

# Under The Bigtop

Touring With Cirque du Soleil's Corteo

## Christopher "Kit" Chatham

Christopher "Kit" Chatham is a very busy musician. Upon getting his Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Georgia in 2000, Kit's music career has been on the go. In May of 2001, Kit was the featured snare drum and percussionist soloist with the Tony and Emmy Award winning Broadway show **BLAST!**, touring all over the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan. In June of 2003, he joined the cast of **CYBERJAM** as the featured

percussionist and percussion manager for the instrumental theatrical show, performing in London, England's West End. Today, Kit is the lone drumset/percussionist for Cirque du Soleil's new touring show, **Corteo**, utilizing ethnic, orchestral, and marching percussion, as well as state of the art electronics.

Classic Drummer recently contacted Kit to give us the insight of what equipment he is using for Corteo.



**Kit Chatham:** My set up is a mixture of New Age and Organic. It is a mix of acoustic world percussion instruments and modern electronic percussion.

The cool thing about my set-up is that it reflects my personality, past, and what I am as a percussionist. I enjoy everything related to percussion and strive to learn and master as much of it as I can.

My set-up reflects all of my experience as a percussionist, starting with drum set onto orchestral, ethnic, and finally marching percussion.

While in college, I played and recorded with many bands that toured nationally and overseas. After I graduated, I wanted to find a gig that would utilize all of my training and decided to audi-

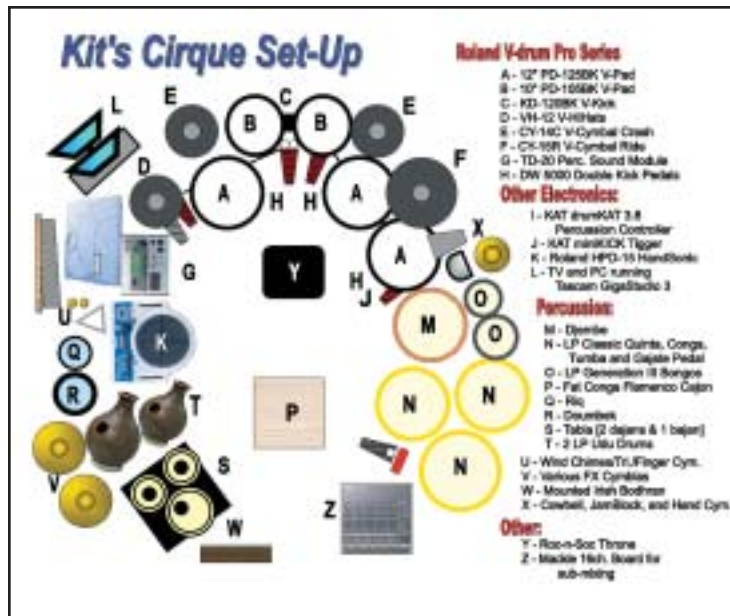
tion for the Broadway show, **Blast!**. With **Blast!**, I was able to play orchestral and ethnic percussion, as well as perform a large rudimental snare solo. When I left **Blast!** to perform in the show **CyberJam**, I knew I was going to be continuing to play a wide variety of percussion and also diving into a more advanced world of electronic percussion.

My initial interest in Cirque du Soleil was the variety of musical styles and also the theatrical element. After having a taste of center stage with Blast!, I fell in love with theater and how theatrics can elevate one's performance. I knew a gig with Cirque du Soleil would be a perfect marriage of the two: music and theatrics. Corteo allows me to continue that passion and actually do a lot of rudimentary drumming on stage with a Yamaha SFZ on a sling and on a tom that is placed on a rotating ring that turns me around the stage.

In my pit with Corteo, the use of an electronic drum set (Roland V-drums TD-20 Pro) is a necessity because I am literally placed in the audience only two feet away from the public. I use computer samples through a super computer as opposed to the internal sounds from the Roland sound module. Using these samples gives me more of a real acoustic sound because they are actually high quality recorded samples of acoustic drums and cymbals. I also use an Alternate Mode DrumKat, Roland Hand Sonic and additional foot triggers

for playing sound and percussion effects that highlight the action of the artists on stage.

I am able to give the music an organic or old world feel that fits with the concept of the show by playing all of the acoustic ethnic percussion. For example, if I am playing a Middle Eastern Beledi, I can stay true and play the rhythm on Darabuka. It also allows me to play the authentic instruments for the appropriate style of each act. With all the electronics, I wanted to make sure that I only used the electronic percussion controllers like the Hand Sonic for sound effects. I did not want to play an ethnic instrument on the electronics when I can play the real thing.



As the only drummer and percussionist for the show, I have to make sure my drums are placed in an ergonomic way so that I can quickly get around them. The drum placement and set up design are a result of my necessity to get back and forth quickly and they are designed around the actual compositions. I even use the cajon as a drum throne in a



number of tunes so I can play it and then quickly jump to the drum set in the same tune.

In addition to all of the instruments, I have a TV in my set up. No, I do not watch *The Simpsons* during the show, but I use the TV so that I have another viewpoint of the stage. One of my roles as a percussionist for the circus is to accent certain visual and acrobatic elements in the show. Therefore, I have to be able to see all the action on stage. My drums face the stage and give me a great side-to-side view; however, since the stage is a circle, I cannot see elements from front to back very well. This TV gives me the view I need so that I don't miss any of the action.

Since I have so much stuff, I am in a pit all by myself. I am actually about 15 to 30 yards away from all the other musicians. In order to hear each other and be perfectly together, we use an in-ear monitor system. This allows us to hear the calling of the bandleader who uses a head mic. We lose that intricate physical and eye-to-eye communication because we are so far away from each other. Due to the distance between us, we use a click track (used on about 75% of the show) or if we don't use the click we know who is in the driving seat when playing.

Cirque du Soleil's *Corteo* is a huge live production with state of the art acrobatics and technology. Unexpected things like injuries and technical prob-



lems are prone to happen. So as musicians, we must be flexible and quick to react to these changes without the audience ever knowing that something is wrong.

The hardest part of the gig is definitely the make-up! I have spent many years studying, practicing, and performing on percussion, but none of that prepared me for make-up application.

Being on tour with Cirque du Soleil has been great. It allows me to meet and study with a variety of exceptional drummers and experience different music scenes all over the country. I stay busy completing my upcoming book on advance drumming techniques and DVD over the same topic, as well as continuing to write my own compositions.

More info: [www.kitchatham.com](http://www.kitchatham.com)  
Photos courtesy of Kit Chatham, Will Nelsen, and Cirque du Soleil.



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