

KOTZ CAJONS

HIP TO BE SQUARED (AND ANGLED)

by Brad Ranola

DETAILS

BRAND: Kotz Cajons

FEATURES: Available in many custom wood and color configurations. Slap pads can be included on any model for an extra \$25.

MODEL: Wedge (with slap pads)

SIZE: 19.5" x 14" x 18" x 14"

WOOD: Maple/birch

LIST PRICE: \$345

MODEL: Rumba

SIZE: 19" x 13.75" x 13.25"

WOOD: Poplar

LIST PRICE: \$295

MODEL: Tone

SIZE: 17.75" x 12" x 11.5"

WOOD: Jarrah/maple

LIST PRICE: \$350

MODEL: Snare

SIZE: 17.25" x 12" x 11.5"

WOOD: Jarrah

LIST PRICE: \$425

CONTACT: Kotz Hand-Built Drums & Percussion, P.O. Box 1093, Claremont, CA, 91711. 909-981-3959. tonecajon.com

You're sure to find your boxing match in one of these Kotz cajons



Once considered inexpensive alternatives to a “real” drum, cajons have finally come into their own as serious percussion instruments. And no cajon is as serious an instrument as those built by Michael Kotzen and his company, Kotz Hand-Built Drums and Percussion. I was lucky enough to get my hands all over four custom models: the Tone (in jarrah and maple), the Rumba (in poplar with birch playing surfaces), the Snare (in jarrah), and the Wedge (in maple and birch).

OUT OF THE BOX. I was first struck by the cajons’ remarkable good looks: Each drum had what seemed to be a hundred different wood tones, and the beauty of the grain popped off the surface. With the exception of the Snare cajon’s functional buzz-makers, each drum was completely void of screws or nails. All the corners have been routed for safety, comfort, and a sleek look. Each box stands protected on four 1” rubber feet.

Two of the drums featured the clever addition of what Kotz calls a slap pad. Consisting of two thin (about 1/16”) pieces of wood, one about half the length of the other, the slap pad is fully glued on

the cajon, which allows for maximum resonance. The result is a crisp, distinct slap tone – somewhat like a cascara sound – that is completely isolated from the drum’s other tones. Brilliant.

ON THE JOB. I brought all four cajons to a world fusion gig at a nice-sounding, intimate theater of 400 to 500 seats. Joining the boxes onstage were ethnic flutes, violin, guitar (and various other stringed instruments), upright bass, marimba, and other percussion. The music was a mixture of folk, Arabic, and South American traditions. I didn’t go with a definite plan as to which cajon I would play for each style, but as the songs progressed, I quickly realized which box suited each tune.

TONS OF TONE. I first pulled up the Tone cajon, one of the smaller drums in the set but undeniably huge in sound. I found the sound of this drum to be what I like to call “Andalucian Hi-Fi”: It has all the traditional tones for playing Flamenco (Andalucia is the birthplace of Flamenco), but they speak better and clearer than any you have heard before. Bass tones had not only a great

pitch but, because of the drum’s screw-free design, amazing sustain and resonance. Open tones were so massive they were reminiscent of conga tones. Slaps were difficult to achieve at first on the playing surface, but adapting a conga-like striking technique brought out a slap like nothing I’ve heard before.

When doing some preliminary research on the Tone, I recalled a note from Michael Kotzen suggesting that I try muffling the drum, somewhat like a bass drum. My first thought was, “Limit the resonance on a cajon? What a waste!” But the appropriately named Tone cajon had resonance to spare. A rolled-up towel in the box, barely touching the playing surface, tightened up the bass tones so that they sounded much like a drum-set kick.

RUMBA. The next drum I played was the Rumba cajon. The model, as tested, had two playing surfaces opposite of each other and a slap pad mounted to the thick, structural side of the drum opposite the tone hole panel. It took a little thinking to figure out the best positioning, but with the two playing surfaces opposite each other, I was able to set the drum up with the slap pad oriented