



## DRUM TECH DTS Advanced Tuning System

### HEAD TENSIONING WITH A TWIST

BY JOHN NYMAN

One of the most reliable hallmarks of technological innovation is the move toward greater convenience. No matter what the product or industry,

someone, somewhere is attempting to improve on the "old way" of doing things. Within the music world, no one has suffered through a greater bombardment of toys, gadgets, and gizmos than drummers, owing in no small part to the sheer

amount of gear our chosen art form requires. Into this field steps Drum Tech with its DTS Advanced Tuning System, which promises to change the way we think about tuning drums. The DTS is a retro-fit item that attaches to your existing drums. Using a different theory of physics to forego the whole rod-by-rod method of tuning a head, the DTS makes head tensioning a one-knob affair, thereby making your tuning choices and changes easier. But like any radical new innovative "shortcut," it has both benefits and bugs, so stay with me.

#### FEEL THE TENSION

The standard goal of tensioning is to achieve even tension on all the

### DETAILS

**MODEL** DTS Advanced Tuning System

**FEATURES** Easy, one-screw tuning, and optional spare components including lubricant, bolt assembly, brackets, and cables (sold separately).

**SIZES** Available in most sizes including 8", 10", 12", 13", 14", 15", 16", 18", and for lug counts of 6, 8, and 10.

TYPES	PRICES
DTS Advanced Tuning System	\$49.99–\$59.99 (each head)
T-Handle Wrench	\$9.99
RIMS Mount Spacers	\$9.99

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lugs of a drum. That means we have to tap, listen, stretch heads, try different heads, swear, sweat, and sometimes even use tension-reading tools, like dials or ratchets, all to the same (somewhat) difficult end. And on top of that, we strive to find a harmonious tuning – excuse me, tension – between the batter and resonant heads.

The DTS proposes to change that and, once properly installed, allows you to raise or lower the tension of *all* the lugs on the head, all at once. It may be hard to imagine, but the folks at DTS want you to *finger-tighten* the tension rods – and that's all. Don't start in with the tapping and listening. Why not? Because the tension rods, in the DTS application, are simply anchors. The DTS guides and cable will be doing the tensioning.

Most drummers facing an array of tubs that need tensioning work hard to achieve one "good" sound and then, wiping sweat from their brow, call it quits. But my experience with the DTS system shows that a broader world of tuning is available with very little effort.

The relative tension of top and bottom heads translates to a *big* difference in tone and response. Most of us know that, or have at least read about it, but most of us have not tried a ton of different tensioning ratios for ourselves. We typically find the tone we like and try to keep the drums in as close proximity to that as possible. So what about trying top tight/bottom loose, top low/bottom high, both heads even, or other variations? What about tuning the heads a fourth apart? A third?

If you have to tune the drums lug by lug, accurately, to every one



of these different permutations, and you have, say, three toms and a snare, it could take hours. Now move your drums to a different room and start all over again ... *yikes*. But with the DTS you can try all these variations with the twist of a single screw on each head.

### THE GIG TEST

At a recent set of gigs I set up DTS rigs on the top and bottom heads of two toms (a rack and a floor), and the bottom head of a snare drum. Right away I was struck by the thought that tuning was suddenly a fun prospect (no, really), thanks to the one-screw system. (Note: Drum Tech sells an optional large-handled hex wrench for that single screw you'll definitely want to purchase. A regular, L-shaped hex wrench would be a serious pain.) I moved straight from a bebop jazz gig in a restaurant (high tuning) to a rock and roll jam night gig (medium tuning), and it was a piece of cake to change tunings – and, I got a great sound. It was also possible to bend notes while playing, though the hex wrench is a little clunky to utilize on the fly.

All this is the good news. The bad news is that setting up the DTS is a royal pain in the butt. And it's not a one-shot deal. You'll have to take it off and put it back on every time you change a head (even though, according to Drum Tech, the process takes a fraction of the time after the initial installation is completed).

### THE SYSTEM AT A GLANCE

So what is the DTS exactly, and how does it work? The heart of the system is a black cable that wraps around your drum at tuning-rod height and sits in the recesses of chromed, pie-piece-shaped metal guides that slip under the shoulders of the drum's tension rods and act like little wedges. The cable's two ends terminate in a chromed, block-and-plate assembly held together by a single hex bolt.

