

# Swan Percussion

## BLACK SWAN DRUM

**AND NOW FOR  
SOMETHING  
COMPLETELY  
DIFFERENT**

By Gary Gardner

**F**ormed in 2008, Swan Percussion is an outside-the-box-thinking company located in Austin, Texas. With its instruments, Swan Percussion utilizes the fusion of brainpower from both the craftsman and the player to put into action innovative percussion products. Designer Eric Holland and drummer/percussionist Mike Meadows have developed in the Black Swan drum an instrument that has no boundaries for creative interpretation. I've never played an instrument quite like it. It is a true blank canvas (with some colorful splotches of cultural diversity). The Black Swan is a hybrid of many drum archetypes, and with its open-shell construction stands out in the area of innovation.

### HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

When you first see the Black Swan the shape strikes you first, followed by the immediate impulse to sit down and play it. Picture a 16" floor tom and put it on its side; now slightly flatten the shell so there is a kind of octagon. The actual drum is 18" deep and 18" wide, and weighs about 20 lbs. The playing surface (don't forget you turned the floor tom on its side) uses a standard 16" drumhead. The shell has two open sides besides the "bottom" or back. The open sides are for projection, as well as for multiple configurations with some of the Black Swan attachments. Shell construction options offer three different stock woods: Carmelized bamboo, cherry wood, and ma-



ple. A comfy 0.375" foam cushion helps you sit without too much fatigue.

The Black Swan can accommodate all 16"-diameter standard drumheads. The head floats on a hoop that is connected to the spider-type internal tuning system. A separate hoop sits over the head and four tensioned clamps pull down as you turn the internal tuning-system handle. The balanced tension allows for a wide range in pitch tuning.

Although a little hard to undo, the tension clamps come off quickly to make head changes a breeze. This internal system can be adjusted on the fly, which is really cool. Playing the drum with one brush and one bare hand and then reversing the hands was a blast. I had an old Ambassador head that I put on and played around with frame drum technique as well as djembe and tabla quasi styles. With a textured head and brushes, the drum emitted some beautiful timbres, especially when combined with finger rolls and frame-drum snaps.

Because the shell is open you would

## DETAILS

### CONFIGURATION

18" x 18" x 18"; about 20 lbs.

### SHELLS

Available in carmelized bamboo, cherry wood, and maple

### FINISH

Clear natural

### FEATURES

Instant "spider" internal tuning system, quick head-change system, 0.375" medium-density foam (black) seat cushion; Black Swan pads are sized at 10" x 12" and 12" x 12"

### EXTRAS

Wood slap panels (metal coming soon), adjustable bass pedal bracket

### LIST PRICE

Maple and cherry shells: \$675.64; carmelized bamboo \$702.24

### CONTACT

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think that tonality and volume would be an issue, but they aren't. Projection is fine and depending on the head you choose the internal tuning system works wonderfully. I hit on the heads pretty hard and noticed only slight changes in pitch. The tension clamps hold steadfast, keeping the pitch quite consistent.

With the optional bass pedal bracket that allows you to attach a bass drum pedal, a whole host of polyrhythms is waiting at your feet. The caveat is you have to play the pedal backward as you're sitting on the shell facing away from the head. But you can still manipulate it to play steady beats that

enhance the syncopation of your hands. After playing for a few minutes you start to get the hang of the twisting action of your foot or heel to play the pedal. If you want to change heads the pedal comes off quickly so there's no problem there.

A fun attribute with the Black Swan is the slap-panel attachment. This simple addition creates a whole new world of musical options. The slap panel attaches very simply to either one of the side openings with a specialized bracket and a couple of wing nuts. The birch wood panel is spring-loaded and has adjustable tension. This cool device

## Swan Percussion KNOCK BOX



### STOMP THIS!

**C**ommensurate with the company's other percussion products, Swan Percussion's innovative creativity is built into every detail of the Knock Box. This fun little additional percussive voice is essentially a hollow wood box with an amplified twist. Hardwood framing and Baltic birch playing surface make the knock box very light, about 1 lb. The box is attached to another wooden piece aptly called the heel rest. When transporting, the knock box folds into the attached heel rest, which can be detached if you want to play it in your hands or standing up. The instrument comes with adjustable spiked feet to change the incline of the box for best foot comfort. A universal mounting bracket is currently in development as of press time.

Compact and lightweight (1.75" x 6.25" x 5.25" when folded), the Knock Box' magic happens with the aid of a K & K Big Twin transducer affixed inside and a Switchcraft 1/4" endpin jack. Connecting a standard 1/4" stereo jack from the Knock Box to an equalizer or effects unit produces some pretty interesting and slick effects. I really enjoyed playing the box bongo-style with a brush and super-soft mallet. When running a large-hall reverb EQ the mallet combination sound was totally cool.

Two edges of the box have guiro-like notches — one narrow and one with wider notches — which add another textural dimension when striking the Knock Box with a stick. I used a pair of plastic chopsticks and had a great time manipulating the EQ. I did have a little issue when hitting right over the center of the box where the transducer sits. Sometimes the signal would be too hot. So just be sensitive to your playing area, use dynamics, and you should be fine. There are endless options for EQ settings for the Knock Box. Experimentation is the key. Luckily the Knock Box makes that the fun part. The price through Swan Percussion is \$185. —G.G.



▲ The Black Swan is an attention-getter from any angle

lets you really explore options. I used my hands, various brushes, blast sticks, and even mallets. The syncopated rhythms you can create between the panel and the head are endless. I first thought hitting a bare piece of wood could hurt, but like a cajon, there's a natural feel to the angle and the wood. The spring-loaded board can easily be adjusted and is a powerful addition in both sound and tonality. Swan Percussion is soon going to offer textured wood and metal slap panels as well.

### TAKE ME TO FUNKY TOWN

The Black Swan is a powerful tool. I was able to play it in an acoustic ensemble and definition was no issue. I used the included black plastic logo head and found it very versatile. It was really nice to be able to tune on the fly. I dropped the pitch low and used a soft mallet in combination with the slap panel. There was great sustain from the drum. I tightened the slap panel a bit so I was able to play more articulate and syncopated beats. After watching company cofounder Mark Meadows do this I tried it myself: Sliding and pressing my heel up (no sock) against the head changed the pitch as I was playing, adding another dynamic to the performance capabilities.

At one point I decided to play on the drum sideways having the slap panel in front of me instead of on the side. Using two plastic-bristled brushes I moved

around from panel to drumhead. The brushes together offered a light and full timbre filling the ensemble. When needed, a more staccato attack on the head added nice bottom punch and the panel provided tight definition to keep the groove on. ■

## VERDICT

The Black Swan is a powerful step into the 21st century of drums and percussion. With multiple capabilities of configuration the drum fits into almost any type of musical situation. At around 20 lbs. and designed with the right proportions, the Black Swan fits comfortably into a standard 16" floor-tom case. This makes it ready to go for gigs around town. The internal tuning system is very cool and tuning on the fly is even cooler. The ability to change heads quickly is ideal for studio as well as live performances. The Slap Panel adds a real organic percussive vibe and because of the open-shell construction can be placed on either side of the shell. Your creative imagination is the only boundary with this instrument. The Black Swan is proudly handcrafted in the USA. With its many bells and whistles I feel the price is appropriate.

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