

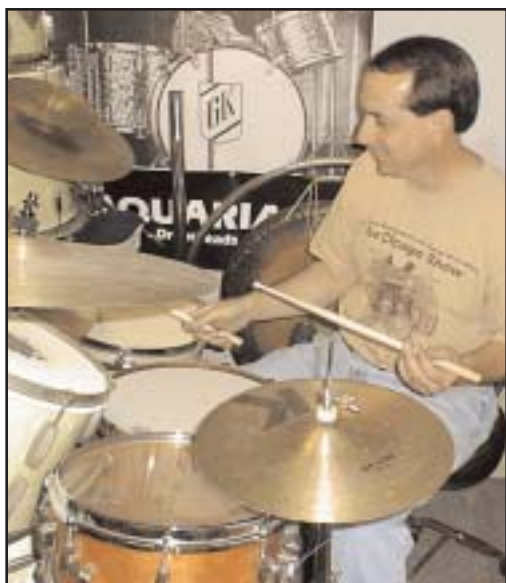
Who's Who in Vintage Drums ...

John Aldridge

The Not So Modern Drum Authority

by Billy Jeansonne

I met John Aldridge about four years ago when my wife and I were traveling through Nashville. I gave him a call and he gladly invited us to visit him at his office. He patiently took the time to show us around and answered the many questions we asked, and we learned quite a bit about John that day. Mostly that he was willing to share his knowledge about vintage drums and that he would take time out of his busy schedule to spend time with someone who shares his passion for vintage drums. But his contribution goes way beyond that.



John Michael Aldridge was born in Ardmore, Oklahoma in 1960. Influenced by Sal Mineo playing Gene Krupa in the Gene Krupa Story, he began playing drums when he was 11 years old. John began playing in sixth grade band, took a few lessons, played in the High School band, and practiced, practiced, practiced. His first drumset was a cheap Taiwanese kit (Green Oyster Pearl) bought for \$ 300.00 from paper route earnings. He learned how to play drumset mostly by listening and watching other drummers and played the usual dances, parties, and club dates through junior high, high school, and college. About a year before graduating from Southeastern Oklahoma State University, John got married, made a record and toured for a while with a Gospel Quartet as he finished his last year of college. Moving to Tulsa to work on his Masters degree, he soon dropped out of grad school to teach music at a private elementary school. He really enjoyed teaching young children. One year later, John began teaching general music at a public school and continued teaching elementary music.

His next break came when his former drum teacher was fired from his gig with an established band/booking agent. Having subbed on the job before, John was called to replace him. That kept him busy for the next six years. As the first call drummer for Sammy Pagna, John was presented with a wide variety of musical situations from trios to big band music. A few of the national acts that John has been called to use his drumming skills on are, Freda Payne, Marilyn McCoo and Billy Davis Jr., Charlie Pride, Pat Boone, The Platters, Foster Brookes, and Hank Thompson. During this time, he was also teaching drum lessons privately at the Hank Thompson School of Country Music at Rogers State College in Claremore, Oklahoma. Teaching at the school provided John with a steady stream of drum students. He played gigs with many of the older swing band players who also taught at the school which was an education in itself. When asked about a favorite musical memory, John replies: *"Playing western swing with a group of original members of the Bob Wills band. Even though these men were in their 70's and 80's, they could still swing you into bad health and laugh all the way."*

Billy: Who are some of your all time drumming influences?

John: I was a big fan of just about any drummer, but the ones who stick out to me were Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Ringo Starr, and anyone who ever played with the Doobie Brothers or Steely Dan. For current drummers, I really dig Johnny Moore, Matt Chamberlain, Shaw Wilson, and Jim Keltner.

Billy: Are you still an active drummer?

I laughingly refer to myself as an "inactive drummer". I do get the rare opportunity to play on recording sessions that

happen here in the complex where my office is located, but I don't pursue live gigs anymore. Being a very involved father, running Not So Modern Drummer magazine, and engraving and building drums takes about every bit of time and energy that I have.

John got into vintage drums in 1983, while teaching privately in Claremore. He felt there was a need for entry level snare drums, mostly because the entry level drumkits recommended by the band directors were overpriced and low quality. John scoured the pawnshops of Tulsa and was able to come across a steady stream of Ludwig Acrolites and Supra-Phonics, along with cases, pads, stands, and bell sets which were of superior quality to what was being pushed on the students by their non-drumming band directors. He then cleaned, repaired, and sold his pawn shop treasures to his students for less than the import drums were selling and was still able to make money due to the plentiful supply and low prices of pawn shop drums at that time. In John's hunt for drums, he ran across several Ludwig Pre-serial # Chrome over Brass Supra-phonics and noticed the difference from the other drums he was finding, so he started looking for these snare drums exclusively. In the course of his drum hunting, he ran across Bob Daniels, a fellow who bought and sold used clothing. Bob also had an interest in vintage drums and was finding them while searching for used clothing. Bob and John became friends and John purchased several vintage drums from Bob, including a 1920's Black Beauty and numerous Ludwig Standards. As with most people into vintage drums, John became addicted to the older drums and has repaired, restored, and played every old drum that passed through his hands. Through networking on the phone and by mail, he began meeting other people with the same interest.



