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Hall of Fame Inductees

Steve Smith's Journey

From Berklee to
Rock & Roll
Hall of Fame

Gary Astridge

Beatles Drum Historian
to the Starr

Will Calhoun

Master of Funk, Fusion, Jazz & More

A photograph of two men, Gary Astridge and Steve Bryant, standing in front of a large poster of Ringo Starr. Gary is on the left, wearing a black shirt and glasses, making a peace sign. Steve is on the right, wearing a black jacket and glasses, also making a peace sign. The background is a large poster of Ringo Starr in a suit and hat. The text 'ADVENTURES IN OYSTER BLACK PEARL WITH GARY ASTRIDGE' is overlaid in large, green, outlined letters.

ADVENTURES IN OYSTER BLACK PEARL WITH GARY ASTRIDGE

By Steve Bryant

Q: Who has the coolest gig in the classic drum biz?

A: This guy!

If you're a regular reader of Classic Drummer Magazine, you know of Gary Astridge and his work with the Ringo Starr organization as the historian and curator for Ringo's Beatle era drums and accessories. He is the leading authority on the topic and his lectures and speeches are in demand internationally. His regular series of informative articles is one of this publication's most requested features and it's always fascinating to learn the important and little-known facts that his research has unearthed over the years. Recently, Gary visited the Classic Drummer studios near Atlanta and this conversation is the result. While it's always easy to get Gary to talk Ringo, Beatles and oyster black pearl drums, getting him to share his personal story and his favorite projects is a little more difficult. Fortunately, we caught him in the right mood and this feature is the result.

In the beginning . . .

CD: Gary welcome the Classic Drummer studios. Yours is a fascinating story. It begins with Gary Astridge, the Beatles and Ringo fan and ends up with Gary Astridge the Beatle era drum historian for the Ringo Starr organization. How did all that come about?

Gary: This is an overused line, but my story starts like a million others, it started for me at the age of seven when I saw the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. That was February 9, 1964 and the Astridge side of my family, which is English and Welsh, had gathered at a relative's to celebrate my grandmother's 67th birthday. All my aunts, uncles and cousins were there. There was this buzz before the TV show and the album Meet the Beatles was playing over and over on the record player. My uncle took a home movie, which is cool to have. Unfortunately, my inability to dance has me looking like a geek. When the Beatles came on, I found myself hiding under a dining room table with my cousin watching the response of my family – hearing laughter and comments like, “Those are wigs!”

I could feel an overall sense of pride in the family for those kids from England and that experience changed my life. For some reason, I just laser locked on Ringo and my parents always told the story of me taking empty coffee cans to use as drums. My dad removed both metal ends from a large and small can, put the plastic lids back on one side and he used electrical tape to combine them together. They were

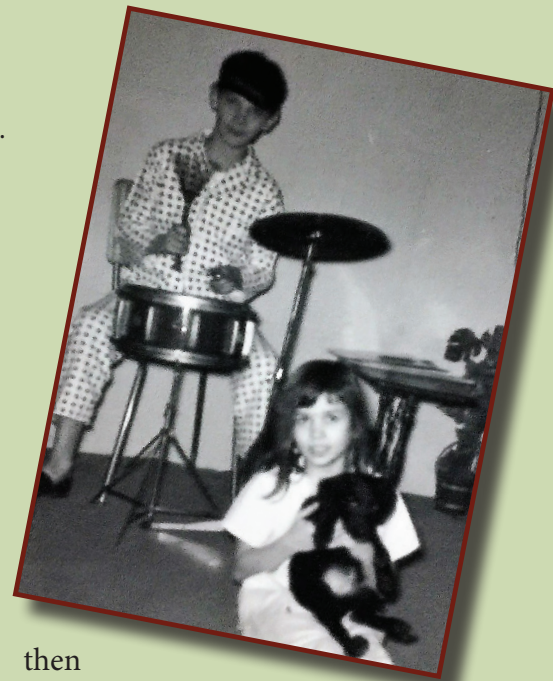
primitive bongos but too me, that was my first drum set. My dad took two of, my mom's wooden spatulas and cut the spoon ends off, those were my first drum sticks.

CD: Is that when your interest in Ringo's drums began?

