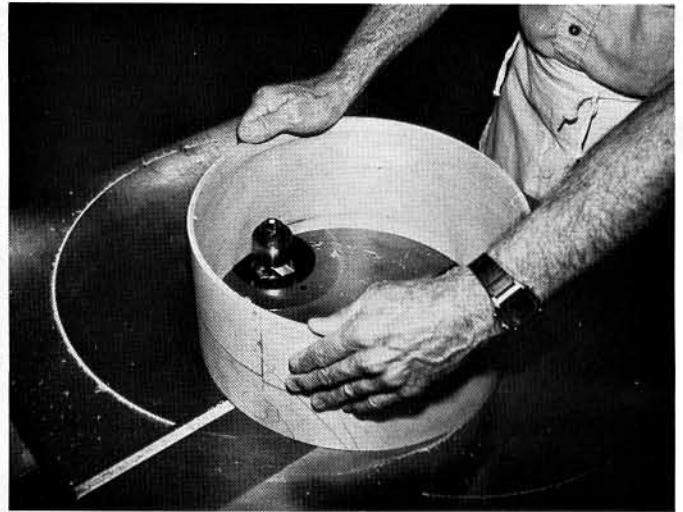
After being cut, the shell is given a rough sanding on a belt sander. This removes any glue that may be on the outside of the shell from the manufacturing stage. It also opens up any cracks. Gretsch wants to find defects as soon as possible, so that time is not wasted on a shell which will not be used.



After being belt sanded, the shell is placed on a turntable which trues the rim. This compensates for the tendency of a saw not to end up in exactly the same place it started.



After truing, the shell is put on a special machine that cuts the bearing edge, which is so critical to the tuning of a drum. "We shape our bevels on a single-spindle shaper," Ben explained. "The bevel is not controlled by the employee; it's controlled by the configuration of the cutting tool. We purchase the cutting tools to meet our exacting specifications. What we're doing is getting the head of the drum to tune on the outer ply. That's really the only surface that the head comes in contact with." Both ends of the shell are beveled, making it possible for any shell to become either a single- or double-headed drum.



As we watched shells being cut, trued, beveled and sanded, Ben commented on the touch of the worker. "In woodworking and in musical instruments, there's a lot of feel. If you watch Merle closely while he performs these operations, you'll see that he's not really looking. He's feeling it. That's really what it's all about."

The final sanding is done by hand, with the shell spinning on a turntable. This is the last step before the shell is either finished or covered. This step is especially important for those shells which will be given a natural-wood finish, because, as Ben explained, "There's a fallacy that the finish will hide and cover everything. The truth is, the finish will highlight every mistake we make. If the drum is not properly prepared, we're going to have a product of inferior quality at the end of the line. That's all there is to it. So the woodworking is critical.

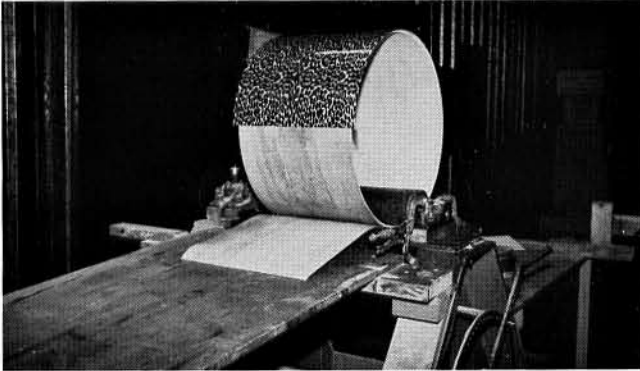


"Everybody makes such a big deal out of sanding, and they go out and get digital readout computers to analyze how much sanding should be done. The real trick is the detailed attention that the employee pays to it. Merle can tell how much he's going to have to sand it by the grain structure."

Ben re-emphasized the importance of catching defects early. "Everybody in the system is looking for the defect. We want to stop it before we have all our money in it. We normally don't have a high scrap rate. That's the whole name of the game and everybody in this building is an inspector. That's a part of everyone's job. All employees inspect their own work, as well as the work of whoever is feeding them, and if they see a flaw anywhere on the line as they're walking by, they'll point it out."

After the sanding is completed, the shells are loaded onto a dolly, and taken either to the covering area or the finishing area. We stopped first at the covering area and watched a bass drum shell receiving a pearl covering. "This is a straightforward, simple oper-

ation,” Ben commented. “I’m sure that everybody does it about the same. Both the shell and the covering material are coated with contact adhesive and allowed to dry. I know that some companies use double-face tape, but we have not found that to be adequate. We start it by hand on the top just enough to hold it, and we put it through the pinch roller.”



After the covering has been applied by machine, the overlap on the ends of the shell is trimmed by hand.

To get from the woodworking shop to the finishing department, we walked down a long corridor and through a heavy door, which is always kept closed. Ben explained the reasons for the separation of these departments. “If you’re going to have a class finish, you’re going to have to keep the dirt out of it, and the woodworking generates a lot of dust. That’s why we’ve isolated the dust and dirt of woodworking. It adds clarity to our finishing. The booths are cleaned and the floors are mopped daily.”

