

Play What You Love:

A Look Inside the Craftsmanship of the A&F Drum Co.

By Jeff Ryan



Courtesy A&F Drum Co.



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Simple design, practical application, and brilliant sound, are the three pillars that stand as the foundation for the somewhat newly created (but by no means unfamiliar) A&F Drum Company. There are so many adjectives that come to mind when I think about this company and what they've achieved since their start just over six years ago; organic, creative, inventive, bold, versatile, and brave are some that come to mind. But the one that has stuck with me since the first time I laid eyes on and played them is pure artistry. What do I mean by "pure artistry?" True artists are driven by their desire to create something, it's written in their DNA to pursue their passion in their given medium. Monetary gains and notoriety be damned. We drummers have certain magical sounds innately embedded in us. These sounds inspire us to sit at the drums and create rhythms and patterns. We literally chase the sounds that we

hear internally in an attempt to express them on the drums.

That's exactly what happened to founder and owner Ramy Antoun of the A&F Drum Co. He was searching for that perfect or pure snare sound that he heard internally but had yet to find. Despite his endless recording, touring, and working in the music industry, he had yet to hear the snare drum sound that he'd heard in his mind. So, like the old saying goes, "If you want it done right, just do it yourself," and that's what he did.

Modern Drummer was recently invited into the hallowed workshop of A&F Drum Co. in Spicewood, Texas to sit down with owner and founder Ramy Antoun, his partner Josh Jones, and head of A&F Sales Rob Andre. We wanted to learn about their inspirations in drumming, making drums, and what it's like to chase, find, and create a sound for themselves and for all of us.

MD: Even though this story is about A&F Drums, I think it's important for the readers to understand a little about A&F's founder Ramy Antoun. What was your inspiration to start playing drums?
RA: I'm a self-taught drummer, I grew up listening to a lot of Eastern music and odd meter Eastern rhythms. My father was a pianist and a producer in Egypt. I've always enjoyed rhythms and music. I got a start in Los Angeles as a session drummer for records, film, TV, and commercials. One thing led to another, and in 2003 I joined Seal's band. I toured, wrote, and recorded with him for about four years. Then my band Goldspot got signed to Universal Records and I spent time in London recording and playing. After that, I moved to Austin and took a bit of a break.

I spent about five years working with a big church here in Austin, helping artists of all disciplines with their careers and spiritual journeys. In 2010 I started a film production company called CAG, we created documentary films for large nonprofits like World Vision and The Salvation Army and helped build awareness and raise funds for all the good things they were doing across the globe. In 2011 I connected with Ed Kowalczyk from the band Live. I made a solo record with him and ended up touring for the 20th anniversary of Live's *Throwing up Copper* and for his solo record. During that time, I started to finalize the snare drum design that I had been working on for about 12 years.

In April 2015 I made the first A&F snare which was a 4 x 14 Raw Brass. In May 2016 (almost a year later,) due to the rising demand for the drums we were making, we formed the A&F Drum Co. Company, LLC.

MD: When and why did you decide to start making drums?

RA: From my early start as a session drummer, I've always been fascinated with vintage drums. It was always interesting to me that my vintage drums would make more appearances on sessions than any new drum I'd ever purchased. I would constantly take my vintage drums apart and try

to understand what made them sound like they did. In doing so, I learned a lot about the manufacturing style of drums that were made almost 100 years ago. This early passion for understanding vintage drum sounds and construction is what led to creating A&F Drum Co. It was always about the sound first, then about the method by which that sound could be produced. That's become the pillar of A&F Drum Company: simple design, practical application, and brilliant sound. A secondary driving force for our company's innovation is solving everyday drummer problems and creating unique instruments that will inspire new sounds and performances. That's why we make pancake and

Slingerland's, and 40s Gretsch's. All the old drums have beautiful stories and inspiring manufacturing details.

MD: I've tried to wrap my head around all the different snare and kit offerings that you have as a company. Correct me if I'm wrong, but there's close to nine different metal and wood snare options, toms, and bass drums to choose from as well. That's not an overwhelming amount to choose from, but if you had an up-and-coming drummer who was new to your drums and cymbals where would you have them start regarding what type of drum they might want?

RA: In the six years since the start of the company our catalog has definitely



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gunshot snares and massive and tiny bass drums. That's why we design hardware with a touch of class that's light, functional, sturdy, and deeply connected to our drum designs.

MD: I recently watched a YouTube video where you said you wanted to go channel the same processes of how they made drums 100 years ago, and pair that craftsmanship with new technology to make A&F Drums. Was there a particular brand of drums (Gretsch, Ludwig, Rogers) from back then that was inspiring?