Billy: What led to the creation of **Not So Modern Drummer**?

John: My obsession with vintage drums began taking a toll on my life. I was spending so much time on the phone talking drums, that my wife said, "why don't you just start a newsletter for all your drum geek buddies?" The woman was a prophet! But I didn't actually have that goal in mind when I instigated the mailings. I started NSMD by sending out a letter to all of my vintage drum connections soliciting addresses and contact information on other vintage drum enthusiasts. When I got a list compiled, I sent a copy of it to everyone who had contributed, and printed a draft copy of an article that I was writing on Black Beauties (which would later be published in Modern Drummer magazine). The response that I received from that mailing was enough to merit keeping the newsletter going. I also added subscriber ads so that people could (hopefully) spend less time on the phone and more time with their drums (and families, of course).

Billy: What year was the first NSMD magazine published?

John: 1988, November

Billy: What has being the publisher of one of the most successful drum magazines done for you in the drum and drumming world on a personal level and a professional level?

John: Success is a relative thing. Even though NSMD is successful in that we've stayed open and continued to improve the content and appearance of the magazine, this is a very small market. The monetary rewards are virtually non-existent. But even though NSMD hasn't been all that successful financially, it has helped to create an identity for myself and my services in this new market. As a result of that I'm relatively well known in vintage and custom drum circles and would like to think that the quality on NSMD and the drums that I've built and engraved have earned me a little respect from those who care about such things. The best benefit from all of this, is the people that I've met over the last 15 years. I have a built in meeting ground for people who share my love and interest in all things related to vintage drums.

Billy: How did you begin your engraving career and how long ago?

John: I started engraving because I couldn't find someone who would engrave a drum for me at a cost that I could afford. Around 1985 or '86, I'd finally been infected with the Black Beauty virus by my good friend Jim Pettit and had

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the fever to get one. But even then, the price tag associated with them (around \$ 800 - \$ 1250) was too high for me. After numerous dead ends, I finally found an elderly engraver who would at least show me how to hold the tools and the movements required to make the cuts. From then on it was largely a matter of just carving up everything in sight until I finally got up the nerve to cut into a 70's Black Beauty. That must have been around the middle of 1988 as well. From 88 to 89, I engraved numerous drums for myself and sold them to individuals and shops.

In 1989 John Aldridge started engraving drums for Drum Workshop, the first drum company to use his services. To come up with new engraving designs, patterns were thrown back and forth, until a round flower pattern was settled on. John Good used a "Spiro-Graph" to draw a few patterns and John Aldridge adapted them to make them possible for hand engraving. About 10 drums were engraved before it became apparent that the shells were not very good quality and were not really suited for engraving. At that point, John was not experienced enough as an engraver to know how to fix the problem and DW didn't have any other options for metal shells, so that was the end of that. Most of the first drums engraved for DW ended up in the hands of endorsers.

With no more DW drums to do, John went back to engraving drums for individuals, mostly 70's or late 80's bronze shell Black Beauties from Ludwig, occasionally purchasing a drum to engrave for re-sale. John approached Ludwig around 1990 with the idea of an engraved Black Beauty. At first they were not interested, but product manager Kick Gerlach called back a few weeks later and sent three shells to engrave as samples. John credits Ludwig's interest in him to Harry Cangany's constant "reminders" to Ludwig that "engraved Black Beauties will sell". The designs produced by John resemble the original patterns from vintage Ludwig Black Beauties and Deluxes in his collection. Ludwig shipped one shipment of 36 shells to John for the production models (all 6.5 x 14 models). But due to the added expense and trouble of shipping the shell from North Carolina to Boulder (where John lived then) Ludwig gave the job to a local engraver located in North Carolina, who was located about 10 miles from the Ludwig factory!

Having had the rug pulled out from under his feet twice, John decided to concentrate more on his own business of buying drums, engraving them, and reselling them, which coincided with his move to Vermont and an early retirement from the music teaching career. With his wife in a new teaching position and the magazine growing, John quit teaching to try to focus his energy on NSMD Magazine and working as a drummer again. He expanded his resale/engraving business by pitching his services unsuccessfully to Yamaha before adding Slingerland's (HSS) new metal drums into the mix with the help of Buzz King, who was running Slingerland at the time. Buzz offered to allow John to show the drums in the Slingerland booth at the NAMM Show in 1995, but two days before that show, Gibson pulled the distribution from HSS and moved the Slingerland stuff into the Gibson booth.