Gary: I remember always looking closely at the Beatles' albums. My grandfather lived with us and he gave me a magnifying glass and said, “Here you'll hurt your eyes, use this!” I took sheets of loose-leaf paper and used black, silver and gray crayons to make the oyster black pearl swirl patterns and taped the sheets on the coffee cans. There was my first Beatle kit. At times I would be fortunate to get a magazine or bubble gum cards at the local corner store and started noticing differences in the drum kits, like how the lugs were further apart. I could tell that through some of the drawings that my mom saved, which is interesting to look at in retrospect. Back then I knew there was something going on with those drum kits. I never took drum lessons because I heard that Ringo never did, and I always focused on The Beatles.

As the years marched on, there was a point when I said, “Why don't I have a Ringo kit?” That was pre-internet. I thought that I did my research and I one day I located a kit in Pittsburgh, bought it and had it shipped to my home in Buffalo. With excitement I opened the boxes

Replica Gold Plated Super Sensitive
The Astridge Collection



then suddenly realized that the kit wasn't like Ringo's at all. It was a late '69 kit with a bowling ball wrap and it was that experience that caused me to do dig deep into researching. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was then that I got involved in collecting kits. Once I managed to put together my first Ringo kit, I dialed in on the others that Ringo had. It took decades to collect all six, but in doing so I developed a great knowledge and an acute understand of all the little details, it became a true passion.

In 2006, I was 95% complete and decided to hunt for a 1964 Ludwig Super Sensitive snare drum to match the one that Ringo received from Ludwig in September of that year and I had it gold-plated. I thought, yeah, I'm going to do it and I





'63 top and '64 bottom
Ludwig Jazz Festivals

ended up with something very rare.

CD: So, at that point you had duplicates of every Beatle era drum?

Gary: Once I completed my collection, I thought, well, now what do I do? The excitement was gone because I realized that a lot of the fun was the chase. Along the way I ended up with two impossible to find 1963 Ringo spec Jazz Festival snare drums. Through all my years of collecting, I know of only five that exist, one being Ringo's, two being mine, one belonging to a collector in Chicago and another owned by a collector in Japan.

I decided to create a website ringos-beatlekits.com with the thought of sharing my knowledge to hopefully save anyone time and money if they wanted their own Ringo kit. They'd learn the history and have the blueprint to search out the drums, hardware and cymbals. Through that, I became known for my research. At one point, I arranged a meeting with the Beatles Story Museum in Liverpool and flew out for a meeting. At that time, they didn't have any Ringo type drum kits on display that were historically accurate.

I gave them an offer, "If you would like any or all of the drum kits from my collection, just pay for the shipping both ways, cover the insurance and let's work on a plan for how long you display them." They determined that my proposal was too costly, and they turned down my offer.

CD: How were you able to connect with Ringo's organization?

Gary: In 2008, I was fortunate to befriend Jeff Chonis when the Ringo's All Starr Band was kicking off their summer tour in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. Jeff has been Ringo's drum tech since 1989. One day, he spent a few hours on my website and sent me an email saying that it was emotional for him. He didn't know much of the information that I had compiled, and he would always tell me that he only knows Ringo's kits from 1989 forward. Because he is such a class act, I always thought he was just being nice to me.

Jeff made me aware that something was in the works for Ringo to do an exhibit on his life. In late 2012, I received a call from Jerry Buszek from the Grammy Museum in LA. In confidence, I was told that they were doing an exhibit on Ringo and it was to be called. . . Ringo: Peace and Love. As part of the agreement, Ringo was loaning three drum kits, his Ed Sullivan kit, the Let It Be - maple kit and an All Starr kit. The

“ I was told that they were doing an exhibit on Ringo and it was to be called. . . Ringo: Peace and Love. ”

Grammy people were communicating with Scott Ritchie, Barbara and Ringo's personal assistant in London, and it was determined that none of Ringo's drum kits were organized. They were having a hard time figuring out what drums made up each kit not to mention hardware and cymbals. Through frantic online researches, all roads led to RingosBeatleKits.com. I'm thinking . . . hey you called the right guy! I jumped in with both feet to help.

CD: Where do you begin on a project like this?

Gary: I was sent confidential high res photos and I gave assurances that everything could be organized for them. Between Jeff and myself, we came up with a plan for the two kits. Scotty was also involved but a distant figure to me at that time.