After the DTS is set up, turning the hex bolt pulls the cable tighter, which squeezes against the little pie-piece wedges, forcing the drum hoop down and thus tightening the head. It's like stuffing eight screwdrivers under the heads of the eight tension rods of a drum and then, all at once, pushing down the handles of the screwdrivers, forcing the hoop to press down under the pressure.

The tension rods, subjects of so much of our attention before, are now merely placeholders. The cable delivers the tension, and

physics insists that each point on the head will now be under equal tension. No more tapping and fussing. Instant, even tuning is here!

But alas, the greater convenience afforded by the DTS must come at the expense of greater options. For instance, it is no longer possible to play around with loose lug tuning. And what a shock to consider that sometimes we want our drums *out of tune*! Care to loosen one or two rods to chase out a sympathetic vibration? Sorry. Want to drop a lug or two to get a weird, fat snare tone? No dice.

Another concern that came up right away was whether or not all this cable tension could hurt the drum. I think not, because the lateral squeezing of the cable translates directly to downward hoop pressure, which didn't seem any greater, or any different than regular tuning produces, just a different pathway of delivery. What did hurt was my head – the one containing my brain – the first time I assembled a DTS rig.

### SET-UP ISSUES

The first part is easy: you just loosen the rods a bit and shove the wedges in – no big deal. Then you lightly and evenly tighten the rods onto the wedges. Next, you wrap the cable around the channel created by the recesses at the bottom of the wedges and tuck the cable's ends into the block-and-plate mechanism: simple. However, assembling this cable/boxes/plate thing (which is actually fairly handsome, by the way) for the first time was a bit like trying to solve a Rubik's cube. There's a series of holes, and you have to calculate which hole best fits the cable on your drum. It's a hassle, even though I got better at it each time, just as you no doubt will. That's because you'll have to do it again for each head on each drum you want fitted with the DTS. Each head, each drum, each time. By the time I reached installation number five, I was already an old pro. I was able to assemble the DTS for a single head in about five minutes by that time, whereas the first one took, well, a lot longer.

That's not all. On my Gretsch test kit I had problems with the floor tom legs, which got in the



way of the cable. (The folks at Drum Tech later pointed out that the problem was unique to my particular Gretsch floor tom model, and wouldn't translate to other floor toms on the market.) Fixing it requires some kind of spacers placed between the leg brackets and the shells so that the cable could go *under* the legs. No thanks. I decided instead to just let the cables rub on the legs. It was a lazy move, but one I'm sure enough DTS users would wind up making that it warranted a test-run. The result? The DTS still worked, though now it was "sticky," with the cable hindered by friction against the floor tom leg. What was worse, if not altogether predictable, was that in no time, the plastic housing on the cable had rubbed off on the floor tom leg's knurled surface. I also couldn't remove the legs for transport, as they were pinned in place by the DTS cable. I compromised in the end and decided to move the legs down, giving the cable smooth chrome to glide across. Better, but not perfect, and certainly not up to the manufacturer's recommendations.

Drum Tech also warns that some RIMS-style mounts (and almost everyone has RIMS-style mounts nowadays) require a special spacer that, you guessed it, is

sold separately. My 12" x 8" tom has a RIMS mount, and the DTS fit it okay, but just barely. There's also a warning for "short" rims, which, of course, includes the die-cast Gretsch rims on my toms. After assembly, the DTS cable slipped off its tracks. That was an easy fix, though. As per the instructions, I moved the tension-rod washer *under* instead of *over* the cable guide. Done and good.

Also, after putting the DTS on the bottom head of my snare drum, I found the drum no longer fit well into my snare basket. The cable was again in the way! I tried rotating the drum, but then the basket arm interfered with the functioning of the DTS. I wound up positioning the basket so that it just gripped the edges of the snare's bottom hoop. Needless to say, this does not allow for a very stable snare position. The top head of the snare drum had problems, too. Yes, I was warned. Not all snare throw-offs leave enough room for the DTS cable. Again, liberal application of spacers could solve the problem.

### VERDICT

If you make the DTS commitment, be prepared to enjoy easier tuning, but also to lose a few quirky options, like de-tuning a lug. And you might have to do some hardware juggling and add-on purchasing depending on the brand of drums you play. Assuming you are okay with that, you'll enter into a new world of tuning possibilities, including many you've likely never tried before. So while Drum Tech's DTS system may be plagued by small bugs, it's also loaded with tremendous potential.

