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# SUPPLY

SJC CUSTOM DRUMS | BY ALEX HARRELL

## FOSTERING INDIVIDUALITY

**S**JC Custom Drums was founded by two teenage boys in their grandmother's basement.

Then-14-year-old Scott Ciprari messed around with refurbishing old drums while his brother Mike, just a year younger, played those drums with his band. It was a hobby between kids over a common love.

Six years of turning that hobby into a business and "continuing to hustle," as Mike — who's now 32 years old — said is what led to Panic! At The Disco performing at the 2006 MTV Video Music Awards Show using a drum set made by Scott.

"I remember sitting in my parents living room, watching [the VMAs] with my brother, and we're like, 'Damn, we built that drum set in our basement and there it is on TV,'" Mike said with a laugh. "It was such a cool, surreal moment. I think both of us would've been happy if that was the last thing we did building drums; we had no idea what was about to come."

Mike's referring to the eventual falling out he and Scott had in 2013. The Panic! At the Disco kit inspired the likes of The Academy Is... and Gym Class Heroes to work with SJC. It became a friendly rivalry between the bands as well as between the brothers.



Mike Ciprari

### SJC Drums builds more than custom kits without sacrificing its DIY roots

And then it was not-so-friendly. The sibling rivalry eventually put too much pressure on the company, and Mike bought Scott out.

Though SJC has hit a few roadblocks throughout its near 20-year history, the company has been on the upswing. Currently located in a 10,000-square-foot

warehouse in Southbridge, Massachusetts, SJC plans to move in May to a 60,000-square-foot space down the street.

"We're going to utilize the new facility to our advantage," Mike said. "[We're] opening up a small showroom; like a destination for customers to come and hang out and geek out about drums."

#### COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

It goes without saying that custom drum kits are a highly personalized item. Mike compared the process to that of getting a tattoo: You meet with an artist and give them an overview of what you're looking for — the inspiration, colors, shapes and sizes — all before committing to the purchase.

"A lot of drummers are very specific about what they want — whether it's through different woods, different hoops or bearing edges or a combination of all those things — so we'll take a lot of time and dive into the project with the customer," Mike said. "Our sales and our artist relations people are always willing to go above and beyond — even if we don't know it's a guaranteed sale."

Throughout the building process, SJC is in constant contact with its customers to ensure that the kit is exactly what's desired. Once each team member completes their 10-point checklist, the drums are shipped in a specially designed box that Mike's business partner, Chris Nikopoulos, engineered to keep the drums from getting damaged in transit, a previous point of contention.

"It's much more than just, 'give me your money, get the drums and go away,'" Mike said, explaining that the relationship starts when customers reach out

and inquire about a kit.

“We’ve got some great lifelong friends and customers that play our drums who we’ll keep in touch with and [develop] more than just a business-and-consumer relationship,” he continued. “And that’s one of the things that I’m most proud of at the company — it doesn’t just stop once we get their money. That’s [just] the beginning of our relationship as far as I’m concerned.”

As a result, SJC not only has virtually zero returns on custom kits, but it has formed over 1,700 artists relationships as well — including Tré Cool of Green Day, Josh Dun of Twenty One Pilots and Jay Weinberg of Slipknot.

On top of building relationships with artists, SJC works to build equally weighted relationships with its not-so-famous customers as well.

“The thing that we love to do is anybody who plays SJC is equally part of the family, so we put them on the page,” Mike said, referring to the company’s “Family” tab on its website. “To me, it’s like, how cool is it for 15-year-old Johnny, who’s getting his first drum set and whose favorite band is Green Day, to be on the same page as his favorite drummer?”

SJC’s credo of fostering a “collaborative culture” extends further than consumer and company.

“There’s no hierarchy where just because one person said it, that’s how we’re going to do it,” Mike explained. “We take everybody’s ideas into consideration; that’s how I feel most of the great ideas that come out of any company are bred.”

#### AFFORDABLE KITS

Which led to the company’s next move. Despite its inclusive efforts, SJC was missing a huge segment of the market: regular drummers who don’t want or can’t afford a custom kit, given that the lowest price point for a custom set is \$2,000.

“And that’s why we did it,” Mike said. “We had a lot of drummers wanting to play SJC because their favorite drummers are on our roster, but they

weren’t able to afford it.”

So in August 2017, SJC rolled out a ton of stock: three styles of Foundation Hardware, the Pathfinder Navigator and Paramount drum sets crafted overseas at SJC’s Taiwan factory, more than a dozen snare drums as well as accessories. The company was also able to hit an under \$1,000 price-point kit for beginning drummers. These standard products are cur-

rently offered at Sweetwater Sound — and soon to be at Sam Ash Music — as well as through dealers worldwide.

“We’re continuing to try and innovate and be different from the other drum companies,” Mike said. “The DIY grassroots kind of morale and work ethic that we started with in my grandmother’s basement still lives in the DNA of the company today.” **MI**

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