With a possible production run of Slingerland drums in the offering and a need to find a more active drum market for his engraving, John decided to move the family to Nashville to be close to the Slingerland factory. This led to a short run of production engraving for Slingerland (Gibson). He engraved about 30 brass and copper drums for Slingerland, adapting the pattern from the Solid Gold Model in the 1928 Slingerland Catalog. By now you should know what happened next... Slingerland ran out of drum shells and decided not to continue the drums.

John was once again looking for work when his friend Johnny Craviotto came up with a project through DW to add engraving as an option for his collector series snare drums. At the same time, John started the Not So Modern Drum



Company with a partner, Tommy Winkler. The goal of the company was to reproduce the 6.5" x 14" Ludwig Black Beauty shell from the 1920's, which proved to be an impossibly difficult undertaking! Ultimately the metal spinner that was making the shells went bankrupt after completing only 6 drum shells, leaving the NSMD Co. without a source for shells. Back to square one, with a substantial loss as a result of the metal spinners going bankrupt with all of John's tooling costs and deposits on production costs. Once again, Jon Cohan called with his new Drum Heaven project, the Galaxy Drum. Cohan was producing a very limited edition (10 drums), and the drums were all to be hand engraved. John finished those drums and continued to engrave DW hoops for a while before they were discontinued also. Ludwig Drum Company contacted John in 1998 to engrave the 90th Anniversary model Black Beauty. John would spend the next year and a half working on these beautiful drums for the 90th Anniversary model Black Beauty, which included John's own version of the scroll pattern that combined elements of several vintage Ludwig patterns.

Shortly before the 1999 NAMM show, Johnny Craviotto added the Lake Superior Limited Edition to the mix and John engraved the hoops for the 200 drum limited edition of snare

drums made from 400-600 year old maple. The Lake Superior drums are one of John's all time favorite projects.

In the summer of 1998, John was asked by Kenny Aronoff and Tama to engrave Kenny's Signature snare drum. The patterns were provided by Tama, so John began engraving the prototypes and a few production models. Unfortunately, John lost that contract to a Taiwanese engraving supplier, but in place of that larger production job, Tama contracted John to do an "American engraved" limited edition model. With a more elaborate design and engraved hoops, lugs, strainer and shell, this was John's most ambitious project to date. Production is still running on these drums at this time, but a total of 42 of the 5.5 x 14 Kenny Aronoff



Limited Edition snare drums were made in the first release. The 6.5 x 14 models are still being engraved and should be released at the 2002 NAMM show. The engraving patterns for all the Tama drums were designed by Johnny Douglas, a prominent Houston artist and custom drum painter.

In November of 2000, John began working on a drum for Drum Workshop. After several false starts, DW finally settled on a black brass 5.5 x 14 size shell with one of John's own floral design patterns. About 30 of these drums have been completed, with about another 70 drums expected.

As production winds down on these outside projects, John has begun producing his own engraved 4 x 14 Deluxe model snare drums with tube lugs, single flanged hoops, and collar hooks as his favorite model. He, along with Greg Morrow and Dean Collier, are building 8 and 10 lug 4 x 14, 5 x 14, and 6.5 x 14 black engraved drums in standard configurations as well as custom made to order. Studio and live drummer alike are lining up to add the newest NSMD Co.'s drum to their drumming arsenals.

Billy: What is your favorite snare drum that you have engraved?

John: When the first Not So Modern Drum Drum Company folded, leaving me with a huge debt to investors, I had only 5 completed shells and 32 shell halves to show for 3 years of work, and only four of those completed were up to spec. I determined at that time that those shells wouldn't be frivolously used. I've only completed one of them so far for Eric Jerde. The drum is lavishly engraved with a combination of a wild rose pattern and a lotus blossom, and the entire drum is gold plated. That drum represents the only success of that first NSMD Co. snafu. I will undoubtedly finish the other five shells, but only for huge amounts of money! They sit there on the shelf as a reminder of what NOT to do when building drums. They sound great, but at \$ 5,000 each (and I'll lose money at that), I don't think the orders will come thundering in!

Billy: Tell me about the new NSMD engraved snare drums.

John: My new snare drums feature a shell that combines elements from three different eras of the Black Beauty snare drum with fixtures redesigned to meet modern usage requirements. The shell is constructed like a pre-serial number Ludwig Super 400 (Predecessor to the Supra-Phonic), but has a snare bed which is closer to a 70's Black Beauty, and a size that hasn't been offered by Ludwig since the mid 30's in a metal shell. This drum is the answer for the fellow who wants a vintage 4 x 14 sound and look, but needs a drum durable enough to take today's music. So far, Jack Bruno (Tina Turner, Peter Frampton), Scott Underwood (Train), Shaw Wilson (BR-549), and Jason Smyth (Five for Fighting), are using the NSMDrums that they purchased on tour and in the studio.

