



# HI-PERFORMANCE

## JOHN DOUGLAS IS THE CUSTOM CREATOR OF CHOICE TO THE STARS

**A**s a working drummer himself, John managed to combine his passion for the instrument and his love of art. He's created custom finishes for the likes of Steven Adler, Frank Beard, Chad Smith, Alex Van Halen and more. He's also a working drum tech. Drummer simply had to corner John to find out more about his shenanigans!

**John, how did you get involved in creating custom pieces of art/instruments?**

Music, more specifically drums, and art have always been my two passions. In every band I played in I would design the logo, create flyers, posters, album covers etc. In an effort to set myself apart from other drummers, I started modifying, customising and ultimately painting my drums. I was inspired by the unique and

over-the-top drum kits of Alex Van Halen and the custom paint on the drums of Myron Grombacher. I was never intimidated by the prospect of ruining my drums. Taking things apart, seeing how they work and putting them back together has always intrigued me.

**Who was the first major artist that you completed work for?**

I painted two kits for Steven Adler when he was still in Guns N' Roses. I was working in a drum shop in Houston, Texas, when this guy walked in to buy some gear. He noticed one of my painted drums and asked me for my name and number. I never thought anything would ever come from it. A few months later I get a call from Tama drums telling me they were sending me two sets of drums for me to paint for Steven

Adler. Around this same time I was playing clubs around Texas and the guys from ZZ Top would come out to see my band. Eventually I met Frank Beard and he asked if I would ever be interested in painting some drums for him. So I said, "Sure." And that was the start of a 20-plus-year friendship in which I have created about 13 different drum kits, each one more involved than the next.

**"I KNOW DRUMS AND DRUMMERS. YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO VISUALISE THE KIT COMPLETELY ASSEMBLED AND SET UP ONSTAGE."**

See Brent Fitz's kit by John on page 42!



# ARTWORK

## Can you name some more artists that you have done work for?

Joey Kramer, Chad Smith, Alex Van Halen, Scott Phillips, Vinnie Paul, Nicko McBrain, Alex González, Brent Fitz, Tico Torres ... to name but a few.

## What's the process of producing a kit for an artist?

It usually starts with a phone call or an email. Most of my work comes from word of mouth. Drummers see other drummers playing one of my kits and they pass on my name. Every job is different. Some guys have no idea what they want, just "something cool". Other guys are very specific – maybe it's based on their new album artwork, like with Alex González of Maná. Maybe it's based off of one of their tattoos, as in the drums for Scott Phillips of Creed/Alter Bridge, or even Chad Smith's Octopus kit. With Frank Beard I come up with some ideas and we

talk about it, brainstorm a little bit, and then I run with it. Other players will have an idea and I have to tweak it so that it works when it's onstage. I like for the kit to read well from a distance, 10 rows back, 30 rows back ... I like for it to say 'custom' when you first look at it.

Do you start with a standard kit, or do you build it from bare shells and fittings?

I generally get the drums straight from the drum company because a lot of my clients have drum endorsements. I have built a few drums from the raw shells, but usually just for me. So I start with a factory finish, strip it down and start over.

## What challenges are there in producing custom artwork?

There are many challenges to achieving that custom look. The drums themselves, the brand, the lug design, how the drummer sets up his kit ... This is where I think I have the advantage over other artists ... I know drums

and drummers. You have to be able to visualise the kit completely assembled and set up onstage. Where is the hardware? Is he using stands or on a rack? What angle does he mount the toms? I feel that a drum kit is a functional, musical piece of sculpture ... Making those elements line up on one drum kit can be a challenge ... but I love it!

## What is your favourite piece of work?

That's a tough one ... Sometimes I stumble on an idea or theme and everything just clicks – I think that's happened on some of the ZZ Top kits: the green one with the spinning wheels, the gold one with the skulls ... It's hard to be objective on the work I've done.

