

Gene Krupa: Legendary Drummer of the Swing Era

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Gene Krupa is legendary for his contribution to the art of drumming, a contribution that made drummers prominent soloists just like other instrumentalists in jazz bands and orchestra. In the words of Krupa himself, he made the drummer “a high priced guy”.

Many critics claim his actual musical contributions to jazz were nil and that his talent for showmanship got in the way of any musical contributions. Krupa’s study of the great black drummers, combined with his spirited and wholehearted approach to playing, made drumming a widely respected art form. As author Bruce Crowther says, “his handsome, overwrought, gesticulating presence both on-stage and on-screen, changed beyond recognition the role of the jazz drummer and provided a lasting visual image of the Swing Era.”

Krupa deserves recognition for making the jazz drummer as much of a musician as any of his musical counterparts. As a drummer in the Benny Goodman Orchestra he helped usher in the Swing Era. As a band leader he brought jazz to a wide public. As an innovative drummer he brought African-American drumming techniques to all musicians.

Krupa was born on the south side of Chicago in 1909, the youngest of nine children in a poor family. Originally he started playing the saxophone, but eventually he became entranced with the drums. Everybody in his family hated jazz. On top of that, his mother wanted him to become a priest. His preoccupation with music, practicing the drums, listening to drummers in local clubs, caused him to flunk out of high school.

Krupa’s mother gave him one more shot at the priesthood by enrolling him at Saint Joseph’s College in Indiana. The tug of music proved too strong and he dropped out of there too. Now he would spend the rest of his life in music. After playing with a band called the Frivolians, Krupa collaborated with a group of youngsters known as the Austin High Gang. The Gang was an historically important group of musicians who idolized the New Orleans musicians who had traveled up the Mississippi River to Chicago. They translated the New Orleans into their own exciting Chicago style.

The most famous names associated with the Gang were guitarist Eddie Condon, tenor saxophonist Bud Freeman, clarinetist Frank Teshmacher and drummers Dave Tough and George Wettling. Krupa and the Gang made some very influential recordings in 1927, outlining the Chicago style for musicians around the country. This style included many embellishments but it is most succinctly described by Gang member/cornetist Jimmy McPartland: “people say the Chicago guys expanded on the New Orleans style and added something significant. What we did was take it from two-beat into four-beat. It was as simple as that.”

As Krupa himself said, “the recordings made an enormous impression on musicians around the country, particularly in New York. The Dorsey’s, Red Nichols, Bix, Vic Berton and fellows like that really were surprised. They felt we had moved music one step ahead by modernizing New Orleans ideas and techniques and adding touches of our own.” As a result of the Gang’s recordings, Krupa, then in his mid-

20's, became recognized as one of the premier drummers in the country, surpassing New York drummer Vic Berton's reputation.

Eddie Condon described the impact of Krupa's drumming in his own inimitable way: "Krupa's drums went through us like a triple bourbon." Krupa's style was actually an amalgam of the drumming styles he grew up listening to in Chicago, men like Tubby Hall and Don Carter, but more importantly black drummers like Zutty Singleton and Baby Dodds. Later, Chick Webb would become an influence. To this combination of influences he would add his own brand of fire, drive and showmanship that would be more noticeable through the 1930's.

In 1927, the Gang decided to try their luck in New York. At first they had to scarp to find jobs and pay their rent. After a while Krupa found a steady stream of work in the pit bands of Broadway shows where he became George Gershwin's favorite drummer. He also played with various commercial bands most notably one led by Red Nichols.

These early years in New York were important for the constant presence of the Chick Webb Orchestra at the Savoy Ballroom. According to Krupa, "I had admired Baby and Zutty; Cuba Austin, the drummer with McKinney's Cotton Pickers, had flash and some good ideas. But Chick taught me more than anyone. I learned practically everything from him. Critics say Krupa became a more polished drummer due to Webb's influence. While drumming for the Benny Goodman Orchestra, Krupa and Webb would face off against each other in a battle of the bands at the Savoy Ballroom. Krupa admitted to being thoroughly upstaged by Webb.