Once the gear was sorted through using pictures, I told the team that there were major concerns that needed to be pointed out. The lugs and other hardware on the maple kit were highly oxidized and corroded. At the time, the majority of stands and other hardware for any of the kits couldn't be located. I offered a plan to help. Everything needed was in my personal collection and by taking the necessary

hardware from my maple kit, we could repair Ringo's kit. I could supply the stands, hardware and cymbals to make each kit historically correct and whole. If things weren't done properly, could you imagine someone looking at the kits on display and saying, "Aren't those cymbals and stands from the 90s and weren't the Beatles around in the 60s?" My plan was accepted and that's what we did. Around this time, I remember thinking that this is my purpose in life. What are the odds of having my drum collection and being able to offer any part of it to Ringo to make his Beatles kits whole again?

From the photos that I was sent, I

Gary with Ringo's Maple Hollywood Kit at Grammy Museum Exhibit



discovered that Ringo still owned five of his six Beatle kits. I made a proposal that for historical significance, let's document and make all five kits perfect for current and future generations of Beatle fans. Jeff was involved and said we should get road cases and make sure everything is perfectly taken

care of. If a kit was to be displayed anywhere in the world, it would be organized and easy, just ship and done.

CD: This had to be a rewarding project.

Gary: Yes. In fact, on the last day of Ringo's exhibit, I was invited as a guest speaker at the Grammy museum's Clive Davis Theater. So, my first live presentation was a talk starting at the top of the pecking order. It was a full house and it was very well received. Because of all of this, I was warmly welcomed into Ringo's inner circle.

Along the way, I was involved in other projects like assisting Jeff in setting up Ringo's kit at Bloomingdales in New York City, for the Christmas season.

That was in 2014. I also set up Ringo's 1964 Ludwig

Super Classic kit at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and participated in a video that was made for Ringo's induction ceremony in 2015. I had a big part in Barbara and Ringo's auction at Julien's Auctions in Beverly Hills. When I learned that Ringo was offering his first Ludwig drum kit for the auction's big 'Wow' factor, the response in my head was,



Gary Astridge (L) Jeff Chonis (R)
Ringo's '63 Jazz Fest Gary's '63 Jazz Fest

Nooooo!! I had done all this work and gotten everything together and now it's going to leave home. Once I understood the logic and reason for selling it, I totally understood. The sale of that kit alone raised 2.1 million dollars and benefited Barbara and Ringo's Lotus Foundation charity.

CD: You mentioned the Jazz Festival snare drum and I know you're involved in a project that is designed to preserve the historical accuracy of the drum and possibly make a special version available to serious collectors and fans. Tell us more about that project.

Gary: First, you must know why Ringo's snare drum is so rare and it's an interesting story. When he took possession of his first Ludwig kit in May of '63, he bonded with his Jazz Festival snare drum. He used it predominantly throughout his career with the Beatles in the recording studio and on tour. You see it in movies, you see it everywhere. That's the only snare drum that you see him with. You can identify it easily by the positioning of the hardware and the oyster black pearl swirl pattern. It's like a finger print.

There's always been speculation as to whether Ringo's Jazz Festival had a 5-inch or 5 ½-inch depth. When I had the chance to see it and touch it, it was almost a religious experience. I clearly remember Jeff pulling it out of the crate when we were setting up for Ringo's Grammy exhibit. He said, "Gary, here's the snare drum. Is there anything you want to know?" I answered, "Yes, we need to find out the depth of the shell." Jeff measured it from head to head and he said, "What do you think? Five and a half? Yep, five and a half it is." I said, "I knew it, I knew it!" That was a huge question for Beatle drum geeks.

CD: So, you had time to measure, photograph and document the details of all of Ringo's drums"

Gary: The honor of really going through the kit was that it turned into a relationship. One interesting thing I felt was tremendous respect for this on a historical level. People who know that I was involved in these projects would ask me if I played his kit, specifically the snare drum. I could never do that. For me, I would give it a tap, but no, the only guy who should play it is Ringo.