RA: I love all vintage drums made from 1890 to 1969, although I gravitated towards the 20s Ludwig's, 30s

grown. But in the bigger scheme of things, we only offer about five colors and wood options. We don't do wraps and we don't necessarily make custom drums. Everything we do is curated and has a historical merit. For someone new to A&F, I always recommend the Royals Brass drum kits or our Raw Brass snares. That's where it all started. They really do exemplify our sound and manufacturing styles.

I also recommend our Oddities cymbals, especially the square ride, the north star, and our Sabian collaboration bell hats. Those offer unique, warm, and inspiring sounds, and they are very microphone friendly.

MD: Can you go into a little detail on your choice of tuning rods, lugs, and hoops, and your "Lego" approach of how they work together? What metal is used for those components and why?

RA: That is a great question. I spent a lot of time researching materials, looking at vintage drums that I love and trying to source similar materials. This proved to be quite difficult. Things just aren't manufactured like they were 100 years ago. It's largely because that type of manufacturing is expensive and difficult. But I'm never one to shy away from a challenge. I stayed persistent in my search for great raw materials that are all locally sourced in the United States so we could hand make drums the way they did 100 years ago.

Raw Brass is a very warm metal and produces warm overtones that are microphone friendly. Therefore, I chose to use as much raw brass on our drums as possible without sacrificing mechanical integrity. All of our hoops, lugs, tubes, spurs, kick drum brackets, floor tom brackets, and legs are all solid raw brass. We also wanted to eliminate metal from touching metal to avoid rattles and unnecessary buzz. We cut leather gaskets to place between the lug and shell on every drum we make. We also cut a badge out of solid brass and placed it on a leather gasket and hand stamped an individual serial number for every single drum. Even our bass drum head has a solid brass badge, cut out over the leather, and affixed to the front of the Remo head. We pay a lot of attention to detail, but don't let the aesthetic fool you. The mission here is to make workhorse drums that will stand the test of time. Just like the drums made 100 years ago that we still play today.

As for the Lego inspiration, I've always been fascinated that I could buy any box of new Legos and combine them with Legos that go back 30, 40, or 50 years. You can continue to connect and create new designs and ideas because everything is integrated. I love that modular concept, and I wanted to bring that to everything that we make. One example of this is that all of our floor toms can easily be used as bass drums by using the spurs from your bass drum in the floor tom brackets. Our snare stand can also be tilted 90° to sit vertically with our pedal attachment so you can play any snare drum as a bass drum. Our snare stands also

accommodate drums from 10 to 22 inches in diameter so you could play large diameter bass drums as toms if you choose. I love the idea of showing up with a four-piece kit and creating the sounds of a 12-piece kit by just moving some things around. We designed our own internal snare mechanism that allows you to create multiple sounds with one snare drum. We created and patented the Kick-Bone, which is a manual effects unit that can attach to any bass drum and create multiple sounds with one drum.

MD: After seeing first-hand the "internal snare" application you've created, I was

made like they would've been made 100 years ago.

MD: The attention to detail and overall craftsmanship is felt not only when you see these drums, but when you play them. Was that the initial intention? Or did the vision of curating artistic flavors and fine tuning every aspect of each drum make them each unique developments along the way?

RA: I didn't know this about myself prior to A&F, but I love to design beautiful things that are reminiscent of the Art Deco era of architecture and design. Once we had established the company, I felt a lot of freedom and inspiration to



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really impressed with all the variations of sound that you can achieve just by altering the settings on the snare. Can you elaborate on the decision to make this applicable to your snares and describe some of the sounds you can create with it?

RA: Yes, the A&F internal snare is a wonderful addition to any drum. There's a small snare wire unit that can be engaged on the inside of the top or bottom head and create dry, orchestra, or marching snare sounds with the flick of the switch. Remember, all these things are manual not electronic, and are

take my passion of design and apply it to everything we make. Although it starts with sound, practicality, and design, at the end of the day instruments are made for sonic purposes.

MD: The word "fingerprint" has been repeated in our conversations and in your videos when you describe the process of making these drums. Can you elaborate on that idea?

RA: Yes, that was actually coined by John Aldridge. He has been a mentor and engraver with us from the beginning. He was referring to our patina, and how every single patina is different. Each

patina will continue to evolve and create its own individual fingerprint of a unique design.

MD: Without giving away any of your secrets, I'd like to dive in a bit deeper on the actual construction of your drums. Do the all the different drum and "snom" offerings differ in ply thickness, bearing edges, and-or hoop design? And how does this approach differ when it comes to the metal, bronze, and copper drums?