The finishing area seemed warmer than the area we had just left, and I commented on that. Ben replied, “We have to control humidity in this room. Right now the humidity is a little high, so we’re forcing heat in here. If it’s 85° outside and the humidity is too high, we still force heat in here to drive the humidity out. Likewise, we have a static problem in finishing if the humidity gets too low. So at that point we pump moisture back in. We like to maintain about 42% humidity in here. There are days when we can’t do that. Mother Nature just does not cooperate at all and equipment can’t overcome it. We will not sacrifice the quality of our production just to keep the line going. Therefore, it is possible that we may have to shut down the finishing area completely for a day or two.”

The first step in the finishing process is the application of a wash coat, which is merely a colored tint. As Ben explained, “This will show up defects that we have not been able to see in sanding. If there’s any glue there, it will jump right out. If there are any cracks, they will show up. We can either block sand them by hand to get the glue off or send them back to woodworking to be started all over again.”



After being wash coated, the shells are stained. Depending on the grain structure, a shell may be given from one to three coats of stain. Ben described the process: “In staining, it’s a real talent to be able to blend these colors and make them match the control chip. We have to know when to stop. Otherwise we’re into a rework situation. We let the coating dry and then recheck it. If it’s just a shade light, we put on another coat to make it darker. If it happened to be too dark, we would wash it back with alcohol.”



Throughout these operations, the skill of the workers was evident, and Ben commented again on their touch. “In our staining operation, our people can actually tell which one of the woodworking operators finished the shell by the feel of the wood and the way it takes stains. The quality isn’t different; it just has a different feel.

“Our next operation is sealing. We wash coat; we stain; we seal. That’s it on the first day. Then we shoot one coat of lacquer per day. We sand the second coat, put two more coats on, sand the fourth coat, and then apply the final two coats. It takes seven days to put lacquers on because we allow two days’ drying after the sixth coat before we go to buffing. That allows the solvents to get out. Most companies are laying two coats a day. We’re putting on one coat, letting the solvents dissipate, and it reduces the shrink. Lacquer will shrink into grain. Sometimes, as on guitars, you can see where the lacquer has shrunk into the grain, and it looks like it’s checked. That’s what we’re trying to eliminate.”



After the final coat of lacquer has been allowed to dry for two days, the shell is wet sanded. “We use just soap and sandpaper for this process of removing the lacquer buildup.”

The next step is the application of the “magic coating”—the silver-colored sealer on the inside of every Gretsch shell. Again, this process is important to the Gretsch sound, so the company was reluctant to discuss the chemical structure of the sealer, or to have the application process photographed. However, I witnessed the process and can verify that the coating is *not* used to cover up inferior wood. Scratch it away and you’ll find high-quality maple. I questioned Ben about the reason for putting anything on the inside of a drumshell. “It seals the wood. In finishing, if you only finish one side of the wood, the wood is not stabilized. Moisture will affect the other side and work one side of the surface against

the other. You want a protective covering so that the moistures are not attacking the interior. As far as the specific covering that we use, all I can say is that it's 'That Great Gretsch Sound.' The sealant that we use gives more of a resonator effect to the shell, so that the shell carries the vibration of sound without absorbing it."

The next step is to buff the shell. Ben explained why the wet sanding which was done after the lacquering operation is important. "That makes it easier on the buffer, because the buffing wheel generates so much heat that you can scorch lacquer. We could go directly from the final lacquer to the buffing wheel, but it heats up the lacquer so much that we would have a lot of rejects. So we put that extra sanding in to cut down on the buffing time.



"We have a wet wheel and a dry wheel. The wet wheel has an abrasive, and that takes the wet sanding even further to smooth out the lacquer. Then it's washed off with naphtha and goes to the dry wheel. There's no compound at all. You can actually see the lacquer moving and you have to know when you're applying too much pressure so you don't scorch or cut through it. Here again, it's the craftsman's feel that makes it controllable. I have not found a machine that could do it without someone directing it.

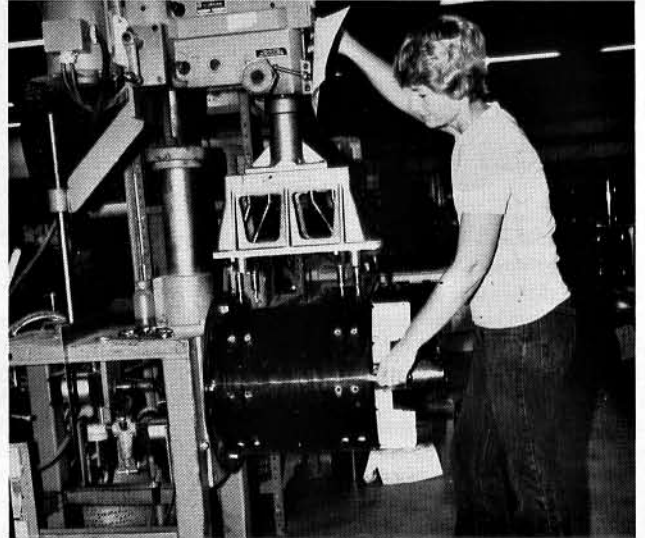


"What we do better than anybody is wood finishing, because we start it out properly and we finish properly. We're woodworkers and finishing people. We just do it better than anybody. Nobody can touch us without rushing the process. We could put them out a lot faster, but not any better."

