

When you think you know everything...

A drum solution, out of the "blue"

By Jack Alexander

The word "audiophile" usually summons images of tubes, turntables, weird looking speakers and weirder looking humans jumbled into untidy basements in seedy bungalows, whose upper floors are filled with thousands of records lovingly shoved into sagging wall units built onto every flat vertical surface.

Well, I don't think my place looks like that, but I am one of those, and the audiophile thing has been a great secret weapon in the sound biz wars

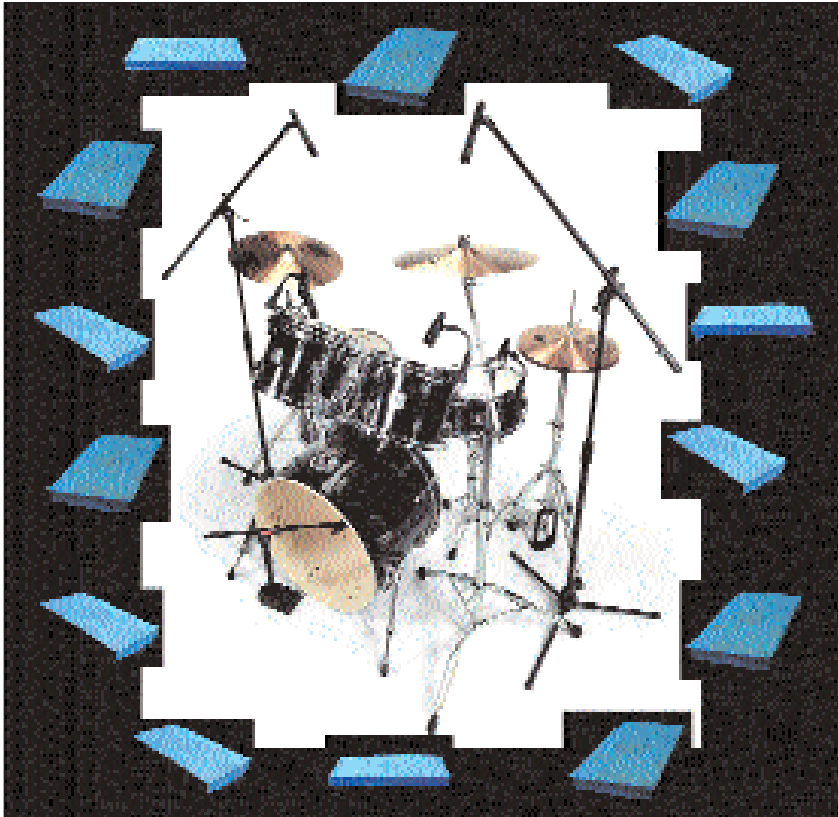
over the years. People who think Midas is a downmarket muffler vendor would not seem to be potential founts of pro audio wisdom, but what they care about most is sound quality, and they're very good at finding ways to optimize it.

Isolation, especially when one's playback system is thermionic (tubes) and analog (vinyl, like with a turntable, and no – not a 1200...Arrggh) is a big deal in these circles. You could easily write a book about all the methods for isolating the components from one another, and from the disaster the speakers are creating out front.

MORE STUFF

Isolation ain't a real big deal in live sound as a rule. We usually just go get some more stuff and blow away whatever acoustical bummer is ticking us off. And if we have to deal with a drummer situation – as in some clown whose decay time on his floor tom could be calculated with the Zoroastrian calendar – we just go to the 7/Eleven and look the clerk firmly in the eye while buying two boxes of Stay-Free Mini-Pads. Or we deploy the bar napkin/old sock/wad of duck tape/condom filled with cat litter if we're inelegant by nature, and don't really want the mini-pads showing up on our expense account/credit card statement. (Potential wife/girlfriend problem: "And who was that for, dear?")

So it came to pass that drum week arrived at the college, and Mr. Randy and his funky old kit were on hand as part of a series of demonstrations of live sound drum methodology. By the third class we had the kit sounding quite good – I think I only burned half a roll of Permacell and 20 paper towels.



Blasphemy? An audiophile solution like sorbothane making a contribution on the professional level??

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Jack's Place

As this was the last class of the semester, things were a little looser than usual, and I had agreed to help Mr. Frank, one of our best students and a (gasp) working drummer, sort out a disastrous mistake. He had purchased a kit with (the horror!) built-in mics, and had noticed that it sounded like crud.

In the '80s, I had happened to do the house mix for the launch of that particular product, and had hated the things ever since, especially the time I had to do monitors for a jazz situation with the drummer from Journey accompanied by his delightful roadie and one of these appalling kits. They

tion, but before preparing to face the corporate artistic offering, I had Mr. Randy rip all the stuff off his really good kit, and had him stick a single slab of "sorbo" (each sized about 2.5-inches long by 1-inch wide by 1/4-inch thick) on each drum.

He attached the slabs in such a way that they were rattling against the heads, instead of fastened securely, as one would normally do. As I was about to correct this mistake, he started to hit the drums and I heard what I consider to be the greatest drum sound I'd ever heard, even though the slabs were kind of, well, vibrating

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had a SM57 internally mounted in an undamped, closed double-headed 24-inch kick, and they thought I was going to get it to sound like stadium rock n' roll. Right.

Back to 2004, Mr. Frank schleps his stuff in and sets it up – great, he has the mics mounted without the little twisty thing that gives you a fighting chance of finding something that doesn't totally stink. This is now beyond tape and towels, so I need something special and head up to my ceremonial (read small) office to grab the sorbothane isolators from underneath my audiophile playback electronics.

Audiophiles know all about sorbothane; it's vinyl-like stuff in varying thicknesses and densities that isolates all kinds of nasties from delicate tube electronics, turntables, speakers – anything.

STICK A SLAB

Mr. Randy was astride his throne, with a devilish gleam in his evil eye as I stared hopelessly at Mr. Frank and his shiny drums. He probably thought it was frontier justice that I was faced with fixing this corporate marketing disaster after I had junked up his kit with all that tape.

I had never tried sorbothane on a drum kit before. Figured it was too much, would make the drums go too dead. I'd grabbed it out of despera-

loosely against the heads. (Remember, he'd removed all the tape and towels, and had not re-tuned, so without the sorbothane the kit had more arrivals than Grand Central Station.)

It was simply the best. Chased down Chairman Jones and all the studio managers – none of us could believe it. The Chairman mutters something to the effect that you could do that with any vinyl of the same dimensions, but he seems disinclined to make eye contact with me as he chants this mantra.

As of this writing, the witnesses to our little drama have been all over the Internet searching for sorbothane samplers – I'd like to see the faces of the UPS drivers in a week or so when all this weird looking blue stuff starts arriving at our facility and various project studios around Chicago.

As for Mr. Frank, the sorbothane helped, but phase reversing those delightful built-in mics was also necessary.

As for moi, those eight pieces of blue audiophile stuff are back where they belong, underneath the glowing tubes in the ceremonial office, hopefully not too much the worse for wear after their little rock n' roll experience. ■

Jack's back! Professor Alexander instructs on topics allied to performance audio at Columbia College in Chicago. Reach him at jalexander@colum.edu.