RA: Let's start with our wood shells. We make seven ply thin wood shells, each with our exclusive wood ply formulas. We have no inner edge and just a slight round over outer edge to fit the contour of the drumhead. For all of our metal shells, we cut soft 45-degree edges and wide snare beds. We do not use reinforcement rings on any of our drums.

MD: Are these materials, both the metal and wood, locally sourced materials?

RA: Yes, all our metal and woods are sourced locally in the US.

MD: Let's move onto your hardware designs and how you have really gone above and beyond the call of duty. In your words you are "trying to reinvent the wheel" to give the drumming community the freedom to set up their drums easily and with tons of support, so they can

focus on playing the instrument and not worry about inconsistencies in their hardware. What was the inspiration behind the decision to start making hardware?

RA: I've loved the simple design, function, and aesthetic of vintage hardware since I started collecting vintage drums in 1998. I had amassed over 100 different vintage stands dating back to the early 1900s. However, stands made back then were more for lighter jazz playing; they were thin and lightweight, but not very sturdy. I wanted to combine everything I loved from these vintage stands with modern structure and application. I also love how nickel ages over 30, 40, or even 100 years. That is why we made our stands nickel over carbon steel and decided on a stamped metal manufacturing approach for a higher level of durability.

MD: Can you elaborate on why you chose to partner with Sabian and describe some of the unique offerings that A&F and Sabian have created together?

RA: Yes absolutely. For a young company like A&F, we needed to find an older, wiser manufacturing company in our industry for guidance and understanding on how to build our business into a 100-year-old legacy! Sabian and Zildjian are all from

the Zildjian family and Sabian continued the traditional hand-making processes that go back hundreds of years. The original Sabian factory was built when the Zildjian family came to North America. Seeing how this successful company held true to their hand making processes and manufacturing standards was a true inspiration. When the opportunity arose to partner, I saw it as an honor and a blessing!

We started with a series of big bell high hats made from the amazing Turkish Sabian bronze as well as our exclusive A&F Brass, which are all still in production today. Then we made a very limited series of rolled and welded (not cast) Sabian Bell Bronze A&F Hand Hammered snare drums. The shells are almost 5mm thick and weigh over 25lbs! We only had 19 of those and I think they sold out in about three hours.

After that, we introduced a standard production drum kit, and snare drums that are all made with our exclusive bronze. They are also hand hammered by the experts at Sabian. Everything we release with Sabian carries one branding, called The Ankh series.

MD: And speaking of cymbals, after visiting your shop I played some of your own cymbal creations. Can you explain that creative process and how and why you chose which materials to use for your own line of cymbals?

RA: I had been cutting cymbals into odd shapes for many years; all to try and enhance their performance in studio settings. More warmth and less decay, that was always the goal under the mics. It wasn't foreign to me to create cymbals from scratch. That way I already knew what the sound was going to be. It was exciting to find a cymbal smith in Chicago named Ray Byrne who was willing to entertain my madness. We start with authentic Turkish blanks from Istanbul Turkey, and Ray hand-lathes, hammers, and cuts all the cymbals one at a time in his garage shop. We didn't want to have a cymbal line for the sake of selling cymbals. We wanted to offer odd things that cymbal companies weren't offering at the time. Ideas that we felt were a fun and innovative addition to a drummer's sonic arsenal. That's why our cymbal series is called the Oddities!

MD: The Whiskey Maple kit really struck my eye for multiple reasons, I would love a little clarity on the construction, and how and why you chose to blend the

maple wood with a certain type of Scotch to get your finished product?

RA: That is actually a very funny story. In the early days of our company, I spent long evenings into early mornings in the shop trying to finish and ship drums. One night, I was working on a maple snare drum and I was supposed to oil the drum to seal it for moisture. I was having a glass of Macallan Scotch Whisky while I was working on it. It was probably 3 am and I was starting to get tired. When I went to dip my rag into the oil, I accidentally dipped it into the whiskey and rubbed it on the drum. I was so angry thinking that I just ruined the snare drum, and we would have to sand and start it over, so I sat it down and went home to bed. When I got in the next day, Tabber had finished it with the whiskey and oil together, in that moment our Whiskey Series drums were born! That's been a fun series, especially when some clients send us a little bit of their preferred whiskey, bourbon, or even (for non-drinkers) espresso, which we mix with the oil when we are sealing and staining the maple shells.

MD: I want to address a misconception that (hopefully) only a very small percentage of the drumming community has. A&F drums and cymbals are NOT luxury items meant to be displayed in the corner of your studio or home to be coveted from afar, these instruments are meant to be played, hit, brushed, and pinged so musicians can express themselves, yes?

RA: HaHaHa. YES!!! They are DRUMS, made to be played in ALL settings and designed to hopefully last at least 100 years!!

