



Photo by Mike Graham

# Bun E. Carter

## Confession of a Drum Addict

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Cover photo by Mike Graham

**W**hen I called Bun E. he was getting prepared to go to England the coming week to tour with Cheap Trick. He, Rick Nielsen, Robin Zander and Tom Petersson were supposed to be touring already; however, the group had just gotten word that they wouldn't be going to Germany due to the military tension swarming around post 9/11 and the impending Iraq situation, so that afforded me time to talk drums with Bun E. It's evident when you talk with Bun E. for any length of time that he loves vintage drums. So, be forewarned, what follows is diehard vintage drumtalk with a self proclaimed drum addict.

### Bun E.'s Collecting History

**BC:** I started in 1964 when I was 12. My folks bought me a drum set at Ralph Nielsen's music store, Rick's parent's music store. They got me a Sonor kit, a little blue marble kit - a four piece. I learned to play and got in a band. In '66 I got a Ludwig kit, a black oyster kit: a 20, 12, 14, with an added tom, of course. In '67 . . . I got a white marine pearl Rogers kit. In '68, after seeing Cream and Hendrix and a bunch of bands - because I used to go see a lot of bands, I picked up a couple of white pearl Ludwig kits which I used for the next few years. Cheap Trick started in '73, and in '75 a guy called me to sell some cymbals. I went over to see the cymbals, and there was a Radio King kit sitting there, and I didn't know what that was at that time (a black diamond Radio King kit). I bought the cymbals for a buck and a quarter and

had him throw in the kit. It was just one of those things. It was a five piece kit with busted skin heads on it, and somebody had put a double tom mount on it. I fixed them up and took them out and started playing them. In probably '78, I got another Radio King kit-a custom finish kit with old Radio King shells - through Pat Foley (later of Slingerland drums) and Paul Jamieson, who was a guy in L.A. who rented a lot of gear. Also in that year, I ran into Charlie Donnelly in Newington, Connecticut (who is still on the board of Modern Drummer); he really got me into vintage collecting and started educating me. Stuff like, "You gotta buy this Slingerland Black Beauty snare drum", which at that time was the only one known. Now there's about a dozen known. It (the one Bun E. bought) is on the cover of the Slingerland book. I

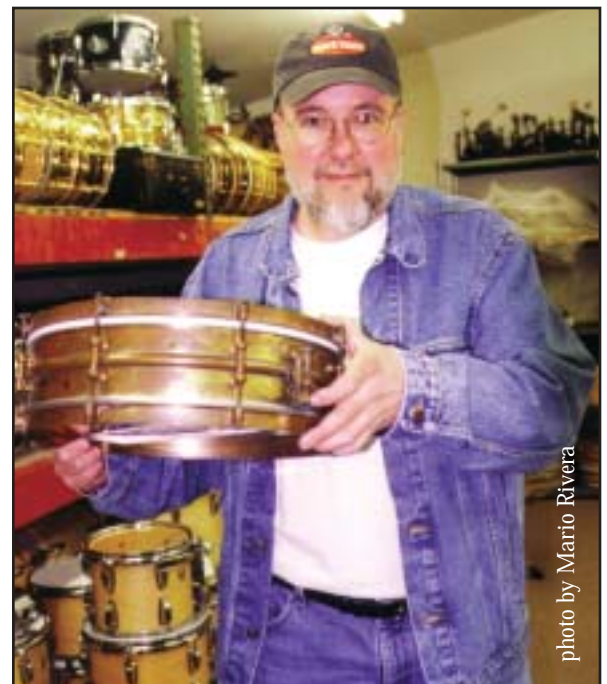


photo by Mario Rivera

sold it to a guy a couple of years ago at the Chicago show. The guy gave me a ton of money for it. So, Charlie Donnelly basically got me into collecting, and he sold me a beat up Ludwig Black Beauty - I fell in love with that. *It's all his fault.*

I started endorsing Ludwig in 1980 when Slingerland went out of business the first of many times. I started endorsing Ludwig and have been endorsing Ludwig ever since. I collected a lot of Ludwig, Slingerland and Gretsch stuff in the '80s. In the mid '90s, I decided to pretty much concentrate on Ludwig stuff.

**Vintage Drummer:** Ludwig's been your only endorsement?

**BC:** Yeah, Ludwig and Zildjian. I've endorsed a couple of different drumsticks, and I've endorsed stick tape. I endorsed Remo for a while: drumheads and stuff. Those endorsements kinda came and went.

