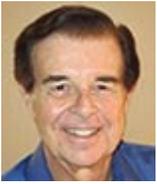


ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the eighteenth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

GENE KRUPA

What young man studied for the priesthood, but decided instead to become arguably the best jazz drummer of the Swing Era? Eugene Bertram Krupa, born in Chicago on January 15, 1909, was raised as the youngest of nine children. When Gene was quite young, his father met an untimely death, forcing him to seek work to help out. At the Brown Music Company on Chicago's South Side, Krupa ran errands and cleaned windows. With some of his earnings, he bought his first drum set because it was the cheapest instrument in the catalog, priced at about \$16 (remember, this was 1920). He played with local pickup bands and got quite a bit of work. His schoolwork suffered, since he would fall asleep during class as a result of his late-night gigs. His mother did not hide her disappointment, and Gene, trying to assuage his guilt, enrolled in 1924 at St. Joseph College, a seminary prep school. He lasted about a year there.

Taking advantage of the top-notch music instruction he received during that year, he left school in 1925 and played with several local jazz bands. During that time, he had the good fortune to observe the premier drummer from New Orleans, Baby Dodds. Duly impressed, Krupa immersed himself into the study of black jazz, known for its sense of timing and rhythm and its driving beat. Gene practiced incessantly, often eight hours every day. By 1927, he was a regular at the jam sessions held at the Three Deuces, playing with the likes of trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke and clarinetist Benny Goodman.

Playing with the Austin High Gang, he was invited to a recording session on the Okeh label, and was forewarned to stick with the standard drum setup of the day: a snare drums and cymbals. But Krupa persisted. The producer finally relented and let Gene use his full set of equipment. That event marked the first time the bass drum was used in recorded jazz music. It also set the standard for the Chicago jazz sound for years to come, making use of other equipment such as tunable toms (which Krupa designed for the Slingerland Drum Company), high-hat cymbals, and the like. The banjoist Eddie Condon wrote that "Krupa's drums went through us like triple bourbon."



In the early 30s, Krupa continued to work with commercial groups while receiving further formal instruction, and worked hard at refining his skills. His big break came in 1934, joining Benny Goodman's band in December. NBC's Saturday broadcast Goodman's show *Let's Dance* brought Gene's talents to the listening masses. Krupa started playing solos along with Goodman and trumpeter Bunny Berrigan. During this period, Goodman formed the famous Trio and Quartet, bringing together pianist Teddy Wilson and vibist Lionel Hampton along with Krupa and Benny. Gene was a master of the brushes, again setting the standard for jazz drummers. But not until 1936 did he become recognized as a phenomenal drummer.

Goodman's hit that year of *Sing, Sing, Sing* brought Krupa superstardom, producing the classic drum anthem of Swing. His hard-driving beat, his solos, his wild antics and sensational showmanship put the position of drummer "out in front" instead of at the back of the band. His critics hated it. His fans loved it! Unfortunately, Goodman felt Gene's showmanship overshadowed the music, and sided with the critics. They parted company in 1938.

Krupa led his own band for several years, joined Tommy Dorsey's band in 1944, but eventually, with the demise of the Big Bands in the 50s, formed a number of smaller combos. He was feted in the 1959 movie *The Gene Krupa Story* starring Sal Mineo in the lead who, according to Krupa, did a credible job in his portrayal. Although I enjoyed to movie, nothing beats the real deal. To see what I mean, get on your computer and go to www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BZ5B7yqDYbA and see Gene and the great drummer Buddy Rich "dueling" on their drums. It's a hoot!

For reading material, get a copy of *Drummin' Men: The Heartbeat of Jazz: the Swing Years* by Burt Korall, from Oxford University Press, 2002 (available on Amazon ISBN-10: 0195157621). The book covers several key players, including Krupa and Rich, in the swing years of Jazz. And aptly, my favorite recordings are found on *Drummin' Man* on Audio CD, 20 songs, Hallmark UK label, 2006 (also available on Amazon, ASIN: B000086ED6). The "Chicago Flash", truly the patron saint of drummers, died of heart failure in late 1973 in Yonkers, but leaves a rich legacy that we can all enjoy. And the beat goes on!

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com.