



# What To Do With Vintage Drums

Almost every drummer in the world is fascinated with vintage (antique) drums.

It's very exciting to have a historically important musical instrument made twenty-five, fifty-five or even two hundred plus years ago, though very few of us are lucky enough to have such an instrument in good working and playing condition. Often, these drums will have several sonic problems, such as a boxy sound, unwanted overtones, poor resonance and no sensitivity, to name a few.

Vintage snare drums are the most wanted because you can play them with any drum set. Besides the cliché sounds, most drummers are looking for ease and response when playing buzz rolls and press rolls, or in getting that timbale sound with rim shots, etc. One

very important quality to look for is when you can achieve those sounds without "digging" into the drumhead. Sticks should fly off of the head easily, which will translate to less pressure on your hands. Sticks come down by gravity, and a springy drumhead then throw the sticks up. We just have to redirect and control this motion with authority and ease. Why work hard? The energy is there, you just need to learn how to use it.

Have you ever wondered why most antique drums usually don't sound that good? The reason is because most vintage drums were made in large quantities, and accordingly, the quality varied greatly from drum to drum,

shell to shell. Similar to cymbals, you may have to go through many to find a great one.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

Now let's get to it: you just purchased the vintage drum(s) of your dreams and don't know where to start.

First, you have to inspect the drum thoroughly to determine if it is all-original and there are no missing, worn out or broken parts. Plus, make sure there is no structural damage to the drum shell. Then you can take the drum apart for a thorough cleaning and lubrication before you attempt to tune it up. After cleaning and lubricating, you can determine if the drum is ready to play, and if all the parts are working properly. Otherwise, you can inadvertently damage some very hard to replace parts.

Assuming the drum is put back together and complete, tune the drum up and play it. You will see if all the threads are fine and nothing is stripped by hearing right away if the heads and the snares are all right, or are in need of being replaced. Also, it should be obvious if the strainer and the butt plate are functional. Before tuning you can only guess that everything is working properly; after tuning, you'll know for sure.

## WHAT TO REPLACE

With most vintage and antique drums, you will probably have to replace the drumheads and snare wires. Replacing them does not diminish the value of your drum. This is not unlike the strings of a guitar, when they are old you have to replace them. BUT, don't throw away any original parts. Old drumheads and snare wires are collectables, and you'll need them in case you want to show off your drum in a museum. Very often, strainers, butt plates, lug casings, hoops and mufflers are either missing, damaged or not functioning correctly. If so, it doesn't mean you have to throw them away and/or replace them with something else. Remember, replacing drum parts is a last resort, only replace them when there is nothing else you can do. If at all possible, I recommend saving all the original parts and restoring them to the original specs. If that's impossible, fix them with generic elements, so they will have some vintage spirit left for more integrity.

## MISSING PARTS

Original, unaltered drums with missing parts, are usually left in "purgatory" while you find yourself in the position of searching for the missing parts. It doesn't mean that you can't play them, because you can always



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temporarily replace the parts which do not require you to drill the shell or hoops. Do not drill the drum, you don't need extra holes! There is a way to install generic parts on a drum without drilling out the shell, and I do this all the time. This way you can play your antique/vintage drum while you are hunting down the original parts.

## ALTERED DRUMS

Now let's talk about drums with extra holes, altered finishes and newer parts. Drums like that can be more comfortable, better sounding and better looking. Why? Because, new generation parts are usually better working, stronger and more comfortable than vintage counterparts made a long time ago. Though there are a few exceptions, for example: Slingerland's three point strainers, Ludwig & Ludwig "Black Beauty" strainers, Rogers and Fibes strainers from the sixties, etc. Although the altered drums value is diminished, the playing ability of the drum is increased. When all the alterations are properly done, and the drum sound is elevated to an exquisite level, the value of it will go up among players.

You might also want to consider new, correct edges and snare beds on altered vintage drums. Remember, vintage drums were made in a factory, so there was a lot of room for mistakes and negligence, which is why you

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can consider all of these improvements.

Now about the edges and snare beds on “untouchables.” Most vintage drums do need help to achieve a better sound, edges and snare beds will help. The problem is, with the temptation to improve the sound, you don't want to alter the originality of the drum. This is a predicament. I have a suggestion: let's analyze the “Gretsch” Round Badge snare drum. Although most people would not be opposed to having one, some of them are more desirable than others. The “Broadcasters” made in the thirties are the best to me. Then we have drums made after WWII and up through the mid-fifties, I like some of them too. From the mid-fifties, Gretsch was mostly using Jasper drum shells, and sometimes Keller shells. After WWII Gretsch stopped making their own shells, and a subcontractor company has been making their shells ever since. Customizing drums like these is not a big crime because Gretsch made them by the thousands. You can investigate other company histories and figure out which drums are “untouchables” and which ones are not.

## CUSTOMIZING

Customizing is needed only if it's really necessary. For instance, when new drumheads and new snares are

not helping the sound. After trying everything, you have to decide what to do: keep the drum for show room and museum purposes, keep it as an investment, sell it, or customize the drum and turn it into a serious, versatile musical instrument.

My suggestion is to ask yourself this question, “Why do I want this drum?” If you're honest and the answer is because of the sound, then you can consider customization. However, if you want to play this drum just to look cool, show off, peer pressure, or as a show business requirement, then definitely DO NOT alter the drum(s).

## THE RARE BIRD

There are a few vintage drums left which I put in the category of “endangered species.” I'm referring to drums that are very hard to find and there are very few left around: drums made during WWII with wooden lug casings, pre-war Black Beauty's from the twenties and thirties, etc. If you're lucky enough to find one of these rare babies, you can research it through various drum books, or contact a serious collector to investigate the value of your drum. You should know what you really have.

In case you discover that your instrument is among the “endangered species” take my word for it and DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT change, alter or customize anything on the drum/drums. Consider only the restoration, gentle cleaning and lubrication by a reputable drum shop or individual, in case you are busy or not knowledgeable enough to do the job. At the very least, get the best drum case you can find for your “Mona Lisa” of drums. ✨

You too can own the vintage drum of your dreams, visit [www.nodarrode.com](http://www.nodarrode.com).