**Vintage Drummer:** Do you endorse any heads or sticks now?

**BC:** I use Ludwig heads, and I've been using Cappella sticks since about 1979.

They make me a stick that used to be a Slingerland model: a Peter Erskine model. When Slingerland stopped making them, I sent them (Cappella) a stick and they made a lathe for it. I've pretty much been getting sticks from them ever since. A couple times in the '80s I got pissed off and tried other sticks. Some were good and some weren't as good. Vic Firth was real good, but for reasons of my own I still use Cappella. They work the best for me.

That's it in a nutshell, really. I played in a bunch of different bands, and me, Rick, Tom and Robin basically ended up in the same band after 4 or 5 years of playing in different bands together (in different configurations). As far as collecting, around 1978 I went around looking for stuff. There used to be a lot of stuff sitting around back then. That kinda got me going. I ended up with a basement full, literally. Where I lived I had 2 and a half houses. I had a house that me and my wife live in now, and then I had a small house behind me, then I bought the house next door. I had the house next door and the back house full of drums. Then I had to say, "What am I really collecting?" Because you find yourself pick-

ing up all sorts of stuff. I starting getting rid of stuff and just concentrated on the Ludwig stuff. I'd trade a couple of '50s and '60s Gretsch kits for a Black Beauty-do stuff like that. Got rid of a bunch of Slingerland kits and Gretsch kits, basically. I've still got some, too. But it's probably about 95% Ludwig.

**Vintage Drummer:** Didn't you have a Gladstone kit that you sold to Carl Palmer?

**BC:** I had a Billy Gladstone kit: Cozy Cole's snare drum and Morey Feld . . . who was Benny Goodman's drummer in the early '50s, it was his bass, rack and floor: white marine pearl. Reading about the guy (Gladstone) later, I was surprised it was a wrapped kit. I'm surprised it wasn't a wood kit. I paid seven grand for it, and I sold it for ten grand. So, I really didn't make any money on it cause I had it for about six or seven years. It's one of those things you couldn't play. If you break something on it you're screwed. I've got a kit like that that I bought right after that. I bought a Sonny Greer kit, Duke Ellington's drummer for about 30 years. I bought his kit from about 1940, which is a historically significant time



photo by Mike Graham



for Duke Ellington, and the Smithsonian borrowed it for four or five years in the '90s and had it in a museum tour. . . it's sitting in these huge Indiana Jones cases: museum cases. You really don't want to mess around with a kit like that. It still has the original front head on it. If you busted something on it, you'd be heartbroken.

**Vintage Drummer:** How did that Gladstone tuning system work in your opinion?

**BC:** I never used it. I tuned the snare drum up and messed with it. For skin heads this individual tuning would be a great idea for on the spot tuning - whip out your key and retune part of the bottom head without flipping the drum over. That was probably a great idea in the skin head days. But I guess after the mid '50s it was like, "What's the use?" Well of course if you lost your drum key you'd really be in trouble - that was a three-way drum key. I understand that Steve Maxwell might buy that kit, or maybe already has purchased that kit from Carl for his collection. That is a world class drum rarity. I took some snapshots of it one time. I wish I'd sat it up at some time and taken some cool photos of it.

**Vintage Drummer:** Why did you pick up the sticks to start with?

**BC:** Well, I found out when I was about 21 that my great-grandfather was a drummer in the Wisconsin Brigade in the Civil War. The next generation, my grandmother's generation, they were all a bunch of musicians and my ma's a musician. She can play about anything she picks up. They said they didn't want to encourage me when I was a

kid. I taught myself piano, and I was french horn in the school band. I come from a musical family. I went to see every band in the world when I was a kid: The Beatles and The Stones; Dave Clark Five. I saw them in Chicago. I'd take the bus in or get my dad to drive me. I'd go see these bands when I was in high school. If Hendrix did two shows in the same night, I'd get tickets to both shows. You could go to the first show and write notes down or write the setlist down. The second show you knew what was coming. I also took pictures if I could. I'd sneak a camera in, just so I could remember what happened later. I still have a bunch of that stuff. My mom collects antiques, so I come from a collecting family. The fact that I collected drums was never that unusual. In fact, when I was still living at home, if I brought drums home, I would keep them in the basement.

