

## Who's Who in Vintage Drums ...

# FRANKIE V'S VISTALITE COLLECTION

by Billy Jeansonne

**Frank Pepitone**, known worldwide as Frankie V, “guess what the V stands for”, started collecting Vistalite drums in 1973 when Ludwig first introduced their new line of See-thru drums. Frank was only 14 years old. He now has what is claimed to be the world's largest Vistalite collection. He has over 50 complete kits, each with a matching 6.5" x 14" snare drum. Some of his kits even include the matching Vistalite canister throne. His Vistalite snare drum collection consist of a total of 68 snares. Frank is regarded by many as an authority on Vistalite drums. Let's hear what Frankie has to say about the most unique and sought after drums from the 70's. We'll also take a look at Frankie V's incredible collection.

*Dated February 12, 1973, a letter was sent out to Ludwig dealers announcing their new line of Vistalite drums. The Vistalites were introduced in Clear and 5 tinted finishes, all transparent, including Yellow, Blue, Green, Amber, and Red. The 1973 Ludwig catalog does not contain Vistalite drums, but everything shown in the '73 catalog was available in the Vistalite line, including thrones, parade drums, bongos, and all the different set configurations. Also, a separate flyer was sent out in 1973 showing the new line of Vistalite Drum Outfits. Vistalite drums were made no larger than 30" in diameter.*



Reprinted from Ludwig Catalog # '75

*“I began playing drums at the age of 9 years old. I bought a cheap set of Japanese drums and played to records by Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and the Marshall Tucker Band. Even after many years of playing in front of different audiences, the passion that I have for playing drums translates into an excitement right before I play. I may get a little nervous before I play, but that emotion is a passion to excel. I also have that same passion for collecting drums.” Frankie V.*

**VDM:** Frank, what attracted you to Vistalite drums as a beginning collector?

**Frank:** They were cool drums. I was fascinated. This was the first time I had seen see-through drums. I was finding nearly new sets that were already being traded in at local music stores or being sold through a local paper called the Buy Line. I loved all the cool colors of the Vistalite drums and wanted to collect them. I was already a collector of wood shell drums, even at an early age.

**VDM:** What were the Vistalite drum shells made of?

**Frank:** The shells were made of acrylic. Ludwig designed and formulated all specifications. Ludwig also had the facilities to heat and bend the acrylic in their factory to form the shells. Other companies such as Cadillac Plastics may have been involved with Ludwig in the forming of the Vistalite shells.

There were 3 different generations of Vistalite drums. The first generation drums were made of extruded acrylic and the joining seams of the shell were flat. This procedure of connecting and gluing the shells allowed for problems to occur with the seams separating. The second generation Vistalites had a V-groove in the edges where the shell joined together which

allowed for the adhesive resin to fit into the groove and lock the edges together creating a much more secure connection at the seam of the shell. The V-groove was at the outside of the shell which allowed the resin to show. The third generation Vistalites were created with the V-groove to the inside of the shell, so the resin adhesive was to the inside of the shell allowing for a much smoother outside surface and a much cleaner look. This was very necessary when the pattern Vistalites came into existence, because there were so many seams within the shell.

**VDM:** Do you have every color and pattern of Vistalites that Ludwig produced?

**Frank:** I have at least one complete kit, including the 6.5” snare, in every single color ever released by Ludwig. I also have at least one complete kit, including the 6.5” snare, in every single pattern, but I cannot possibly have every pattern with every different color combination. There were ultimately a total of 9 colors, adding black, white, and smoke, and a total of 6 different patterns. Each pattern had almost unlimited possible color combinations, depending on the colors chosen and the sequence of the different colors within the pattern. This adds up to quite a few different possible combinations!





**VDM:** Do you have Vistalite kits in the Octa-plus configuration?

**Frank:** I have Octa-plus sets in each of the original 6 Vistalite colors, including the matching 6.5" snare drum. I also have Octa-plus sets in the black and white Vistalite and a Quadraplus kit in smoke. Every set I own includes two floor toms, either a 16" and 18", or an 18" and 20". Most of my sets include the very rare matching canister thrones.

**VDM:** When did the pattern Vistalites come into existence?

**Frank:** The first Ludwig catalog to show pattern Vistalites was the 1976 catalog, which also introduced Ludwig's line of Stainless Steel drums. This was the small "pocket" catalog. The 6 patterns were Pattern(A) 3 Band Rainbow, Pattern(B) 5 Band Rainbow, Pattern(C) Spiral, Pattern(D) 3 Band Swirl, Pattern(E) 2 Band Swirl, and Pattern(F) Vertical Bar. The mathematics to create pattern Vistalites were incredible. It was very difficult to make the patterns match up. The hardest patterns to create were the spiral patterns.