Billy: Please tell me about your family. We would like to know the personal side of John.

John: I've been married for almost 20 years to the lovely and talented Dr. Joyce Spivey Aldridge and we have two wonderfully inquisitive little blond haired boys, Michael (6) and Lucas (4) (and of course their intelligence is off the scale, naturally...). My family is the sanity at the end of the day with drum collectors on the phone. I enjoy every minute of my time at home.

Billy: I'm sure you have played many drums in your career. What is your favorite snare drum, drum kit, and cymbals?

John: My favorite snare drum of all time is my trusty old worn out 4 x 14, 8 lug Ludwig Deluxe. My favorite kit is a mismatched Slingerland Radio King kit from the 30's/40's that includes a floor tom reputed to have been given by Gene

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John Aldridge *continued ...*

Krupa to Barrett Deems. Cymbals are a mish-mosh, but I've been playing the same paper thin 18" crash for most of my 29 years of drumming. I also favor my Zildjian KZ 13" hats (thanks Jim Pettit), 21" Larry Londin Sabian ride cymbal (thanks Jolie Roark), and a number of splashes and small crashes from 6" to 13", all Zildjian but from the 30's - 60's, with the exception of two new 8" and 10" K splashes.

John Aldridge is considered to be one of the most respected and well known vintage drum authorities in the world. He is the author of *Guide to Vintage Drums*, Editor/Publisher of *Not So Modern Drummer* magazine and occasionally contributes articles to *DRUM!* and *Modern Drummer* as well. Were it not for John and his effort and dedication to the world of vintage drums, this nostalgic hobby that keeps us enthusiastic about drums and drumming might not have evolved into its current state. Thank you John for reminding us to look back on the drums and drummers of yesteryear and for all that you do to promote the great drummers of our past, the preservation and use of vintage drums, and the new custom drum builders who are carrying on the traditions of building tomorrow's collectibles.

Book Review *continued ...*

drum became a status symbol. The unique positioning of Leedy as the leader, and only source of some of this "Dressing up a drum to FULL DRESS" positioned Leedy as the pre-eminent drum maker.

The Black Elite, the Full Dress, the Tudor finish, the marvel strainer all innovations of Leedy drum company. What innovations, and what a successful company.

Rob's inclusion of the Bass Drum stories between Purdue and University of Chicago understate the importance of image for both Leedy and those wanna be drum makers at the time. Everyone vying to become the biggest and therefore the best. This antiquated way of thinking still prevails with us today.

The story on the downfall of the world's largest drum company starts in September 1929. The sale of the Leedy drum company is the beginning of great things and the beginning of the end as well.

Rob Cook delves into the General Products Company and the remainder of the Leedy Drum Company's life in great detail. The section on the Product Developments from 1930-1942 were the hey day years of Leedy. The expertise that Leedy had developed with the xylophone and timpanies is not something that most people don't know about. Rob makes it interesting during this chapter to point out the achievements of Leedy. The Advertising section for Leedy's in the 1930's was of great enjoyment for me personally. Like a trip thru time, but a stop worth the effort. The War chapters and the product developments 1942-1947 told of the restrictions and basic survival of the war mentality that existed in those days. The history goes on post war and the combining of the Ludwig and Leedy names. Some of the finest drums ever made were made during this time.

The introduction of the Auto Tune Drums was the last gasp attempt at the GC Conn company's forays into bottom line management of the Ludwig and Leedy drum companies.

From 1948-1951, the product develops were non-existent. In the end, the GC Conn company decided to sell both the Ludwig and Leedy companies due to their unprofitability.

The end came more quickly than the building of a business took. Quickly Slingerland relegated Leedy to an economy line status. A once great name with the most innovative drum achievements was no longer breathing life into the hands of drummers nationwide.

Rob Cook's book, I believe, is a heartfelt tribute to the U.G. Leedy family and the contributions that the Leedy Drum Company gave to the drum world. The drums that fashioned ideas that have not been duplicated go on....they go on in the hands of vintage drum collectors all over the world.

The Leedy Drum Company's Black Elites, and the solid mahogany Artist model snare drums are some of the most sought after vintage snare drums. Play them and you'll realize what a great sounding snare sounds like.

Rob Cook, my hats off to you for breathing life back into a drum company that was all but forgotten.

I highly recommend you purchase and read this book, about a company our industry should remember forever.

Leedy drums, the world's finest drummer's instruments since 1895.

