

# Bob Henrit visits the Asba factory

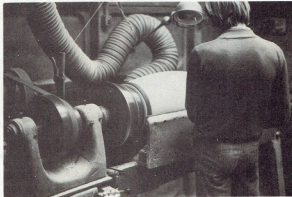
London, Heathrow. Nine-thirty and I am waiting for the Airbus to Paris. I would have visited the Asba drum factory three weeks before, when Phoenix were playing Paris, but due to my ill-advised choice of the hamburger, *ou polivre* at a restaurant in the Rue Scribe, I wake up on the morning of my visit with an acute attack of Montezuma's Revenge. In short, I had the runs! There was, of course, no way I could visit a drum factory with this disability so the whole exercise was re-scheduled. After British Airways' normal uneventful Tri-Star flight, I was met at Charles de Gaulle airport by Peter Isen, an Englishman who I first met years ago when he worked at Dover as a customs officer.

The Asba factory is situated fifteen kilometres outside Paris and was started in 1928 by one Alfred Bonderdo. The company was called "Alfred and Simone Bonard Accessoires." Hence Asba. Its present owner, Monsieur Perin, is the late Albert's brother-in-law. It's still very much a family business with three of the family working there assisted by 16 or so other people. French drums are expensive to produce, partly because materials are expensive there and wages are correspondingly high. The minimum salary in the factory is nine francs per hour for a 42 hour week; from 7.15 until 5 daily with a 45 min. unpaid meal break - no tea or coffee breaks other than this. Average wages are 665 per week and overtime is not normally worked unless absolutely necessary. As you would suppose from what I've just said, there are no unions involved in French drum manufacture - or at least none at Asba belongs to one.

I enquired about how much of their production goes out of the country and discovered that 60% of their output goes for export. They ship to most of the European countries with the exception of Spain; also to Hungary, Australia, South Africa and North America. I thought that Canada would have been a large market because of its nationalistic affiliation to France, but as yet it's just a reasonable one.

Wooden drums are made at the factory from Okume which is a red, hard wood of probably African origin. The grain runs from top to bottom of the drum. One piece of 3mm material is cut to size, glued on one side and placed into a former with its dry side facing inwards. This former is a very crude but effective piece of business. Basically, it has a wooden central core which is split in the centre to enable it to be made slightly larger by pieces of metal attached to it and working on a sort of parallelogram system. This makes the exact interior dimension of the drum. On the outside is an omega section-shaped piece of metal the same distance from top to bottom as the drum and its inner core. This is slightly larger than the exterior of the drum but, once it's edges have been tightened together, it is exactly the size of the drum. However, before this happens another piece of 3mm material is glued and inserted this time with its dry side out and its edges moved round 180 degrees. This means the joints on the shell are opposite each other and, for those of you who are really paying attention, means the shell is now double-thickness (6mm) the two pieces of material having glued themselves together after pressure was applied via the former to the inside and the outside. To get a nice flat joint on the outside edge, the pattern has a shaped piece of wood inserted where the outside former splits to put just a little more pressure and present a more even pressure surface. The plastic finish is finally glued on with an impact adhesive.

The bass drum hoops are bent to shape from



solid wood and then clamped and glued at their joints. Underneath the five clamps are arc formers which apply pressure back and front; the hoops are left overnight and then, like magic, come out perfectly round. Ten years ago Asba made metal bass drum hoops but found them to be superfluous - they reasoned that since the bass drum's beater always strikes at the same spot it wasn't necessary to use hoops to make the sound any brighter. I'm not too sure that I know what they're talking about.

Stainless steel drums are made on the premises. The metal is purchased in large sheets with one side covered in plastic. This means through all the processes one side (the outside) is protected from scratches and knocks. This sheet is cut to size on a guillotine and then put through a hand-operated set of three adjustable rollers (like a mangle) which bends the metal to the required circumference. This machine can bend to almost any diameter and from any thickness of material up to about 1/2", the only limitation in this case being available head size. The snare and bass drums are made from slightly heavier gauge material than the tom-toms but only two thicknesses are used. The circular piece of material is now ready to be welded. An impressive electronic machine carries out this task in no time at all. Finally our completed cylinder has a concave bead pressed into it about half an inch or so from each edge to strengthen it. That's basically all there is to it.

One of the keys to Asba's success could be the fact that since they aren't a ridiculously large corporation but more of a family business, they only make as many drums as are on order at a specific time. This means they are in the comfortable position of going out to find orders to increase production rather than (as is the case with almost all other companies) having to go out and get orders to move increasing stockpiles.

The Alluglas drum shells are not made by Asba but by an outside plastics firm (rather like the French I.C.L.) to their specifications. They say that the development and manufacturing processes are so complex that they couldn't possibly get involved with them at the factory. This of course gives Asba grounds for complaint if something goes wrong with a shell. I don't know how often (if ever) this happens but their plexiglass drums certainly seem to be nicely made.

Plexiglass and stainless steel drums are polished on a series of buffing wheels prior to assembly and, in the case of the metal drums, can take up to an hour for four drums. Successively finer grades of soap are used for this exercise and applied to huge cloth buffing wheels.

With the exception of the cast counterhoops and nut-boxes, all the metal parts for the Asba sets are worked in the factory. All sorts of "T" handles, snare strainers, filters, drum keys and holders, damper parts etc. are cast from zamak by highly skilled foundrymen who make the castings as and when the factory needs them in an all fired smelting furnace. The molten metal is then hand-ladled into the molds. Needless to say this foundry works all day everyday. Some of the really big casting jobs are contracted out to Asba's specifications, but all of these parts are hand assembled in the factory.

