

TRIBES DRUMS Sandy Ficca's Labor Of Love

by Kevin Winard

Boulder, Colorado, about twenty-five miles northwest of Denver, is home to about 96,000 people—and Boulder Drums. The store occupies 1,150 square feet of a strip mall and is owned by seventeen-year Firefall drummer Sandy Ficca.

Sandy opened the first Boulder Drums shop on Pearl Street in 1993 and moved to his current location just over two years ago. As if having forty to eighty dates a year performing with Firefall and running the store wasn't enough, Sandy also owns Tribes Drums.

Tribes Drums started out innocently enough. Sandy had learned about building custom drums and doing bearing edges while living in Florida in the '80s. "About six years ago," he explains, "a customer came into my shop and told me that he was a woodworker and had a spray booth. So I gave him one of the snare drums I had built and told him to finish it. It turned out beautiful. So I gave him different drums to work on until we had a complete set finished. I set up the kit at my store, and within a week we had about ten orders for custom drumsets. It was at that point that we decided we were going to become a drum company."

Tribes drums feature the same Keller shells most major US-based drum companies use, but all of the bearing edges, drilling, and finishes are done in-house. With the help of his partner, Billy Hoke, and their "manufacturing guy," Jon Erlich, Ficca runs his company at a grassroots level. "Our entire concept for doing business is that we cater to the working-class drummer,"

Sandy says. "I like to call Tribes Drums 'a blue-collar drum company.' I feel that guys out there who are busting their butts, playing every night, deserve to have custom drums as much as the name drummers do. Most of these guys can't afford \$5,000 drumsets. So in order to keep costs down, we only sell through our store or through our Web site (www.tribesdrums.com).

With this philosophy in mind, Tribes uses high-quality hardware, but they reserve the cosmetics for their finishes. Sandy continues, "Our whole thing is about offering good sound and quality while keeping the prices

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Boulder Drums TRIBES' "ANTI-STORE"

In order to compete with major stores like Guitar Center and MARS Music, Boulder Drums carries more eclectic products in order to make the store stand out. "I try to buy things that other stores don't carry," says owner Sandy Ficca. "For example, I carry Bosphorus and UFIP cymbals. You have to find your niche."

"This town was into ethnic percussion long before the rest of the country," Ficca adds. "It has a real spiritual feel to it, like Asheville, Santa Cruz, or Santa Barbara. Boulder is also unique in that it has a huge drumming community. I sell a lot of djembes, talking drums, and other percussion instruments."

Ficca has a special philosophy when it comes to training his employees. "I sort of 'anti-train' them," he claims. "When I worked for another store, they would have sales meetings every morning. It was like being at a car dealership. I hate that approach, although I do use some of the same sales techniques. But I make it much more personal. I want customers leaving here thinking that we were really nice people and that we knew what we were talking about."

When asked what he would suggest to someone wanting to start a drum business in today's market, Ficca answers, "I don't think I would try to start a business today, because the market is so saturated. But if you are committed to doing it, then approach it as if you were having a career as a professional musician. It has to be a labor of love. You can't really be in it for the money. I do love my life; I get to play professionally, I have great friends and customers, and I feel really lucky. I probably will never be rich or own a Mercedes. But I sleep really well every night."

affordable. That is where we focus our goals." The average five-piece Tribes set with a natural finish costs around \$1,595. The company produces about forty sets a year, and while that number may not astound many people, considering the fact that there are only three employees and basically one person making the drums, that is quite an accomplishment. Tribes can usually produce a kit in about ninety days.

Having the facilities to design and build his own kits allows Ficca to look at what other manufacturers are producing and make improvements where he feels they're necessary. In fact, Ficca says, that was his motivation for building his own cocktail drum.

"I've always loved cocktail drums, but I thought that the sets being built were marginal at best," he explains. "Even when Yamaha came out with their design, I didn't feel it was all it could be. You can use an 8" snare drum, like they do, but in most real playing situations you need a full-size snare. So I decided to build a cocktail set that first and foremost had a real snare that was detachable, so you could also use the snare with a full-size kit. I also wanted to separate the kick from the snare in order to cut down on the sympathetic vibrations. I came up with my design and gave it to my partner to start building it. The set sounded really good, but the kick drum wasn't quite there yet."

"The initial design had holes underneath the partition between the snare and bass, because I wanted to be able to mike it just like a regular kick. Originally I wanted one hole near the bottom where the head is, but Billy felt we should put two holes opposite each other, at the top. The partition was 4" underneath the snare. One day I was showing a customer the snare, and I took the spacers off, which were between the snare and kick. Later I forgot to put the spacers back on, and when we put it back together it accidentally knocked the partition down. I thought that we really messed up the design and broke the drum. So I decided then to put the partition under the holes; then we had our kick drum sound. With the new design the snare also sounded bigger. Our happy accident turned out to be the answer to the problem."

The cocktail drum that Tribes is building is starting to get some recognition. *Modern Drummer* did a review of it in the November 2001 issue, and Ficca says that several other stores have expressed interest in carrying the set.

Tribes Drums, although a small company, does use endorsers to promote their product. "We have some local drummers who are with bands starting to get national recognition. Michael Travis with The String Cheese Incident, Brian Nevin with Big Head Todd & The Monsters, Sam Young with The Samples, and the band Leftover Salmon all use our drums."

Ficca's shop does carry other name drums, like Tama, Gretsch, Premier, and Sonor, but he says many of his customers end up buying Tribes because, "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize quality versus price." The company is starting to make a name for itself, but they are deliberately taking it slowly because, as Sandy observes, "I have seen so many drum companies come and go very quickly. I think the main reason is that they were trying to compete with the major custom drum companies in the same price range. All of us involved with Tribes do other things to make money, so it's not totally about the money. It's really a labor of love."