I was left handed. When I saw the Beach Boys in Spring of '65, Dennis Wilson was playing left handed on his right handed kit. I'd had a drum set for about six to eight months at that time and I was like, "Ah." Because, before that, I sat them up like they were in the catalogue. I remember I went and saw some bands in October of '64. Those were the first bands - rock bands - that I saw live. It was like Chad and Jeremy, Johnny Rivers. In Rockford, I won tickets on a radio show. I went and saw the afternoon show then stuck around between shows, snuck back and talked to a couple of the drummers, and then I stayed for the next show. That kinda got me into thinking, "Hey, this two-show-thing works real good." I snuck in with Keith Moon's roadie in '68 and helped set up his drums. I talked to Ginger Baker's roadie on a Cream tour

and showed him some pictures from a previous gig. He gave me a stick. You smooze the roadies and ask interesting questions and these guys want to talk to you. Going to a billion shows and asking questions really helped. I took a couple lessons in '67 and the guy was like, "Cross out all the "L"s and write "R"s in - because I was left handed. I was like, "Boy, this sucks." I got in a band.

My little brother is a real good reader. He was first chair for all six years: junior high school and high school. He's a doctor now. He just started playing again. I got him a psych red kit last year. He's playing in a band with a bunch of doctors. He's calling me now about earplugs and stuff.

**Vintage Drummer:** What was it like going from just being in a band and playing to everything really taking off?

**BC:** Rick started writing original songs. When Cheap Trick was brand new, we started replacing "Honky Tonk Women" and "Smoke on the Water" with original songs. The original songs went over really good. We had a band right before that - me, Rick and Tom with this singer from Nazz, Stewsky. We went to Philadelphia and tried to get something going there. It didn't quite happen, but we did some opening dates out there. You kinda notice and start to say, "Hey, I can do this as good as the headliner. Hey, I can play that." You go see a band and you say, "I can do better than that." That's when you kinda realize you're in the running. After going to see enough crummy drummers, you say, "I can do as crummy as that guy." We were fulltime from the second we got

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together. And we started in June of '73, me and Rick and two other guys cause Robin was unavailable and Tom didn't really want to do it. By the end of '73 Tom was back in Rockford so he joined. In the Fall of '74, Robin became available. So, we switched singers to get Robin. It just went up from there. The band got better, the material got better. The songs were coming out good. The money kept going up, and the gigs got better. By '76, the time we finally went and got an album deal, we were making pretty good money. We had a truck and a motor home, stuff like that. We were touring around the Midwest playing all over the place.

**Vintage Drummer:** Was there ever a moment where you had that sense of fulfillment, that sense of, "Hey, we made it?"

**BC:** Our first three albums really weren't big hits. It wasn't until Budokan really took off in 1979 that someone from the record company said, "O.K. you guys, get ready for the ride." They flew us out to New York on a Lear jet the day after we took our Rolling Stone cover photo. And they gave us each like ten grand bonuses and said, "Here's some money for you guys, get ready." Then it was just a nightmare. It was two years on the road with no break. It was a total burnout. It was a lot of work. You never really had it made; you just had more to lose the bigger you got. You haven't been home in six months and you're totally burnt out. You're getting the same dumb questions everyday. Probably the most fun is being huge in your home town.

**Vintage Drummer:** Who were the drummers you admired when you first started?

**BC:** Dave Clark, Ringo and Charlie Watts would be the bedrock for me. As I got more licks in my drumming vocabulary or whatever, probably Mitch Mitchell, Keith Moon, Ginger Baker, Kenny Jones from the original Small Faces, and then the John Bonham types. Basically, who did I steal all my good stuff from? When I do a clinic I break down the intro of "Ain't That a Shame." The first lick is like a lick from Keith Moon. The next lick is a lick from "The End" by The Beatles, and the next one's a Mick Fleetwood lick from "Rattlesnake Shake." Then there's a "Let's Go" lick by The Rutles. You know, I describe how I made the intro: taking this from this guy and this from that guy.

**Vintage Drummer:** What guys playing now do you have an affinity for?

**BC:** Matt Cameron. Dave Grohl . . . when I saw him with Queens of the Stone Age I said, "Yeah, I could do that - once and about half that speed." It's the same thing with Matt Cameron. These guys are just



photo by Mike Graham



up there whipping stuff off and are really impressive.