The Caroline and the Veronic pedals are named after the proprietor's daughter and a distant relative who died tragically young. As I said, it's a real family business. The bass drum pedal, first introduced in 1969, replaced a less sophisticated model. It's just recently been assigned to Ludwig for American distribution, which says much for its reputation since Ludwig already have the Speed-King and Ghost pedals. The Caroline has a facility which I missed on my "drum check" - its footplate is adjustable in its angle relative to the drum head, through two sets of holes per side at the frame's bottom which locates the "U" shaped rod attachment underneath itself.

Asba are justifiably famous for their coopered Congas which are now made on the premises from mahogany and ash. The ash has recently replaced the much nicer sounding lemon-tree wood which they used for many years but which has recently become scarce. It is now possible to buy congas made completely from coopered mahogany which may be a pointer to a possible scarcity or perhaps a price increase in ash. These certainly look different from the "striped" ones which have become Asba's trademark and are very easily identifiable.

The wood for the congas comes from outside. It is dry and is kept in an unheated storeroom for one year before use. The staves are first cut to length and then cut to a slight oval shape to a pattern on a circular saw. The

long edges are then shaped front to back to enable them to butt together like a barrel and to give the glue something to work on. The staves are glued, formed into a circle in a jig and held together with a removable ring at each end. Several days are now allowed for drying prior to the rough shaped barrel being turned on a horizontal lathe. The next step is the fitting of a wooden reinforcing give ring edge into each end. The glue is allowed to dry again and the whole drum is finished off completely on the lathe and its permanent metal bands fitted prior to a visit to the paint shop for a coat of varnish. I presume the metal bands are fitted as an insurance to keep the staves together just in case. As far as I can see they are unnecessary since they gave me a demonstration where they broke an offcut section of sawn-off conga. The glue never breaks under the strain – only the wood. The skins for the heads are lapped in the factory from specially selected thick animal hides. The wet skins are placed onto congas and left to dry naturally for three days.

The company have recently come up with a new size of conga which is larger than normal, called Super Tumbador. The other sizes they make are Quinto (the smallest), Tumba and Tumbador. They have recently branched out into fibreglass congas which I didn't see being made, but come in only two sizes: Tumba and Tumbador. These are roughly 50% more expensive than the wooden drums.

Cuban bongos are made in the factory in exactly the same way as the congas and these, as I mentioned in my drum check in January, were England's introduction to Asba in the early 'sixties. In those days, as now, they were fitted with plastic heads which were first made by them in 1958 and called Dermoplast – I'm not sure if this pre-dates Remo Brelli's heads but, anyway, it's a different process, the plastic being held in a normal 'U' shaped channel but with its open end away from the shell. This channel then has the plastic film inserted into it and jammed in place with a plastic-covered metal wire. The whole thing is then crimped together by squashing the aluminium channel around the plastic and the wire. No glue is used although heat treatment shrinks the plastic into the channel. The head, which runs over one side of the channel before insertion, has no collar on it. This could arguably be a problem as far as net tensioning is concerned. However, I'm not equipped to comment, since it's over ten years since I played these heads and at that time, I didn't realise they were made any differently to other heads. I don't remember them pulling out but I notice that Asba don't specify their own heads for their sets. They use Remo.

Bongos are also available in metal and Altugas, and they have recently resurrected some hard drums which they first made fifteen years ago called Rosotti. These metal drums with skin heads have an internal tuning system with cast rings and a centre thread much like Remo's roto-toms.

All sorts of different latin percussion instruments are made at the factory including timbales with, according to my catalogue, metal or wooden shells, Mexican maracas, tambourines, claves in mahogany or something called bois des Iles (Island Wood?), Cowbells and something I have always coveted – a foot cowbell pedal.

There's also a pair of practice pads. One normal one to be mounted on a stand and one highly original one with a strap on it to be fixed above the player's knee in the most convenient position. (This could definitely save those bruises on your legs. You know what I mean.)

Unfortunately, these very, well-made pads are a little expensive even in France. It's a real shame.

Asba also make marching drums (soldiers for the use of) all with wooden hoops whether made from veneered wood or metal. There's two different sorts of parade drums, one quaintly called "Musique de l'air" and one double-headed bass drum.

Once the shells are fabricated, they are assembled completely by hand (all drilling is done at this time) by just three or four people. While I was observing, one 16" tom tom was being put together. I watched for over half an hour and the drum wasn't half-finished. They even tied some screws by hand to fit the drum. This assembly department definitely goes part of the way to justifying the price of Asba's instruments.

A room off the assembly department houses the polishing equipment. Here, the Altugas and stainless steel drums are buffed up prior to

being fitted with nut boxes and fittings. They are polished on a grinder fitted with large cloth wheels using successively finer grades of soap. This exercise, believe it or not, takes up to an hour for a four drum set!

I saw a beautiful drum made in 1948 which was so sturdy it could last forever. The snares were now attached to their mechanism with a plastic strip. Asba have been fixing their snares this way for seven years or so.

Even though the drums are expensive in England, they are even more expensive in France. Their different sorts of drum shell materials – wood, Altugas and stainless steel – all sell for the same price. Presumably what they gain on the swings they lose on the roundabouts.

Anyway, I must say my visit to Asba's factory was a really interesting experience. I enjoyed seeing the manufacturing processes of what must be the closest thing to hand-built drums available commercially in the world today.

