

Brief Study of Serial Number Spans of “Born Together” Vintage Ludwig Drum Sets

By Richard E. Gier

February 1, 2018

Many collectors place a premium on “born together” drum sets - sets which were originally purchased as one unit from the factory or music instrument retailer. However, very few vintage drum sets come with original receipts or reliable histories which can reassure collectors that the drums were born together. Without documentation, a common indicator of “born togetherness” is a relatively small span of serial numbers between the various drums in the set. This criterium is somewhat problematic, as it is widely accepted that Ludwig did not apply its serial number stamped badges in sequential order so drums which bear the same date stamp may have significantly different serial numbers.¹ Further, Ludwig generally appears to have manufactured to stock, meaning that orders for shipment were filled from inventory, potentially merging into a set individual drums which were not manufactured together. Further variation may have been introduced by a retailer putting together drums in its inventory to meet customer requirements or turn stock. Therefore, significant difference between serial numbers within a born together set might be expected. However, the desire for very close proximity in serial numbers often triumphs over this reality. Some look for sets with serial numbers within a few hundred of each other. Others are less strict, allowing a span in the thousands. Without an established standard, it is a judgment call on the part of the potential buyer, owner or appraiser regarding what constitutes an acceptable span. This study is an attempt to gain a greater understanding of the actual reported serial number spans in vintage Ludwig sets purported to be born together so that an objective benchmark can be established.

Using reports from current owners and advertisements on internet sites including eBay and Reverb, data is collected from 615 partial or complete drum sets. Many of the reports about these sets contain express representations that they were born together, although few of these claims are supported by verifiable information from original purchasers. Other sets are merely presented together with no claims as to their origin. Although the lack of born-together claims is often likely due to a gap in knowledge about the history of the drums, in some cases it masks the cobbled together nature of the drums in the set. Therefore, not all 615 reports are considered appropriate for use for this study. A reduced dataset of 437 “sets” of drums is formed after removing sets with fewer than three complete serial numbers reported, removing sets with drums which are disclosed as pieced together or acknowledged to have drums added to existing sets, removing a few sets with serial number spans in excess of 180,000 and a conducting a subjective review. Subjective factors considered included physical features of the drums, consistency of the degree of fade in finish, overall originality of the drums, and the reputation of the seller/owner of the drums. Although it is possible that some sets which were not born together are included and some which were born together are excluded, the resulting list of sets appears by several indicators to include only sets which were born together.

Some examples of sets included in this study are the following Oyster Black Pearl Super Classics. The first set came from an estate sale in 2017 and has no reported history. The span of serial numbers is 39,960. This set appears by most measures to have been together since its original purchase - the set was the only one owned by the deceased, it has consistent color and degree of wear and dirt, there are no modifications, it is a common configuration, it possesses some original era correct heads, and the set came with same era Ludwig stands and bass pedal and Zildjian cymbals. It “looks” like it came together.

¹ See Gier, Richard E., Serial Number Based Dating Guides for Ludwig Drums, Main Line Drums 1963-1984 & Standard Drums 1968-1973, Rebeats, 2013.

<u>Size</u>	<u>Drum</u>	<u>Serial Number</u>	<u>Date Stamp</u>
16x16"	Floor Tom	189246	None Found
14x22"	Bass	189247	None Found
5x14"	Supraphonic	213590	None Found
9x13"	Tom	229206	None Found



The second and third examples are well-documented, one owner kits.² The span of serial numbers are 56,325 and 3,884.

<u>Size</u>	<u>Drum</u>	<u>Serial Number</u>	<u>Date Stamp</u>
16x16"	Floor Tom	33571	None Found
9x13"	Tom	33649	None Found
14x22"	Bass	89896	None Found

<u>Size</u>	<u>Drum</u>	<u>Serial Number</u>	<u>Date Stamp</u>
5x14"	Jazz Festival	151480	Unknown
14x22"	Bass	151485	JUL 16 1965
9x13"	Tom	151493	JUL 16 1965
16x16"	Floor Tom	155364	JUL 16 1965