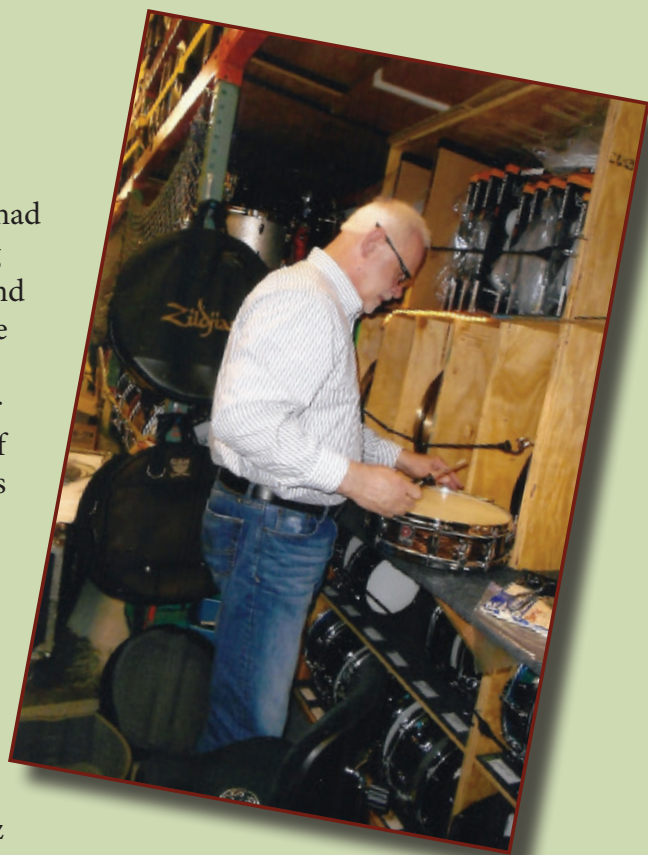
I gained so much information and was able to verify the stamp date inside, April 18, 1963. Many questions were being answered but more questions were being raised. Ringo's snare drum is an important part of rock and roll and huge in Beatles lore. To me the thought was, boy, what if we could put out a

snare drum out there that had the historical look of going through the road, movie and studio experiences with the Beatles? I would think that it would be a nice thing for people to have, especially if we could support the Lotus Foundation. How could I have known the journey this idea would take me on.

CD: So, tell us about the snare drum. What makes it so unique even among other '60s Jazz Fests?

Gary: To start, the hardware positioning inside the panels on a 1963 Jazz Fest is different from '64 and newer. A panel is the space between two lugs. If you are looking at a '63 JF with the P-83 throw-off directly in front of you, to the left is the Keystone badge and next to that is the baseball bat muffler. At the beginning of 1964, Ludwig changed the configuration by moving the badge and muffler to the left leaving a blank panel between the badge and throw off. In addition, the red felt muffler was changed to white, the hoops went from brass to steel and the Keystone badges were now numbered. As far as Ringo's snare, his shell was a fluke. Jazz Festivals were advertised as being five inches in depth and his is five and a half.

February 10th was the day after the Beatles' first appearance on the Sullivan Show and that's when orders began flooding into the Lud-



In Mr. Starr's Drum Storage Room

wig Drum Company. People were ordering oyster black pearl drum kits, some with a Jazz Festival snare drum. Those that did were getting the revised version and even others with a slight twist.

Ludwig was very good at utilizing and using all the parts in their inventory and as a result, little things like red muffler pads and brass hoops were still being used until stockpiles were depleted. Regardless, no one was getting anything specific to what Ringo had. From my research, I've learned that prior to the Beatles, Ludwig oyster black pearl drum kits weren't setting the world on fire. So, Ringo's color is somewhat unique for the period. The sound was unique obviously and the Jazz Fest was something that everyone wanted. Even now, my website, texts and Facebook are constantly filled with people asking,

“How do I get a Jazz Festival? Is Ludwig ever going to do anything with the Jazz Festival? I’d love to have one.”

CD: There’s a difference in shell construction as well the wrap when compared with modern Ludwig’s. Explain these differences.

Gary: The way the reinforcement rings on the top and bottom are degreed is different. The wood veneer for that model were three-ply, thin layers of mahogany, poplar and mahogany. They also incorporated a scarf joint to connect the veneers together which was discontinued. One end of the veneers was tapered, and Ludwig had a method of inserting the wrap into the shell during the process of making it. It’s something unique that’s not done anymore and those are the big differences that make the Ludwig Jazz Festival and their other drums of that era so unique.