A point could be made that Krupa appropriated the style of black drummers and made it popular with a white audience. In what has become a tradition in American popular musicians appropriated the styles of black musical artists (Benny Goodman popularizing Fletcher Henderson's arrangements is an example). But as Richard Cook and Brian Morton put it, "Krupa's impact on the rhythm section is incalculable...though black percussionists who had worked for years in the shadow of the front men had some cause to be resentful, Krupa's respectful investigation of the African and Afro-American drumming tradition was of tremendous significance, opening the way for later figures as diverse as Max Roach, Elvin Jones, Andrew Cyrille and Milford Graves."

Krupa's New York musical career with bands such as Red Nichols, Buddy Rogers, Mal Hallet and the Broadway pits and studio recordings brought him into contact with other leaders and superstars of the Swing Era. In fact, Glenn Miller made it possible for Krupa to play in the pit bands. At that time Krupa could not read music and Miller would make a point to cue him at the proper times.

The Benny Goodman Orchestra was formed in 1934 with the emphasis on jazz arrangements, especially those of Fletcher Henderson. Henderson's own band met its end due to the leader's illness and lack of aggressiveness. This presented an opportunity for jazz entrepreneur John Hammond, who persuaded Goodman to hire Henderson as his arranger. This would be a key decision in making the Goodman orchestra the most important white band of the Swing Era. Henderson's arrangements ultimately defined swing band scoring for that period of time.

After he hired Henderson, Goodman was still unhappy with the lack of rhythmic drive in the band. His drummer, Stan King was not providing what Goodman wanted. John Hammond once again swung into

action and persuaded Krupa to leave the Buddy Rogers band, which was a commercial dance band featuring Rogers inept showmanship and no real jazz arrangements.

Krupa was enthusiastic at the chance to play jazz every night with Goodman's band, even as his pay was cut from \$125 to \$85 a week. Krupa did in fact bring drive to the band and helped launch the Swing Era from behind his trademark set of mother-of-pearl drums. As his three year stay with Goodman (1935 to 1938) progressed, his drumming and showmanship attracted more attention from the fans.

Krupa's drumming become more force full as the years with Goodman went on. Musician/critic Gunther Schuller notes that this may have been due to the weak rhythmic foundation in the rhythm section caused by the presence of Benny's brother Harry Goodman on bass. Krupa would overcompensate on his bass drum, beating out 1-2-3-4 to compensate for Harry Goodman's weakness as a bassist.

Nevertheless, Krupa's drumming with the full band, trio and quartet was influential among drummers and wildly popular with the public. This was a major factor in his departure with the band. Goodman did not appreciate the inordinate attention Krupa was receiving. By the time of the famous Carnegie Hall concert on January 16, 1938, Goodman no longer liked the way the band sounded with Krupa's drumming. According to John Hammond, "Contrary to what many think, Gene was hot at his best during the Carnegie Hall concert. Benny took a new hard look at him that night. Suddenly he came to the conclusion that the way he was playing disrupted the whole structure of the band. The band had become too tight and tense, too precise. Benny wanted more subtlety within the time feeling—something he felt that Gene was no longer capable of bringing to the band."

Krupa's sound and showmanship were too much for Benny Goodman to bear. So in March 1938, during a show at Philadelphia's Earle Theater, these two titans of the Swing Era took their parting shots. Just six weeks later Krupa opened with his own orchestra at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City. That orchestra would be the first of the big bands that he would direct until 1952. Gunther Schuller noted that, "Krupa was a much better behaved, less ostentatious drummer in his own band than he was with Goodman's."

The band was commercially successful and it really took off musically with the addition, in 1941, of vocalist Anita O'Day and trumpet great Roy Eldridge. In 1942, lauded tenor saxophonist Charlie Ventura joined the band. Eldridge left his own small band to join Krupa's, quite a coup considering Eldridge's reputation. He was originally an added attraction to the Krupa band in spite of public racial prejudices. Apparently, Eldredge was the first black musician to play in a white orchestra.