**VDM:** When were the Tivoli line of Vistalites introduced?

**Frank:** The Tivoli drum outfits were shown only in the 1980 Ludwig catalog. The 1980 catalog was copyrighted in 1978, so production of the Tivoli drums probably began in late 1977. The Tivoli drum outfits were made in only one pattern; Pattern (A) 3 Band Rainbow. Any 3 color combination was available. The 3 bands could also consist of only one or two colors if desired. The Tivoli lights were installed inside of the drum shell at the joining seams of the Vistalite bands. All of the Tivoli drum sets were 5 piece set configurations with matching 5" x 14" snare drum.

**VDM:** How were the Tivoli lights electrically operated?

**Frank:** Each Tivoli set came with a transformer box that plugged into an electrical outlet. Out of the transformer box came a harness that plugged into the bass drum. From the bass

drum led a wire which powered the rest of the kit. An on-off switch was located on the bass drum. The lights could be activated to flash to the beat of the music or they could be left on continuously.

**VDM:** What Vistalite color was the most popular in the 1970's?

**Frank:** The number one seller was the Clear Vistalite. The number two seller was the Blue Vistalite. The number three seller was the Amber followed by the Red Vistalite. Number five seller was the Yellow and last was the Green Vistalite drums. Green Vistalites were the first color to be discontinued. The 1980 catalog shows every Vistalite color except Green.

**VDM:** What Vistalite pattern was the most popular in the 70's?

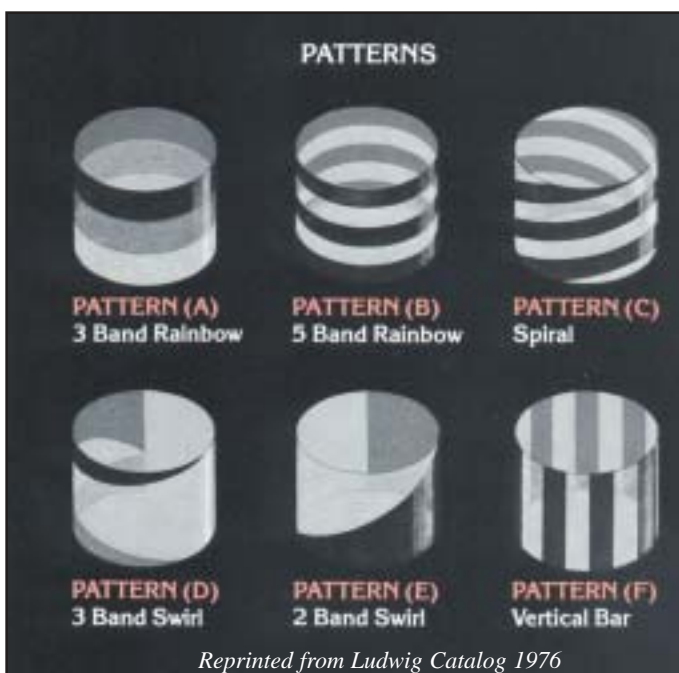
**Frank:** Probably Pattern (A) 3 Band Rainbow or Pattern(C) Spiral. The last pattern to survive was Pattern (A). The first two patterns to be discontinued were Pattern (D) 3 Band Swirl and Pattern (E) 2 Band Swirl. These two patterns were not shown in the 1980 Ludwig catalog. Only Patterns A,B,C, and F remained.

**VDM:** Did Ludwig make a Vistalite Jazzette kit?

**Frank:** I have actually seen a Red and White Spiral Jazzette kit with an 18" bass drum, 8" x 12" tom, 14" x 14" floor tom, and matching 4" x 14" snare drum. This set was never shown in a Ludwig catalog. Also, Vistalite canister thrones were never shown in catalogs.

**VDM:** Why were the Vistalite drums dropped from the Ludwig drum line?

**Frank:** There were two factors involved. Acrylic is made from petroleum. The cost of petroleum was rising considerably in the 1970's which made it very expensive to produce the Vistalite



drums. Also, the Vistalite drums were very labor intensive to make, especially the pattern Vistalites. Number two reason is that Vistalite drums had become very popular in the disco era, partly because of the combination of colors and lighting. Disco was beginning to fade out and Vistalites began to lose their popularity.

**VDM:** Which sets are your favorite?

**Frank:** It's really hard to pick a favorite set because in their own way they are all so individual, based on the patterns and colors provided in the pattern. Sometimes it is the colors that make the pattern so beautiful. And sometimes it's truly the pattern that makes the colors so beautiful. The combination of colors chosen for different patterns can make all the difference in the beauty of the drum. My favorite is a toss up between the Amber, Clear, Amber set in a 3 Band Swirl with matching canister throne and the Yellow and White Spiral set which I call my lemon meringue pie set.