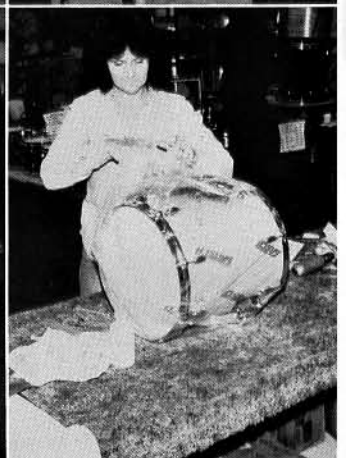
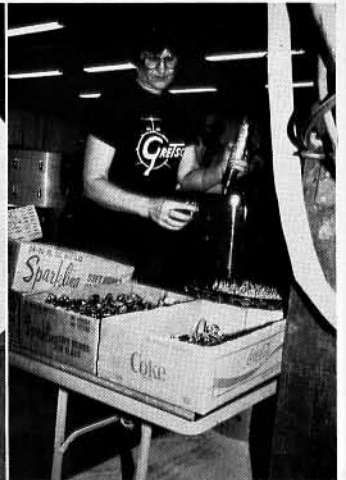
The next step is the drilling, and that is where a shell becomes a specific drum, for a specific customer. "We're really a custom shop," Ben commented. "I believe we have 56 different models depending on the combination of heads and hardware. So once a shell hits that drill, it's really identified. There are always some drummers who want a muffer only on the bottom head, some want it on the batter side, some want both, and some don't want one at

all. It's just impossible to warehouse them all, so that customer is really getting individual treatment on every order that comes through here.

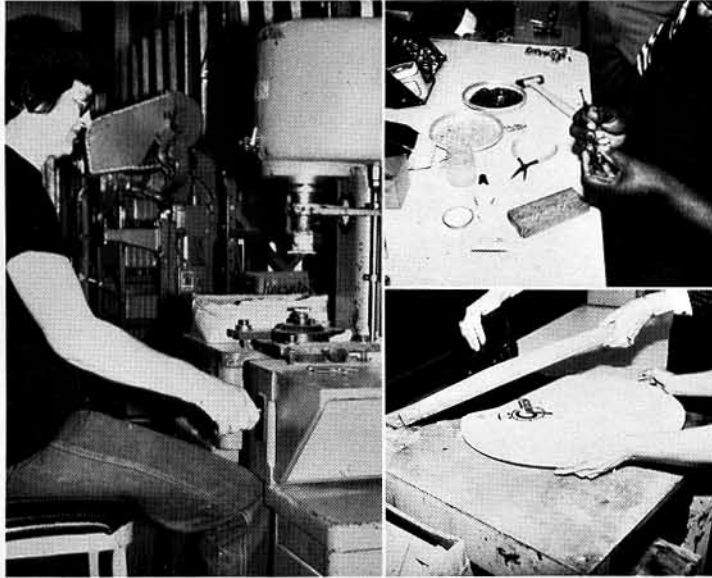
"The drilling is done with a multiple-spindle head that we set up per model. We can either drill single- or double-headed drums. We've chosen to limit our drilling to one lug station at a time, because that results in better alignment."




At this point, the shell moves down an assembly line. The Gretsch nameplate is installed, lugs are mounted along with whatever holders and mufflers are required, heads and rims are added, the finished drum is inspected, given a thorough cleaning, put into a plastic bag, and then into a carton. From there it's only a few steps away to the loading dock, where our tour began.



Before leaving, though, we stopped off to see some of the other jobs that are done at the factory. We saw mufflers being made, snare strainers being assembled, and the Gretsch logo being silk-screened onto bass drum heads.



I remember someone once telling me: "Too many companies make drums like furniture. Furniture is made by machines; musical instruments should be made by people." I spent several hours at the Gretsch factory, but I don't really remember the machines. What I do remember are the people, and the obvious respect they have for the drums they are making. We all know how much drummers love their drums. I venture to say that the people who make Gretsch love the drums just as much. 

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...(with Lionel Richie)...
...on Techware.™

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Harvey Mason (studio)...
...on natural wood finishes.

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Phil Collins (Genesis)...
...on wood shells.

"My first real kit was a Gretsch and they've always had a lovely sound. I've always wanted a brand new set of Gretsch so I went out and bought one a few years ago. I kind of collect drums and I always keep coming back to the Gretsch sound after I try something different. Now, I am playing what I really wanted all along."



Mark Herndon (Alabama)...
...on snare drums.

"The snare drum is the most important component in any set-up. I play in all types of live and studio settings, both indoor and outdoor concerts. I must have a snare drum that cuts through even the most difficult sound situation. Both my Gretsch wood shell and brass shell snare drums provide me with the clarity and projection that only Gretsch can provide."



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