**Vintage Drummer:** Have you found any vintage drums lately that you have been looking for?

**BC:** An Abalone Ludwig snare showed up at the Chicago show last year. I paid good money for it. When the Modern Drummer article came out three guys called up with mod orange snares, and I bought two of them.

**Vintage Drummer:** What are you looking for now?

**BC:** If anybody's got a Ludwig Triumphal lying around, I want one of those. That's a rare bird from the '20s. It's the one where everything's engraved: the tube lugs, the hoops. There's a few of them around; they're about fifteen grand a piece.

I've really kinda filled up my collection. I started out saying, "I want to get one of everything; (now that) has kinda changed to I want to get a representation of everything I ever always wanted to get.

From the '20s, I've got about 20 tube lug snare drums and three or four bass drums; I've got a green one, and I've got a streaked opal and a Stipelgold. Big deal. Like anyone's looking for bass drums. They look good, though.

From the '30s, I've got a couple WFL kits: a real nice seagreen pearl one which is real rare, and a white pearl one.

From the '40s, I've got a WFL kit. And I've got a Ludwig and Ludwig kit, although they're really not Ludwig in the '40s - they're Conn drums. Mr. Ludwig had left the company.

From the '50s, I've got a few WFL kits, some sparkle kits and a rose marine pearl kit. I've never seen that color before. It might be a custom color. It's like a pinkish-red pearl.

In the '60s, things really start to pick up. I've got some mod orange, black galaxy, pink oyster, citrus mod; I've got a new-old-

Kings - seagreen pearl. I got a Gretsch in seagreen pearl. I like that green stuff, it's real hard to find. It's a pretty color. I also got some citrus mod congas last year. I've got totally useless stuff like that. They're nice to look at, but they really don't sound that good. I've also got some old drums from the turn of the century that are kinda like wall hangers.

**Vintage Drummer:** Do you have any of the 10% kits from the war era?

**BC:** I used to have a Slingerland kit, the Rolling Bombers, and I got rid of them. I haven't seen any Ludwig ones around really. I've seen parts of them, pieces of stuff. I had some of that Gretsch plastic lug stuff a few years ago and I got rid of it. The Slingerland ones were wooden carved lugs with a tubular insert. That's pretty much how they all were: plastic or wood. If you

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stock psych red kit that's never been played, with keystone badges. I've got a bunch of snare drums - about one of each of the cool snare drums, although I'm weak in the sparkles. I don't have a green sparkle and I don't have a burgundy sparkle. So, that's what I'm looking for - Jazz Festivals. But I do have a pink oyster, a psych red, a mod orange, a citrus mod and a black oyster. They're pretty nice.

I've got a bunch of '70s - a '70s Black Beauty and an '80s Black Beauty. I've got about ten '90s Black Beautys. I've got three Black Beautys from the early '20s: a couple gold-plated, a couple Ludwigolds, a Stipelgold, a couple of streaked opals. I've got a bunch of other rare birds that I don't play. Most everything else I mentioned, I set up and play.

I've got a Barrett Deems piccolo Black Beauty from '69 that I got from the estate. He used to be Louis Armstrong's drummer back in Chicago. He died a couple years ago. I got some Radio

hit the drum hard enough, one hit could put the whole thing in your lap.

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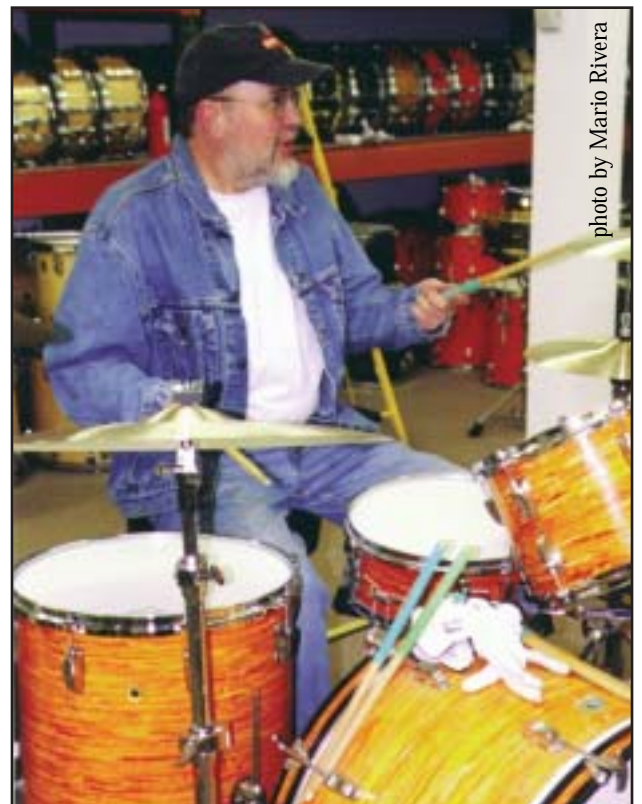


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## Bun E. Carlos continued ...