**VDM:** From the photos we've seen, you have an amazing collection of Vistalite drums. Do you sell any of your drums that you have duplicates of?

**Frank:** Yes, I have a business called "FV Vistalite Collection". I buy, sell, and trade Vistalite drums. I am constantly adding to my collection and in the process, acquire many of the same types and sizes of drums that I already have. I also actively search for Vistalites to keep a constant supply of drums in my inventory.



**VDM:** Your collection can be seen on the website [www.rcivistalite.com](http://www.rcivistalite.com). Explain RCI Vistalite International.

**Frank:** Romano Cotone is the independent owner of RCI Vistalite International. He owns and maintains the website. We work very closely together as business associates. I handle the buying, selling, trading, and customer relations through "FV Vistalite Collection" and all drums sold are from my inventory. Through RCI Vistalite International, Ray performs the necessary repairs and restorations for his customers and the many customers that are directed to him from "FV Vistalite Collection".

**VDM:** Ray, please tell us what goes on behind the scenes of RCI Vistalite International.

**Ray:** For starters, I designed, set up, and maintain the website that displays many of Frank's beautiful drumsets. Like Frank said, I do all of the Vistalite repairs, from removing scratches to repairing a cracked or broken shell. I formulate the adhesive used in the repairs. I have also formulated a product called "Vistabright", which is an anti-static, anti-fog, polish for use with all Vistalite drums and other acrylic drums. I have also formulated a do-it-yourself restoration kit for removing light scuffs and scratches that should be on the market soon. I've done work on Vistalite drums in over 20 countries.

**VDM:** What is involved in removing scuffs and scratches from a Vistalite drum shell?

**Ray:** A colored resin has to be formulated for the particular color of Vistalite being worked on. The resins are placed in the scratches and are allowed to dry and adhere to the shell. Care has to be taken when buffing the compound to blend into the shell. If too much heat is created, the acrylic will "open up" and a fogginess will occur inside. Too much heat can also produce a glistening affect or "sparkly" affect.

The chemistry of each polycarbonate uses different chemicals to create the different colors. Certain cleaning and restoration chemicals, along with heat, do not interact with the chemicals that make up a certain color. If the wrong combination of colored chemicals are used with a particular colored shell, that area of the shell can change color. Therefore, each color of Vistalite will have its own restoration kit, along with complete instructions.

*continued on page 24*

## Who's Who in Vintage Drums *continued ...*

Vistalite drums were ahead of their time. They are just as popular today as they were in the 1970's. Although Ludwig was not the first drum company to produce acrylic drums, they set the standard. Other companies such as Zickos, Fibes, Slingerland, and Pearl have produced beautiful kits made from some form of acrylic. 30 years later, versions of the original kits are still being produced by a couple of the original companies.

Ludwig Vistalite drums from the 1970's are truly unique works of art, especially the pattern Vistalites. They are a one of a kind creation and will probably never be produced again by any drum manufacturer. Obviously the Ludwig Drum Company went to great lengths to produce these beauties and they deserve a special mention.

Ludwig reintroduced Vistalite drums in 2000. Only clear Vistalites were offered in 22", 12", 13", 16", and 5" x 14" sizes only.

For more Vistalite photos and contact information, visit [www.rcivistalite.com](http://www.rcivistalite.com)

*All photos credit of Frank Pepitone and Romano Cotone except for Ludwig catalog photos.*



## Product Review ...

### “VISTABRIGHT” by RCI International

Anti Static, Anti Fog, Polish for Acrylic drums

Since this issue of Vintage Drummer contained an extensive article on Vistalite drums, I thought it would be helpful to Vistalite collectors and players to make aware of a specially formulated product for cleaning Vistalites and other acrylic drums.

I tried Vistabright on a “clear” Vistalite snare drum to determine the effectiveness of using this product over “other” cleaning sprays. This product really does work great! It cleaned and polished the drum so well that I could see imperfections in the drum that were not as obvious before. Simply spray on the drum and wipe off with a clean, soft cloth. No streaking and no remaining film residue. It removed smudges and made the drum look crystal clear. What I did notice immediately was how well Vistabright cleans chrome. When I sprayed Vistabright on the drum, some of the product sprayed onto the chrome hoops and lugs. When I wiped it off, I was amazed at how new looking the chrome appeared. Finally, I sprayed Vistabright back on

the drum and let it remain for 15 minutes. I wanted to make sure that it would not harm the acrylic by remaining on too long. No problem.

Vistabright was formulated by Romano Cotone of RCI International. Romano has an extensive background in chemistry and graphic design, which has allowed him to formulate Vistabright and to market it in a very attractive package.

Vistabright sells for \$19.99 each. One can cleans several kits. Contact Romano Cotone at 203-384-1803.

Visit [www.rcivistalite.com](http://www.rcivistalite.com)