Of the 437 sets in the study, 250 are groups of three drums, 152 are groups of four drums, 35 are groups of five to twelve drums. All 437 sets are shown on Figure 1, which shows the span of each set for every size set in the dataset. Figure 2 shows only sets with spans below 30,000. Figure 3 shows sets with spans under 5,000. The analysis is then broken down differently, showing serial number spans for three groups (three drum sets, four drum sets, all sets), first with all reports, then only spans below 30,000, and then only spans below 5,000. Figures 4-12 show the distributions produced using this information. At least forty percent of the sets have serial number spans of 5,000 or less [120/250 (48%) for three drum sets, 61/152 (40%) for four drum sets, and 193/437 (43%) for all sets]. More than seventy percent of the sets have serial number spans of 30,000 or less [185/250 (74%) of three drum sets, 108/152 (71%) of four drum sets, and 312/437 (71%) of all sets]. More than eighty percent of the sets have serial number spans of 60,000 or less [210/250 (84%) of three drum sets, 125/152 (82%) of four drum sets, and 364/437 (83%) of all sets].

² The owner of these two sets is Ringo Starr. Source: Gary Astridge's website www.ringosbeatlekits.com.

Figure 1

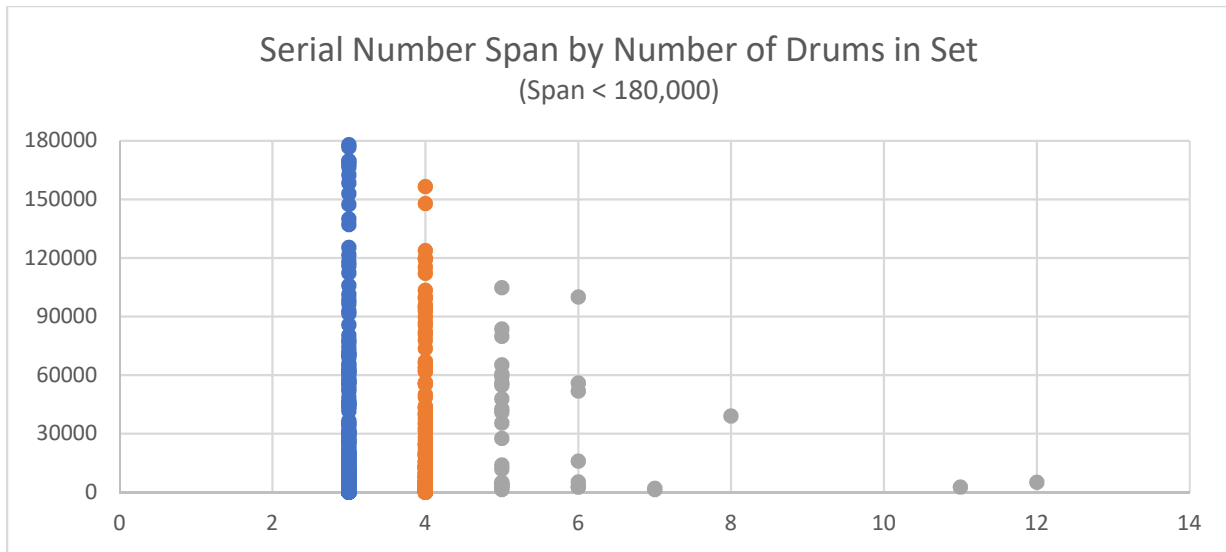


Figure 2

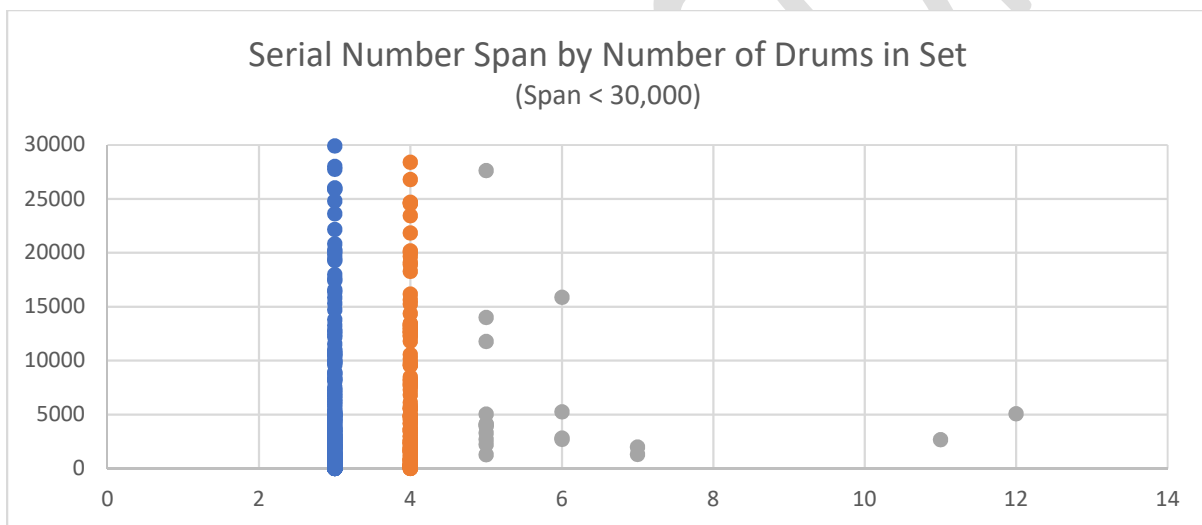


Figure 3

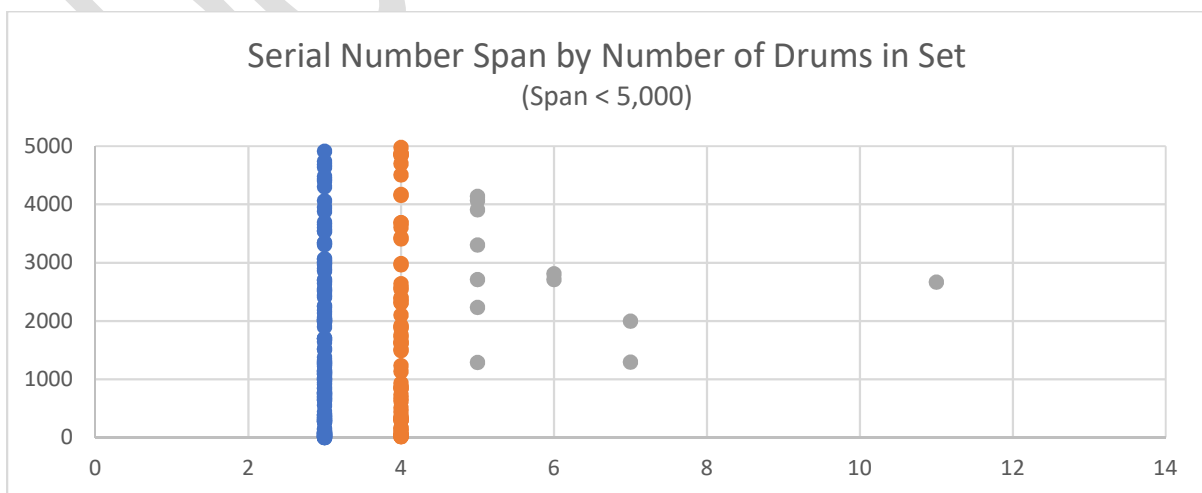


Figure 4

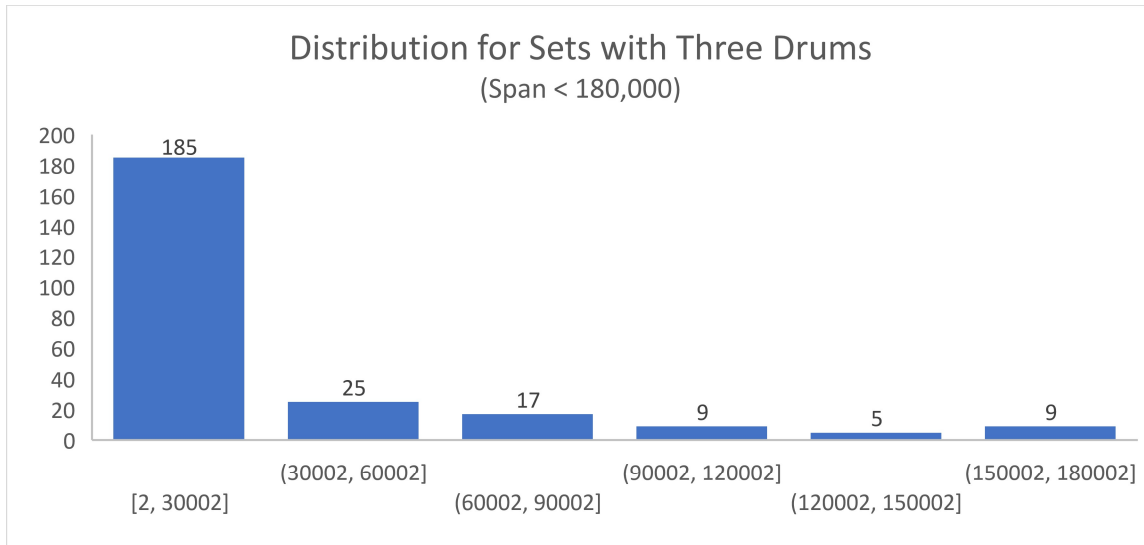


Figure 5

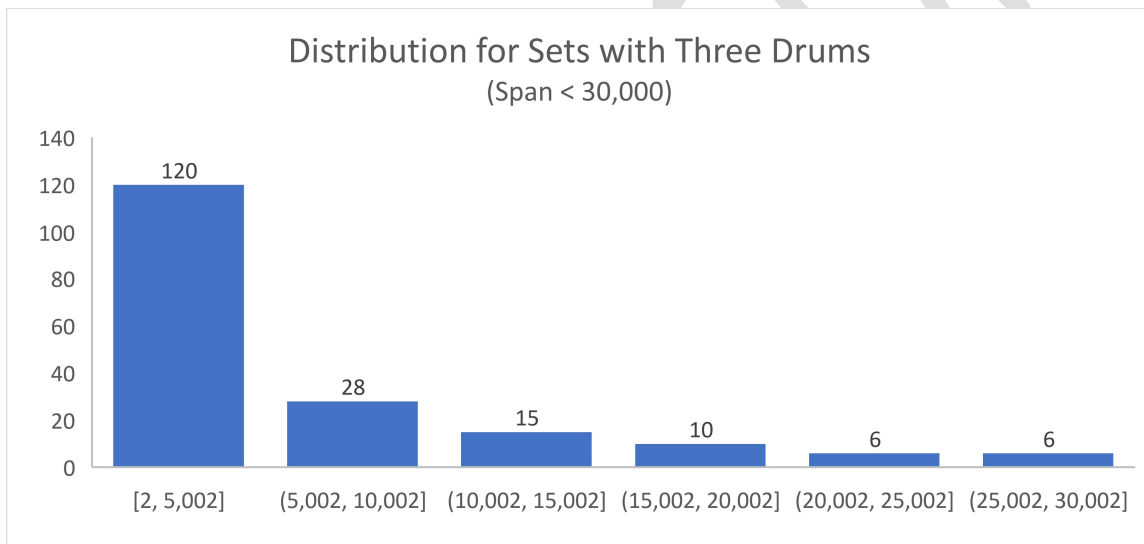


Figure 6

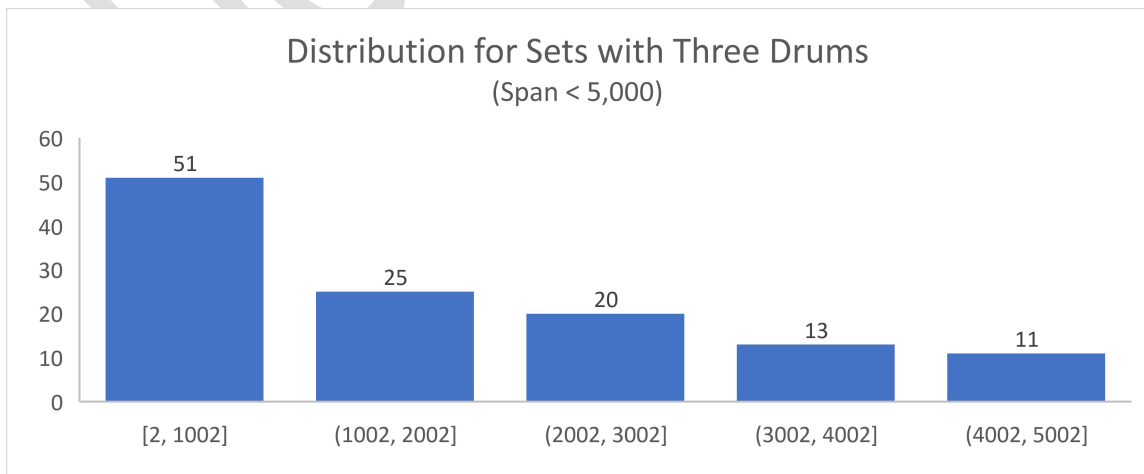


Figure 7

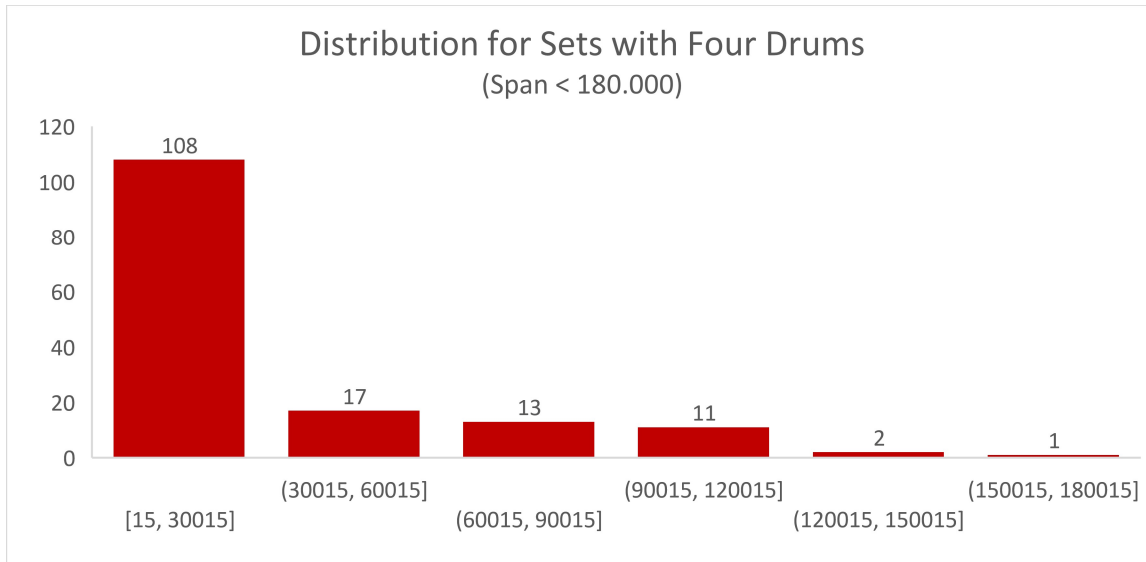