I've got a couple nice John Aldridge engraved drums. Actually, I'm looking at three. He did the Ludwig 90th anniversary drums, I've got one here, number 11 of 90, with a scroll pattern engraved. And I've got a NSMD one that he made, and that thing is singing. That thing sounds good. I've got a Slingerland 7 x 12 prototype that he did in '91 or '92 when Gibson bought that company. That has a nice little pattern too. It's more of a Conn drum pattern than a Slingerland drum pattern. And I had him do me a Ludwig Black Beauty in about '93 or '94, a nice big fat one, with a drum pattern from a drummer in the '20s that played with a marching band guy, and I can't think of his name right now. It's totally pimped out. In fact, Daxx Nielsen, Rick's kid, filled in for me two years ago when I had back surgery. To thank him, we got a Black Beauty from Ludwig and sent it to John and had him carve it up for us. He did a really swell job on that. I've also got this Ludwig 75th anniversary model snare drum from '84. It's got a machine engraved pattern on it; it's a gold diamond anniversary one. Joe Morello had number four. I've got number three (laughs). I bought it from some guy. I think it was originally Bill III's. It's a tank. Feels like about 30 lbs. Stuff like that I like to look at. But most of the stuff I like to get out and play.

### On Joe Morello

**BC:** "We all did this Ludwig shoot in '84 for the 75th anniversary. There were about 75 rock drummers sitting around . . . and in came Joe Morello walking in the door. It was hilarious to watch all these guys suddenly get humble and shut up. It was really cool. All these guys are talking themselves up, and all of a sudden they got really quiet. That's what Joe Morello does when he walks into a room. Drummers all stop what they're doing and jenuflect."

**Vintage Drummer:** You still like the '67 to '73 Ludwigs a lot?

**BC:** You know that stuff's



three ply, either mahogany-poplar-mahogany or three ply maple. That stuff plays real good. It's real responsive.

**Vintage Drummer:** Was I right on those dates?

**BC:** Yeah, about '68 to about '75 or something. In fact, I've got a kit set up right now that's a psych red 28 bass drum, 13 inch rack tom, 15 and 18 floor toms; they're blue and olive. They play great. They really do. But for Cheap Trick and for modern day touring I prefer the new gear. It holds up a lot better. The nine ply maple plays a lot better. I've also got a top hat and cane kit from about three years ago. They made some millennium snare drums in that top hat-and-cane white marine pearl finish. These are Ludwigs. I called the company and said, "What do I have to do to get a whole kit made?" They made me a kit, and



photo by Mike Graham

I've got a 26 inch bass with a 13 rack and 14 and 16 floor toms with a 6.5 snare drum that was probably made for me by Jack Lawton. He wrapped these drums for Ludwig. They're nine ply maple, and they're just singing.

**Vintage Drummer:** If you had to get rid of most of your collection, what would you have to keep?

**BC:** Well, for playing live, I've been using lacquered maple and plain maple for the last couple of Ludwig kits: '96, '97 and '98 kits.

They're nine ply maple. They play really great. They sound great and they're made really well. For a snare drum, right now I'm using a solid maple Ludwig 5.5 snare drum. For a wood drum, I'm sold on solid maple. I like those. You can really wack them and they don't choke. For a metal snare drum, it would have to be a Black Beauty.

In the vintage stuff, it would probably be some '60s or '70s sets in the psych red, mod orange or citrus mod-because I like the way the stuff looks and it plays good. The Jazz Festivals, they play pretty good.