MD: There's a warmth and richness to the overall vibe at A&F Drum Co. as a whole. Was that your initial vision as a brand and a company? Or did that develop the more you got into drum making?

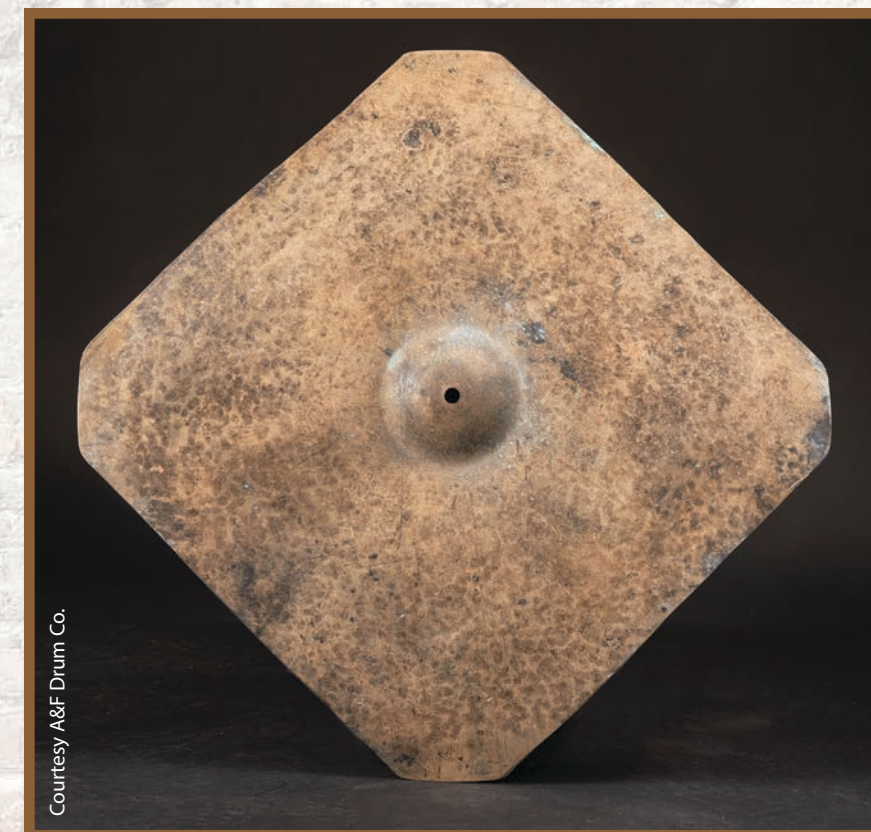
RA: I think what you are describing is essentially the heartbeat of our company. It's not something that we designed, planned, or plotted. It's just an outpouring of who we are and what we make. What you see is what you get.

MD: A&F has delved into all the different facets of the drumming world. Because of your passion for detail and making things from scratch and raw materials, is there a possibility that drumsticks or maybe even your own line of drumheads could be a future venture?

RA: I definitely have a few things on my

list that I hope to accomplish in the next three to five years. But as is usually the case, only 10% of what's on my list will probably make the cut, the other 90% are just fun ideas that probably won't ever see the light of day. I try not to edit my ideas until we've tried things. Once we've tried things, if they don't work, we accept that as reality and move onto the next idea. That said, I can't tell you what things are going to make the cut until they are

can pull out whatever instruments you don't want and play along to the rest. Or you can solo a track that you want to learn. Once you learn it, you can mute the track and play with the rest of the band. You can also turn on the video feature and film yourself playing and send it to anybody you like or post it on social media, it's all right there in one app. Right now, there's just some tester songs that are very basic, but we are working



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tried, tested, and true. I can tell you that innovation is at the core of our company. I pray we never stop creating!!

MD: Can you tell us what IS next on the horizon for the company and for you as a drummer?

RA: Definitely a kick pedal, but let me share (for the first time ever) that we have created a play-a-long app for all musicians. It's in the beta phase but will be available to everyone for free. It's called GrooveBuddy. Go to the App Store, download it and try it out. Send any feedback you have to Ramy@Groovebuddy.com I want to hear from everybody as we continue to build it. Karaoke is for singers, but GrooveBuddy is for players. It's pretty amazing. You

on licensing deals for bigger catalogs of music.

MD: I just want to say thank you for inviting me into the A&F Workshop and inviting me into your home and chatting with me about what I consider one of the most important drum companies making drums today.

RA: There's nothing more encouraging than someone like you and *Modern Drummer* helping to tell our story. To say that we're grateful is an understatement. Thank you so much for taking the time and the energy and showing the interest in our small little drum company, we really appreciate it!

