

Slingerland

RADIO KING

Snare Drums

by Michael Gilbert
photos by Mike Curotto

From 1936 until the late 1960's, the Slingerland Drum Company manufactured some of the most sought after snare drums ever made, the Slingerland "Radio King". Who were some of the prolific Slingerland endorsees?

*Gene Krupa - "King of Swing" on the cover of every Slingerland Catalogue from 1936-1967
Buddy Rich / Don Osborne / Cozy Cole / Ray McKinley / Davey Tough*

Just to name a few of Slingerland's best. There were hundreds more. What guided them to Slingerland? I think it was two things. First, the Radio King had a certain sound that was unique in the big band era. Secondly, Slingerland was one of the first companies to offer the tuneable tom tom. This came directly from their association with Gene Krupa.

Today, the Radio King snare drum is one of the most asked for and unique sounding snare drums ever made.



What made a Radio King Snare Drum a Radio King?

The Radio King snare drum was the successor to the little known Duall as the top of the line snare drum for Slingerland. Slingerland made Radio King shells in the following materials:

- *Solid maple shells: the most popular and coveted*
- *Ply shells: generally the student model or marching model*
- *Metal shells: most likely done on prototype versions*

The patent on the Radio King makes the distinction that there are snare support brackets (bridges) on both snare side and butt side of the snare drum. This patent was granted in 1939 even though the company marketed the idea starting with their 1936 catalogue.

The 1920 Ludwig Super snare and the Leedy Broadway Parallel had brackets that were similar to Radio King bridges.

How do you recognize the 1936 Radio Kings?

The lugs on the 1936 Radio King were the Streamlined lugs. Streamlined lugs were doubled ended casings with threaded holes tapped into each end for the tension rod. No insert sleeves.

- Engraved top hoop of the snare drum. Doubled flanged, heavy brass "Radio King" full-flanged metal counter hoops.
- Chicago, IL CLOUD BADGE (1936-1941)
- 3 point strainer with shorter top adjustable arm.
- The bridges were secured at the drum shell with machine bolts.
- If a muffler was present, it would have been a Todd internal tone control with two felt pads on it. Color could be: red, yellow, green.
- Snare gate was about the same size as the snare wires, and was fastened with 4 machine bolts.

Badges

Slingerland badges used on Radio Kings from 1936 to the mid 1950's.



What sizes did Radio King snare drums come in?

5 x 14, 6.5 x 14, 7 x 14, 8 x 14, 6.5 x 15, and 8 x 15. Upon rare occasion you will find 3 x 13 Radio King snares as well.

Ray McKinley's Radio King was perhaps the one snare with the most departure from a *normal* Radio King. Ray believed that a top wood hoop and bottom metal hoop produced the unique sounds he looked for: warm rim-shots and great sounding brush work. These Radio Kings were available in 7 x 14 or 8 x 14 sizes with two choices of finishes; either Pearl or Duco.

In 1948 Slingerland introduced the first 5.5 x 14 Radio King snare drum.

1939-1940: The era of the Super Snare Strainer: The Clamshell Strainer

This strainer allowed for the spring tensioning of the snare strands from the butt side of the drum. On the throw off side a rather long throw-off arm was very difficult to use, and eventually became an easily broken-off piece. The snares were attached to the drum via a slot at the end of the snare wires. A flat piece of steel, about 1" wide on the bottom of the throw off, fit into this slot and the spring tension of the throw off held the drum's snares in place. It is indeed rare to find a clamshell strainer which is totally intact and working!

Also, in the 40's, The New Super Radio King Modernistic lugs which first appeared on Buddy Rich's Model snare began appearing. We know them as the scalloped Beavertail lugs. These lugs were single ended with inserts. Buddy Rich's 1941 Swingster model snare drum was the only one without snare bridges. Plus, this model was the first to utilize the scalloped beavertail lugs doubling the amount of lugs on a snare.

1940-1941

Metal shell Radio Kings were available with the scalloped beavertail lugs in a 6.5 x 14 size only. This model did not have the snare brackets. This was called the "Artists' Model".

The beavertail lugs and inserted streamlined lugs were used until the "1955" lugs were introduced in the 50's. Various versions of the '55 lugs, either large or small, continued to be the lugs of the Slingerland drum company until the late 70's.

In the 1940's, two bolts were added in the snare bridges making a total of 6 bolts.

In 1942, the snare gates on the snare side hoop were also enlarged over earlier models and fastened with 4 machine bolts.



1958

1958 was the last year the name "Radio King" was used by Slingerland in their catalogue, calling the drum the Student Radio King, until in 1963, the "Radio King" was reintroduced.

1958 Identification marks

1955 "55" lugs

Triple flanged hoops

Solid Maple shells

Clamshell strainers

Badge: small oval, not painted, with clear lacquer

1963

1955 "55" lugs

Triple flanged hoops

3 point strainer

5.5 x 14 and 7 x 14 sizes

Pearl, lacquer finishes

Badge: Brass & Black Chicago, IL (1960), or Brass & Black Niles, IL (1961 through late 60's)



Student Model Radio King

Note:

The WWII days of the Rolling Bomber lug and other WWII era drums are not covered in this article. Not due to any lack of their importance, but rather due to their collectibility and value in the market today.

Radio King sound mystique: The solid shell snare drum

What makes the older solid shell snare drums of the past sound so much better than newer ones? There are several reasons why collectors and players scour the earth looking for the 1936-1941 Radio King snare drums. The solid maple shell and streamline lug design create a very unique sound.

Why, we ask? We believe that it is due to several factors. The wood is the most obvious. Old growth forest where trees grew slowly in dense woods create a very unique harmonic sound when they are made into solid shell snare drums. The growth rings in the wood are very close together and create dynamics that are not duplicated with solid shells of today. The growth rings in trees today harvested for snare drums are wider apart and do not create the same quality of sound that old growth forest wood did in the years gone by. These "old growth" forest woods are rare and not generally available today.

Since ply snare drums are the norm today, we usually get a lot of harmonic sounds from the glue which is in the shells of the snare drum. As a matter of fact, a 6.5 x 14 three ply shell has approximately 671 square inches of glue including the reinforcement rings. That means that the sound you're getting is over 50% from the resonance from the glue, obviously this never happened in a solid Radio King shell. Also, the finishes add additional glue area and sound variations.

The allure of finding a perfect Radio King snare drum eludes the majority of us. But, we keep on looking, and one day it'll appear...that old "Radio King" in perfect condition...can't wait to play mine.

Good luck hunting.