I’ve learned that Ludwig’s oyster black pearl wrap was and still is man-

ufactured by a company in Italy called Mazzucchelli 1849. The final process of adding a protective coating is done by Delmar Products. Mazzucchelli has a special process to make the wrap and unfortunately, in 1969 they had to change their formula to eliminate some hazardous components, specifically lead and Nitrocellulose.

CD: This wrap has obviously evolved over the years. How would you rate the latest generation of oyster black pearl compared others from over the years and the original?

Gary: I’d say the wrap has improved. What I’ve learned is when the oyster black pearl wrap is made it’s manufactured in a block. It’s then sliced off in layers and sold distributors. So, when evaluating the wrap, you can see what’s on top. But when you start slicing, you never know how it will look throughout the block. You can find some dynamite pieces that are dead on and you’ll see some other pieces that are very far off. I’ve done my research, talked to numerous people in “the know” and traveled to meet people to really educate myself on this subject.

CD: Let’s talk about some of the proof-of-concept work that you’ve done in terms of creating accurate replica of the Ringo’s Jazz Festival.

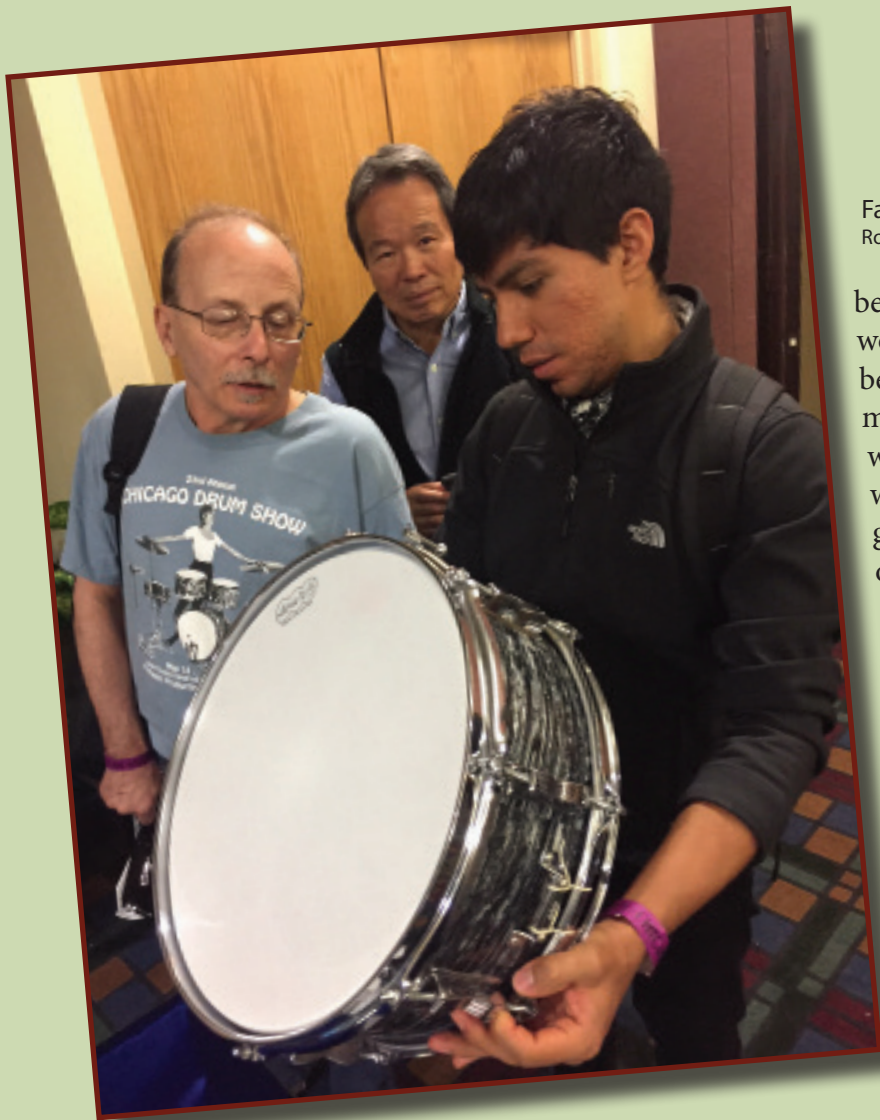
Gary: I wanted to see if an accurate Ringo spec snare drum could be made. The first challenge was finding someone that could build a vintage Ludwig 3-ply shell. While attending drum shows as a guest speaker, I came across Bernie Stone of Stone Custom Drums in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He’s a great guy and someone that understands drums and shell building on a very high level. He said, “Yeah, I can do that.” So, we spent a weekend in his shop building 3-ply shells with re-rings and after hours and hours of hard work, we came up with something that was in the ball park. By harvesting period-correct ‘60s Ludwig hardware I was able to build two versions and I took one assembled snare drum to Rob Cook’s 2017 Chicago Drum Show.

