

Tone in the Box

Kotz Handbuilt Drums & Percussion's line of cajóns feature new innovations on a traditional instrument.

BY WADE VONASEK

In 1997, drummer/percussionist Michael Kotzen discovered the cajón, a box drum of Peruvian and Cuban origin.

"I found I was able to emulate both the groove and feel of a traditional drum set, as well as play conga and other hand drum rhythms," Kotzen says of the cajón. Inspired, he enlisted the help of two friends – a luthier and a custom woodworker – and began to develop what would become the ToneCajon.

The cajón is played with the hands while the drummer is sitting on top of the box itself. The drummer strikes the playing surface, which is made from a thinner wood than the rest of the cajón. Bass tones are found near the center of the playing surface while higher pitches are found toward the edges. "One of the cool things about the cajón is that it's relatively easy to get a decent sound," Kotzen says. "Five different players will play it five different ways."

Kotzen adds that since a cajón is basically a box, there are not any complex techniques involved. "Square cuts and sharp blades are essential to achieving tight, clean corners. I like to use one board for the entire box because it is visually appealing to see the grain pattern match at the corners, and it also contributes to the overall resonance of the box. The size and shape of the cajón, the type and thickness of wood used, and the sound hole size and placement all contribute to the instrument's pitch, character, volume and timbre," he says.

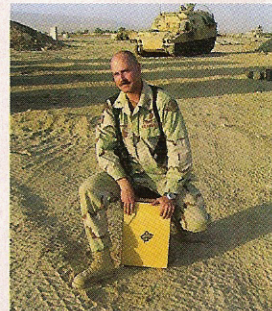
When choosing a wood, Kotzen taps it to see how it resonates. Harder woods like Eastern maple project

brighter tones while softer woods like mahogany are a bit warmer sounding, he says. Other woods Kotzen uses include cherry, koa, figured maple and bubinga.

After the wood is chosen, he planes and sands the wood to the proper thickness, then cuts the sides to length. He uses either a rabbet joint or a lock miter. He does not use fasteners like screws, nails or staples, just aliphatic resin glue (except for the Snare model, which differs slightly in its construction). He then routs and sands the cajón and hand-rubs it with a poly oil finish. With some models, Slap Pads (unique to Kotz cajóns) or feet are attached.

Kotzen has built cajóns for artists such as Mick Fleetwood (*Fleetwood Mac*), Wil-Dog (*Ozomatli*), Steve Berlin (*Los Lobos*), Leon Mobley (*Ben Harper*) and many others. "Percussionists are always looking for new sounds. My goal has been to build a cajón capable of producing a broad range of tones," says Kotzen.

Visit www.tonecajon.com for more information on Kotz Handbuilt Drums & Percussion. ☒



The ToneCajon made it to Iraq and back with serviceman Tyson Reimann.

Mick Fleetwood and Taku Hirano played Kotz cajóns on tour with Fleetwood Mac.



The ToneCajon, by Kotz Handbuilt Drums & Percussion.