Figure 8

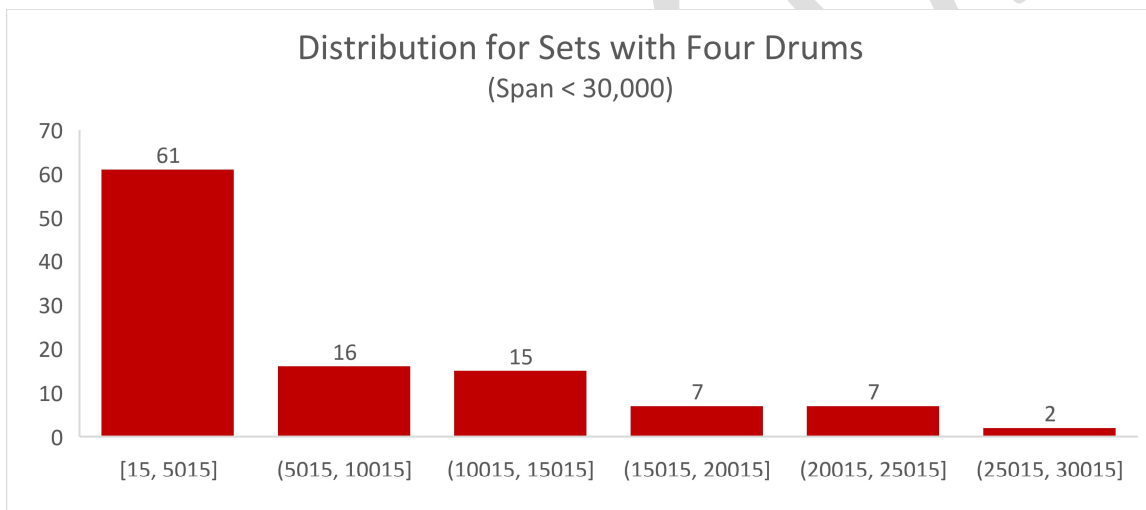


Figure 9

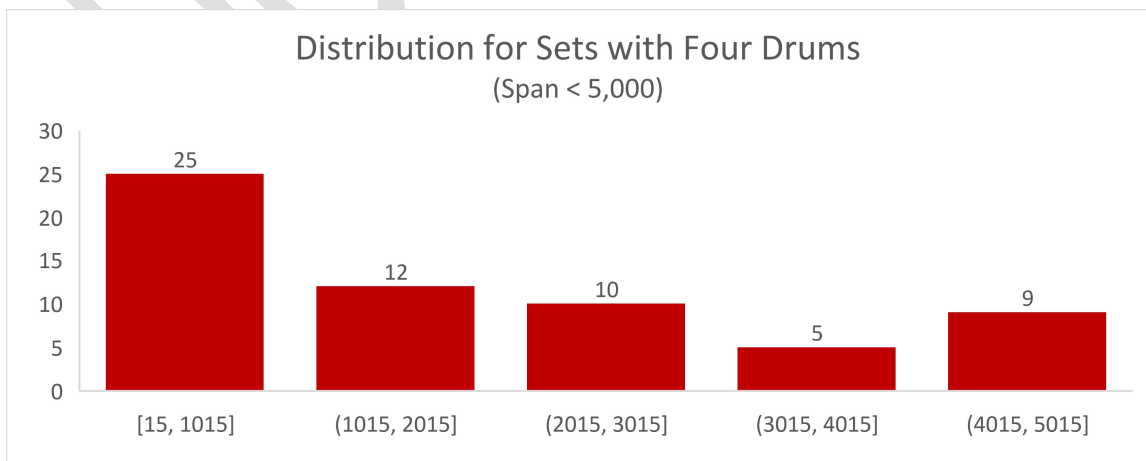


Figure 10

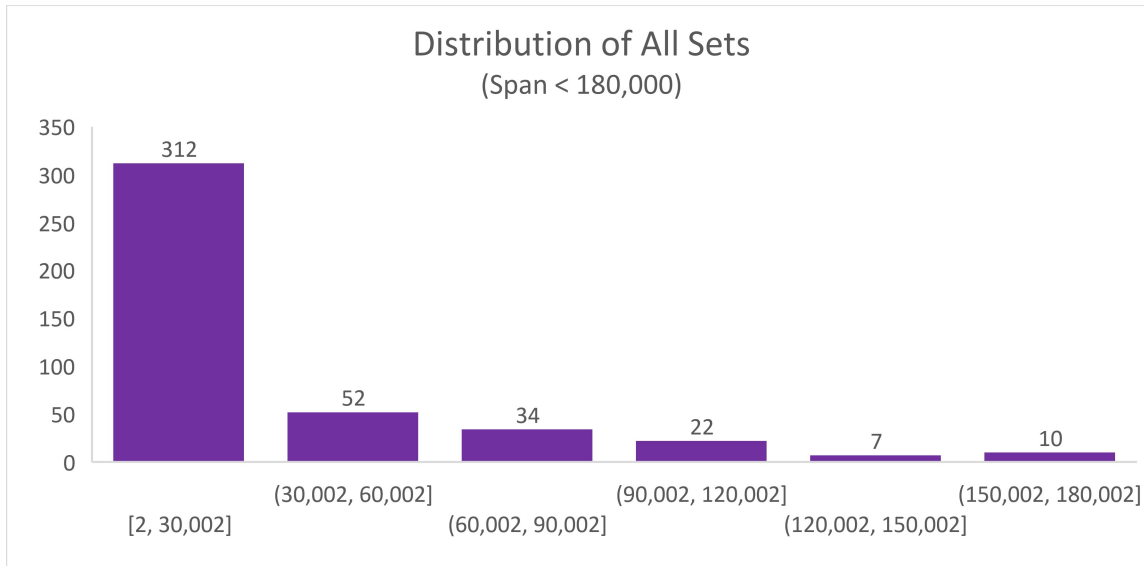


Figure 11

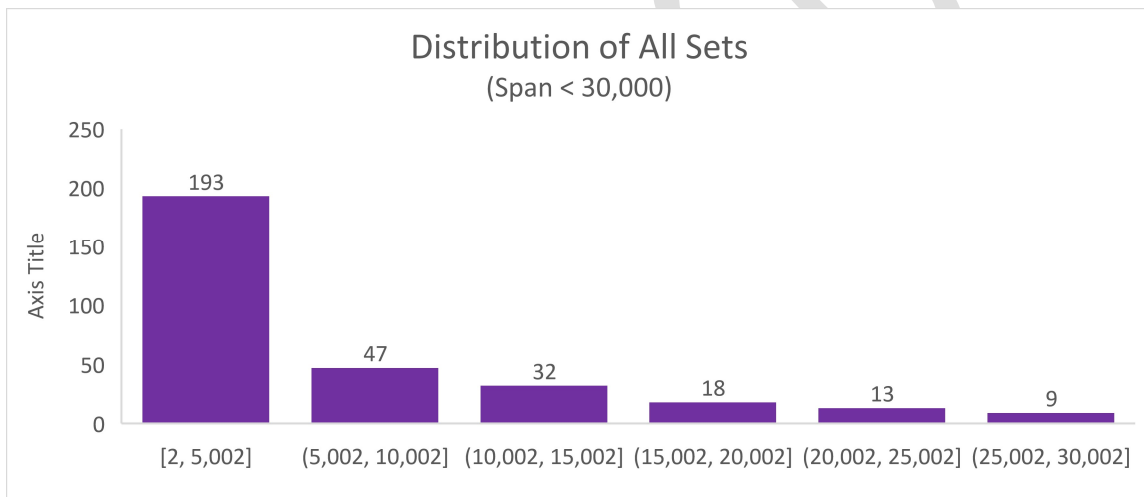
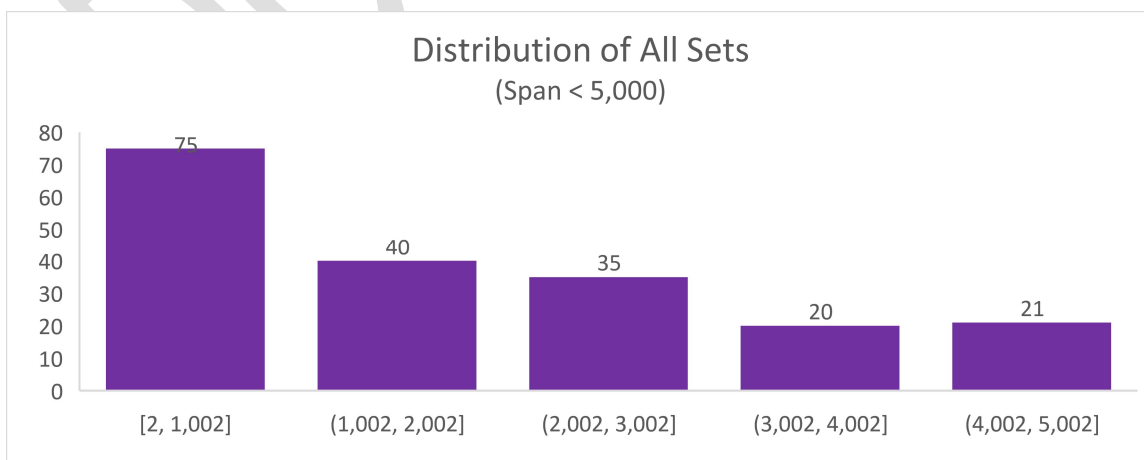


Figure 12



The appropriate benchmark for the span of serial numbers for born-together sets appears to be between 30,000 and 60,000, which captures about three fourths of the drums in the dataset. Despite the attempt to quantify this benchmark with objective data, there is a certain amount of subjectivity to this number. Setting any hard and fast benchmark risks the exclusion of some legitimate born together sets, so it should be considered a guideline and not a rule. For example, Ringo's first Super Classic set has a span of more than 56,000 and few would argue that it did not come together, even if they were shipped across the Atlantic.

Regardless of the exact benchmark selected, the smaller the span of serial numbers is within a group of drums, it seems more likely that they were born together at the factory. This is consistent with the strong tendency toward the issuance of serial numbers in roughly sequential order and echoes the basic rationale used by most vintage drum enthusiasts.

Future steps could include collection of additional data, numerical analysis of the data, division of the data into production eras to determine, for example, if born together sets produced in the 1960s have similar serial number spans as those produced in the 1970s.

Comments and suggestions for further analysis are welcome. Contact the author at Rick@GretschDrumDatingGuide.com.