CD: The aesthetics of the two drums are different...why did you do that?

Gary: This is where we let the cat out of the bag, I had a small brilliant support team help me with this endeavor. That included you, Steve and your associates at The Classic Drummer Hall of Fame. We created two versions: a fresh-out-of-the-box version, and a version that matched the wear and patina of how Ringo’s snare drum looks today, complete with all the battle scars including a cigarette burn. Ringo always positioned his snare



Ringo’s ‘63
Ludwig Jazz Festival



Fan Inspects Early Starr Festival Prototype
Rob Cook's Chicago Drum Show

because it would've been ... Oh my God, what do we do to get this out? So, we replicated the burn mark including the tape residue and the pieces he left on. It's all part of the

version, or the patina road-warrior treatment. However, you came up with some other additions that were universally appreciated by our team.

Gary: Yeah, wanting to go a step further with the two versions of snare drums, we thought of accessories! The list started with an English tea towel, like the one Ringo used to muffle his drums in the studio, white gloves because, well because it's a rare instrument and it would be cool. How about a custom drum sticks and a period-correct fiber board case with a tricked-out interior and Ringo's name stenciled on the lid and replica shipping labels like the ones on his well-travel cases from the

drum the same way and he smoked a lot in the '60s. When you see the location of the cigarette burn, it makes logical sense that he was sitting behind the kit when it happened. I know, through experience and working with those drums, how flammable the wrap can be. In fact, I once took a small grinding tool and used it to remove a grommet by grinding away the inside flanged end. The grommet heated up just enough for the wrap to catch on fire. It was immediate, there was a lot of smoke, a distinct smell and thank God that I had water close by. That suggests to me that when that cigarette burn happened on that snare drum, it had to leave a mark on Ringo's memory

“ To my surprise, Scotty presented the idea directly to Ringo and he gave his authorization. ”

history showing what Ringo used to muffle the top and bottom drum heads. When Jeff and I were going through each Beatle drum set, Ringo said that he wanted all the tape left on, wanting everyone to see.

To me, that added another layer of cool to the build and adds something collectors may appreciate as well.

CD: I was torn as to whether I preferred the pristine like-new

'60s. Add a book that chronicles the history of Ringo's Jazz Festival and the specifications of what makes it unique along with the concept-to-creation story of the collectible snares. Of course, there would need to be a certificate of authenticity and all the little details. What if all these little pieces and more... could come together and we could make this drum really happen?

CD: Was that the drum you had at

the Chicago Drum Show?

Gary: Exactly, I took a prototype to Rob Cook's show last year (2017) and unveiled it to an audience at one of my talks and then had it at my booth. The response was more than gratifying.

CD: So is that the drum you're going to build and make available.

Gary: No. This is where this ad-

venture goes off the charts. I kept Scotty and Jeff informed of my initial idea and after the response at the Chicago Drum Show, I emailed them a 13-page PowerPoint presentation laying out a plan to build a small number of drums that was realistic. I wanted their opinions for a thumbs up or thumbs down before making plans to schedule a meeting with Ringo's legal team. To my surprise, Scotty presented the idea directly to Ringo and he gave his authorization.

CD: Amazing!

Gary: His immediate approval put me back on my heels and I thought it best to contact Ludwig to let them know about my project not, wanting to step on any toes and hoping for their support. A meeting was arranged and to make things easy, I showed Team Ludwig the same presentation that Ringo approved. They were totally on board and we immediately began building a blueprint. The goal was to build a very limited run of 15 Jazz Festival



Semi-Final Starr Fest Proof of Concept Is Approved
Gregg Bissonette, Ringo, Gary and Jeff Chonis

shells nailing Ringo's Jazz Festival specifications exactly. Ludwig wanted a shot to replicate the shell and though it was never discussed, they had leverage because I was recreating a Ludwig brand drum. We expressed views and ideas regarding oyster black pearl wrap at great length and ironically, Uli Salazar, Ludwig's Marketing and Artist Relations Manager had been at the Mazzucchelli manufacturing facility in Italy the week before. He gave great insight and it was interesting to learn that we had the ability to cherry pick from Ludwig's oyster black pearl inventory. So here was the plan. Once all components were compiled, I would assemble each drum by hand using actual period correct hardware harvested from '60s Ludwig Jazz Festivals. Hoops, mufflers, 18-strand snare wires, it's all about the details. The resulting drums would be named Starr Festivals and perhaps the coolest part is that Ringo agreed to hand sign the interior of each drum.