### Do you work alone, or do you have guys that help you?

Basically I work alone. I work out of my shop in Texas. I do all the prep work, sanding, painting and artwork myself. When it comes to building custom racks that require welding, I will mock up the rack and do the tack welding, but the finished product I will have welded by a professional. I get some pieces fabricated at a local machine shop. When I am in Los Angeles working with Van Halen I don't have access to my shop, so sometimes I use Bill Detamore at Pork Pie Percussion. He is the drum-building master and has done some clear-coat and finish work for drums that I painted. For fabrication I use Rick Grossman [the guy that invented the Ahead aluminium drum stick] ... He's a madman at machine work and fabrication.

### What's involved in being a tech for Alex Van Halen? Does this help you in your work?

Teching for Alex is fairly demanding. He is an impossibly good drummer and musician. He hears everything. I have to be dead on with my tuning because he hears it if it's a little off. A lot of it comes down to trust. I listen to the band at soundcheck and I may tweak the snare tuning just a little so it sounds like Alex in that room. I don't claim to be a supertech or anything, but I grew up listening to Van Halen, practically learnt to play drums while playing to Van Halen records. So I care that the drums look and sound like Van Halen. That's my goal.



### What was it like to suddenly have to fill in on the ZZ Top tour. Can you tell us about that?

Oh, you heard about that, huh? I was teching for Frank Beard while on tour in Europe in 2002. I got a call from one of the crew guys at about 2am saying, "They just took Frank away in an ambulance and the last thing he said was, 'Get John to play the show.'" I said, "Yeah, right," and hung up. Then a few minutes later Billy Gibbons called me and said, "Time to step up to the plate." After you get a call like that you don't go back to sleep ... or at least I couldn't. So the next day I set up the kit like any other gig, made a few minor adjustments for me, and then Billy and Dusty came in and we did about an hour-long soundcheck/rehearsal. The lights went down and we played the entire show. I was pretty familiar with the songs but I hadn't played a full show in a long time, and never with ZZ Top. It was a very surreal feeling that night, pure concentration and adrenaline. That kind of thing does not happen all that often – it's happened to me twice! In summer 2010 I was teching for Brent Fitz, drummer for Slash, on his first solo tour. We were in Moscow for the last two shows of the tour, and I get a phone call at noon on show day from Brent and he says, "Can you play the show tonight?" Turns out he was fine, but Todd Kerns, the bass player, had to fly home for



emergency eye surgery that morning, and Brent went to Slash and said if he played bass with me on drums, we can do these shows. Brent is one of those guys that can play everything ... and play it well. Slash is a total pro and was really cool about it. "Just have fun with it," was about all he said. It was great fun, now that I look back on it. At the time it was pure survival – playing through cramps in every part of my body, watching for cues, listening, concentrating, breathing and playing Guns N' Roses, Velvet Revolver and Slash's solo songs for the first time ... in front of a sold-out audience and with the man in the top hat himself. Pretty surreal!

### Finally – your own set-up. What is it and what finish have you put on your own kit?

I was fairly excessive with my drum kits in the past – trying to emulate my heroes. Now I favour a leaner set-up. I have a few kits, the main one being a Pearl Reference Series 24" kick drum, 12" rack tom and a 16" and 18" floor tom. It's purple pearl with lime-green flames that wrap around the shell instead of from bottom to top. Inside the flames are ghosted images of spark plugs, eyeballs and other random hot-rod imagery. I have about 25 different snare drums to choose from; most of them are 14x6.5. The funny thing is, one of my other kits, a Tama Starclassic Maple, is white. I order my drums white ... so it's like a blank canvas for my paint job. But this one I never got around to painting. I'm like a mechanic whose car doesn't run! My cymbals are all Paiste. I have a few different electronic brains – Roland V-Drums and ddrum. I prefer racks to stands as it usually takes up a little less floor space. But sometimes the look of a bunch of straight cymbal stands just looks killer.

You can see more pics of John's work on his website: [www.johndouglas.com](http://www.johndouglas.com)