

Keller Vintage Mahogany Shells

It's What's Inside That Counts

HITS

outstanding construction quality

accurate reproduction of vintage sound

authentic vintage sizes

by Rick Van Horn

To begin with, this is a *different* sort of review. We're not really evaluating the lovely champagne pink sparkle drumkit you see in the accompanying photos. That kit was made by noted drum builder Joe Montineri, specifically to demonstrate the sonic capabilities of the shells from which the drums were constructed. You see, in Joe's "other life," he's a design consultant for Keller Products.

"Ohhhh, Keller," you say. "Haven't they made shells for lots of major American drum companies over the past several decades? In fact, aren't they the company that Harry Cangany recently touted as having made the first 100% maple shells for Rogers Drums back in the late 1970s?"

Yup, same Keller. And they're still making shells for major and minor drum manufacturers alike. But they've recently come "out of the closet," dropping their anonymity to let people know just what sort of shells they can offer *besides* the familiar factory-style maple or birch models. They're still not selling direct to consumers, mind you, except under very special circumstances. The situation is sort of like shopping for a computer and making sure there's a Pentium processor in it. Keller wants you to order your drumset—from whatever source—with a full knowledge of what is available to you, shell-wise.

Keller's Vintage Mahogany shells are available in traditional depths and sizes, including the 14x22 bass drum shown here.



A New Vintage

Which brings us to this unusual review. Among several shell series now available from Keller are Vintage Mahogany models. These 6-ply shells are made of African mahogany and North American poplar, just as most WFL, Ludwig, and Slingerland drums were from the 1930s to the 1960s. The shells are intended to capture what Keller calls a "true 'aged' sound that's rich, robust, and sweet," while offering the advantages of modern-day construction. Those advantages include a staggered-seam laminating process, as well as Keller's own VSS (Vibrating Sound Source) process that conditions each shell and intensifies the classic qualities.

To get an idea of Joe Montineri's specific goals with the Vintage Mahogany kit he created for this review, we asked Joe to outline those goals himself. He responded, "The combination of three plies of mahogany with three integrated plies of poplar is what makes these shells so special. They're the truest vintage replication possible using current manufacturing processes. Obviously, we can't duplicate the old 3-ply steam-bent shells. But I've done my best to mimic old methods in order to recapture the sound of those sought-after vibrating bodies. Each shell is a consistently round and stable cylinder with rigid reinforcing rings specific to this series. Our 10-ply maple rings are 1½" deep on tom, floor tom, and snare shells, and 2" deep on bass drum shells. But the thickness must remain constant, since it dictates support, wall integrity, and projection."

Wood types and reinforcement-ring sizes are not the only elements used to give the Vintage Mahogany shells an authentic character. Vintage sizes are employed as well. For example, bass drum shells are available in 18", 20", 22", and 24" diameters, but only in 14" depths. These sizes may make it possible for an owner of an existing vintage kit to obtain a replacement or add-on drum that sounds and looks authentic enough to be a viable addition—without spending exorbitant amounts of money to find a matching original drum on eBay.

A Closer Look

Our review "kit" included a 14x22 bass drum, a 5x14 snare drum, 8x12 and 9x13 rack toms, and 14x14 and 16x16 floor toms. It was fitted with generic, low-mass hardware that would not have been out of place on kits from the '50s and '60s. The one exception was aluminum-alloy Gauger RIMS mounts for the rack toms. Those toms were mounted on a double tom stand kindly provided by Gibraltar.

All of the drums were fitted with Remo coated Ambassador heads top and bottom, in an effort to match those that would have been common in the '60s. When those heads were removed, rounded vintage-style bearing edges (flawlessly made, by the way) were revealed, along with the dark mahogany interior plies that help to give these shells their "aged" character.

And The Sound

Once again, let's remember that we're not really considering a commercially available finished drumkit here. We're consid-



Jim Esposito

This photo shows the interior mahogany plies and rounded bearing edges that give Vintage Mahogany shells their "aged" quality.

ering what *could* be available if you were to select Keller's Vintage Mahogany shells as the basis for your own drumkit.

With that in mind, every editor at *Modern Drummer* played the kit. We all agreed that Joe Montineri and Keller had achieved their goal. These drums constituted a veritable time warp. In and of themselves, they sounded great—bright yet warm, lively yet controlled. But their sound definitely harked back to the days when names like Ludwig, Slingerland, Gretsch, and Rogers dominated the drum world.

How much of that sound can we attribute to the shells alone? Well, let's just say that we've heard a *lot* of other drums fitted with similar heads, and mounted on similar hardware. And they didn't sound like these drums. So we feel confident in saying that the ply composition, bearing edges, and reinforcement rings contributed the greatest percentage of the drums' acoustic character. And all of those contributions came from the Keller Vintage Mahogany shells.

It's Your Choice

If you cherish the sound of vintage drums in general—and of '50s/'60s drums in particular—and you're considering the purchase of a new drumkit, do yourself a favor. Talk to the company or builder that you've selected to make your kit about using Keller Vintage Mahogany shells. Custom finishes and unique hardware fittings are nice. But when it comes to a drum's fundamental sound, it's what's inside that counts.

THE NUMBERS

Keller shells are intended for use in drumkits made by established manufacturers and drum builders. Contact your preferred builder for price information based on the use of Keller shells to construct the kit of your choice.

Vintage Mahogany shells are currently available in the sizes outlined below. Special orders will be considered upon request.

Toms:8x10, 8x12, 9x13, and 10x14

Floor toms:14x14, 16x16, and 16x18

Snare:5x14, 6½x14, and 8x14

Bass drums:14x18, 14x20, 14x22, and 14x24

(877) 209-9359, www.kellerproducts.com.



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