CD: That's a very nice touch. It's widely known that he doesn't generally sign items anymore.

Gary: It was very generous of him. The level of precision and quality required for a project like this calls for an expert team with a wide array of skills and capabilities. It has been gratifying to see these busy professionals bring so much passion to this drum, often making time in their busy schedules and always patiently accommodating my requests for changes and improvements. I just have to say thanks to

them here and hope that I remember everyone. For starters we have Scott Robert Ritchie - Team Ringo, a large cast of characters at The Classic Drummer Hall of Fame, Uli Salazar, Ryan Taylor, Ernie Benton, Greg Slutz, Miss Ann Ross and the entire Ludwig family, Jeff Chonis - Team Ringo, Mike Bobick - Niagara Custom Plating, Craig Boggs - Labels Xpress, Carla Kestner (graphic designer), Barry Kohan - Bright Star Audio, Brendan Pelo - Lazar - Drum Sticks, Tom Adams - Historic Fab photos, Bernie Stone - Stone Custom Drums, John Connelly & Paul Glenn - Promotional Images, Jim Turner - Encore A&S Case Company, Jim Elyea, Pam Elyea & Richard Adkins - History For Hire and Reg Schopp - deSignet International.

The good news is that this labor of love will add 15 to the current total of Ringo spec snare drums known to exist. The bad news for us regular folks is that due their rarity and pedigree they will be purchased by serious collectors at a rather high price. There have been discussions to create a faithful version of the drum using modern construction techniques for those who would appreciate having a carefully crafted version of the drum that is more affordable and less intimidating to play.

CD: The process you've described seems extremely involved and time consuming, but very accurate.

Gary: So, what's unique about this project as it moves forward, is that

I'll look at every individual part for the correct match and then hand assemble every drum to assure attention to detail. Obviously, with the oyster black pearl wrap being like a finger-print...that can't be exact. Pulling off masking tape leaving residue behind, that can't be exact. But, we're reaching out to every specialist that we know to solicit their help. That's the deal. Obviously, my name and integrity are on the line. Just as important, I'm honored to be working with Ringo and I feel a huge sense of responsibility to respect the history of the instrument and to make sure the drums' new owners get the very best replica that can be built. It will be 100% quality.

CD: What about your capability to do this on a small scale?

Gary: Making this a small-scale project was a specific choice. This is something that has never been done before, so we had to be certain of our ability to build each shell accurately and to procure the authentic, period-correct parts needed. This small number makes these drums rare, to mirror that of Ringo's Jazz Festival. As I mentioned earlier, doing one or two weathered snare drums that match Ringo's as it looks today is achievable and carries that rarified air component.

These collectibles target a limited group of people with deep pockets and trust me when I say that I can look at this objectively. If I was learning about this snare drum for the first time, I'd be excited, inter-

First Starr Festivals will be available April 18, 2018



As we've watched your progress toward this remarkable instrument, we all want one . . . badly. While that's not in the budget for drum magazine guys, we can only hope that the next phase of your plan is realized.

Gary: My pleasure Steve. Rest assured that the Starr Festival project will meet the highest of standards as a desirable product. It's rare, it's news worthy, it tells a Fab story that isn't widely known and it honors Ringo and his legacy. Most im-

ested and at the same time frustrated knowing that it would be virtually impossible to snag because of the small number and five figure price tag. There is a more inclusive long term plan, but this venture

must first be a success in order to move forward. I choose not to elaborate any further at this time.

CD: Gary, thanks for sharing this very cool project with our readers.

portantly, it allows us to put a smile on his and Barbara's faces by supporting their Lotus Foundation charity, which in turn helps other people both today and for generations to come. I know in my heart that the assembled team is ready and willing.