Eldredge and O'Day added excitement to Krupa's band. Eldredge's extraordinary rhythmic intuition and intensity complemented Krupa's style. O'Day inventively borrowed from black singers just as Krupa borrowed from black drummers. And Krupa allowed Eldridge and O'Day to take risks, allowing them to sing together on stage. This band lasted until 1943 when Krupa was arrested for possession of marijuana. This became a highly sensationalized drug bust. Krupa spent three months in jail and Roy Eldridge directed the band until it fell apart.

At first, Krupa thought that the arrest and jail time had finished his career. After rejoining Benny Goodman's Orchestra for a short time, he did a stint with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. He was surprised to find the public response to his jail time to be overwhelmingly positive. This encouraged him to re-form his own orchestra. After an unsuccessful try with a string section (inspired by his stay with Tommy Dorsey's band), Krupa put together a more progressively modern band.

In 1946, young bop influenced musicians such as Red Rodney and Don Fagerquist joined the band. Gerry Mulligan contributed bop-styled arrangements that met with commercial success, with numbers like Disc Jockey Jump and How High The Moon. Krupa's drum style changed not radically but accommodating the rhythmic changes brought about by bebop. With its faster tempos, bebop required a lighter rhythm section with accents on the snare and bass drum rather than keeping time on them.

Krupa thus began to keep time on the ride cymbal and lightened up somewhat with the 1-2-3-4 beats on the bass drum. Instead, he used the bass drum to 'drop bombs' as bass drum accents are called. As drummer Mel Lewis puts it, "he reached a midpoint between swing and bebop and made what he did work."

There was a unique sound to Krupa's playing that stayed with him over the years. Burt Korall identifies it in this way: "Krupa's snare drum sound was central to the character of his work. Crisp, clean, with a suggestion of echo, it enhanced the excitement of his performances. While playing 'time' or patterns across the set, Krupa also established engaging relationships between the bass drum and the other drums, and between the cymbals and the drums. He used rudiments in a natural, swinging, often original way."

From 1952 to his death in 1973, Krupa worked with various "Jazz at the Philharmonic" tours and his own trios and quartets and various reunion bands. To these he brought his style, his showmanship and his fame. He made his mark on jazz. Gunther Schuller puts it best: "In his commitment to real jazz, even in its more advanced bop manifestation, Krupa, with his fame, brought first-rate modern jazz to untold numbers of listeners who otherwise would never had contact with it. He and his bands consistently aspired to be the best and could always be relied upon to play with high discipline, enthusiasm, and an exuberant swing. Given the vagaries of the commercial world in which jazz has always had to fight for its survival, this was no small achievement...whatever his artistic lapses as a showman drummer, Krupa's commitment to jazz was sincere and unassailable. He was even more of a jazz fan than his thousands of admirers, with an almost childlike, inexhaustible enthusiasm for the music and a clear appreciation of that which was genuine. His relation to jazz was primarily emotional and instinctual, uncomplicated. He loved the spontaneous energy of jazz—and supplied a great deal of it in his drumming—and thrived on that rhythmic feeling that separates jazz, in this case in the form of swing music, from most other forms of music."

From his early recordings with the Chicago Gang or his underrated small group recordings of the '50s, '60s and early '70s, Krupa always played with heart and exciting intensity. Even after suffering heart attacks, emphysema and finally leukemia, this intensity still comes across. It can be heard on his final 1972 recording, "Jazz At The New School" a Chicago style romp with Eddie Condon and Wild Bill Davison.

Gene Krupa set the pace for the Swing Era. With his exciting sound and showmanship, he brought drumming and drummers respectability and a feature role in jazz, rock and American popular music in general. With his intense approach to jazz, he provided an accessible entry point for millions of fans.

Krupa won the musical loyalty of thousands of drummers and musicians to identify with swing music and its more modern offspring. His art was his gift to many.