**Vintage Drummer:** Do you think the vintage market is taking off?

**BC:** Right now I think it's soft. When America's in a recession, the (vintage drum) market's with it. In the '80s, anything with a tube lug got hot. People would buy literally anything. Now, they've gotten a little more discerning. The Radio King market has just gone to pot. You can't give Radio King stuff away too much these days. No one's looking for it. Fifteen or twenty years ago, Radio King was the magic word. Everybody loved Radio King stuff. Stuff comes and goes. Look at Rogers drums. People couldn't give them away, and then five or six years ago this Dynasonic wood market went crazy. Then they went down a little. Now they're on their way back up again.

**Vintage Drummer:** What do you think about eBay availability?

**BC:** I think it's great. I've seen stuff on eBay I would have never seen otherwise.

**Vintage Drummer:** Do you think eBay has created interest for people who may not have gotten into it otherwise?

**BC:** Sure. But people shouldn't collect drums to try to make a buck on it because it's kinda like a coin toss. For me, it's about getting what you want. That's how it should be. The vintage drum thing is really weird because the most valuable drum is not based on how it sounds. It's what it's wrapped in. So it's kinda goofy in that way. It's like baseball cards. *Hey, it's a piece of paper!*

**Vintage Drummer:** Do you have any major interests outside of playing the drums?

**BC:** I'm a big music fan, of course. I buy stacks of cds and sit around and listen to stuff all the time. And I read, cause I'm on

**BC:** If I've got something for sale, I just get on the phone or do an ad in NSMD, or do an ad in the white paper. I'm not online enough yet. I get calls all the time because my phone number's out there. I got a call yesterday from some guy asking me about an aluminum Dynasonic which is some prototype they made in the early sixties. I've got one. The pawnshop wanted a buck-fifty for it, and he wanted to know was it worth it. I get a lot of calls like that. Then they ask me what I've got for sale, and I tell them, "I've got this Gretsch rocket lug kit for sale." And they're like, "I'll call you next week." I never hear from them again. That kinda separates the men from the boys. Tell them that you've got something for sale and they never call you back. Which is fine. Yeah, I get calls every week from people because I do have my phone number available.

**Vintage Drummer:** Does that get a little annoying?

**BC:** It ain't bad. Once in a while they've got something for sale. The door swings both ways.

on my shelf with the other one that I have like it, you know? I offer a couple more bucks and they'll usually bite.

For drum collecting, people gotta network. Brian Irving gave me a lecture on this once—a guy out in California. He's basically right. If you want to find something, get on the phone and start calling people and asking about stuff. And, of course, every drum collector in the world wants to tell you about all his latest finds and stuff. You get on the phone with these guys and they'll talk your ear off-like I'm doing to you, kinda. I've basically found that networking is the best way to get your collection, to find out where the stuff is.

### Latest Conundrum

**BC:** I've got a Gretsch snare drum, a white pearl one, that's got something written inside of it in pencil that says, "P. J. at the Metropole" and that was a bar in New York, a big jazz bar from the '50s. I've been looking around for ten years for drummers whose initials are P.J., thinking, "Jeez maybe I've got some famous drummer's snare drum." I'm trying to find this P.J.

### Parting Words

**BC:** One thing in closing: I've got a great vintage drum collection, and I endorse, so I get new drums. I'm like the luckiest guy in the world. I've got the best of both worlds. So, if it sounds like I'm happy as a clam, it's kinda because I am. I've had this opportunity to put together this great collection.



the road and I have a lot of down time. And I live in the sticks, so I'm a bit of a bird-watcher. We watched a Cooper's hawk today fly into a bush and grab a little junco and have it for lunch. That's the joy of having a bird feeder: the little birds show up and the big birds show up for dinner.

**Vintage Drummer:** What do you do when you want to sell an item?

**Vintage Drummer:** So, you really don't move much of your stuff?

**BC:** No, I don't sell a whole lot. And if I'm buying something, sometimes I'll have someone else call for me. Because sometimes when I call the price goes up. Or, if it's on eBay, I'll have someone e-mail and arrange a purchase—have them cancel the auction. I've done that a few times. But, I'm not buying it to resell it. I'm buying it to put

*Bun E.'s a down-to-earth guy whose excitement about drums is contagious. He's a rockin' drummer and I wish there were more people like him in "The Industry." Hear some of Bun E.'s Ludwig drums and Zildjian cymbals on Cheap Trick's new album "Special One" coming out July 22nd. And if you're at one of the vintage drum shows anytime soon, look around for Bun E. and say hello. More than likely, he'll be there.*