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Jazzletter

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Letters

Nat Shapiro died December 15, 1983, in his office at 157 West 57th Street. The obituary in the New York *Times* said:

"He was a writer, record producer, and artists' manager, who was active in numerous aspects of the music and recording fields. He was sixty-one years old.

"In a career that began over thirty years ago, Mr. Shapiro produced more than one hundred record albums, was author of several books related to jazz and popular music, and was the creative co-ordinator of two long-running stage shows, *Hair* and *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris.*

"The performers whose records he produced covered a broad spectrum. Among them were the composer, arranger, and pianist Michel Legrand, for whom he also served as personal manager, and such diverse singers as Marlene Dietrich, Lotte Lenya, Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, and Barbra Streisand.

"For many years he was the director of international recording and music publishing activities for CBS Records and earlier he served as both a record producer and press agent for Keynote Records and National Records. He was also an editor of *Down Beat*, the music magazine, and was consultant to several major entertainment organizations.

"Mr. Shapiro's books include two dealing with jazz, both edited jointly with Nat Hentoff — *Hear Me Talking to Ya*, a history of jazz developed through quotations from musicians, and *The Jazz Makers*, biographical sketches of more than twenty major jazz musicians from Jelly Roll Morton to Dizzy Gillespie.

"He also wrote a six-volume reference series called *Popular Music*, an annotated index of popular songs from 1920-1969, and *An Encyclopedia of Quotations about Music*, published by Doubleday in 1978.

"Mr. Shapiro, who served the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences as a national trustee and more recently as a governor of the New York chapter, was born in Brooklyn and attended Brooklyn College.

"He is survived by his wife, Dr. Vera Miller, vice president of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union; a daughter, Amy Louise Shapiro of New York; his mother, Rose Shapiro, and a sister, Myra Hugo."

What the obit did not say was that this quiet and dear man had won the hearts of every person who ever knew him and some who never met him. The memorial was at the Top of the Gate, and Michel flew in from Paris to play. We have had thousands of calls from all over the world, and everyone said, "He was my best friend."

How very special he made us all feel. I was so grateful that I had been in Washington, D.C., with him and Michel for the gig at Charlie's. Nat had wanted me to come and discuss the next Michel album. (I had co-produced the last one, *After the Rain.*) We had some other projects pending and he wanted the solitude of meetings in Washington, away from the hectic New York office. I almost didn't go, thinking that surely we could take care of this in New York; I didn't want to miss any studio work. Luckily I went. Luckily I knew him. Luckily I loved him. Luckily he loved me back. And luckily he was my mentor and friend.

He had the most exciting life, full of music. And he was never sick a day in his life. He loved his cigars and his gourmet junk food. He didn't drink, he did everything that he wanted to do, he had just written two new Broadway shows and they were being mounted — Honi Coles to direct one — and had a show to produce in Germany, and a new book coming out in the spring for Simon and Schuster, called *Whatever It Is, I Am Against It.* It was an exciting period, and creative, and I spoke to him on Wednesday, and he said that he just wanted to take a short nap in the office and would be right over after the nap to get a hamburger with me. He never showed and I got lost in my library at home and looked up and it was late. I called his office. No answer. I figured he got hung up.

He had taken a nap and simply never came back from it. Quite peaceful. When I got to the office the next morning, his wife Vera, a truly great lady, his daughter Amy, and his assistant Arlene Chapman, were there with the police.

Nat was dead and the earth stopped for a lot of us.

He was married to Vera for thirty-four years, solid. She worked on his books from time to time, transcribing from tapes, and Arlene was with him fourteen years, every day. And Michel — managing and loving him for twenty-six years. He was a true friend to us all for the long haul, steady and true. He accepted everyone as they were, never asking for anything, and the only thing that could make him nut on you was if you asked him to change. It always seemed like a good deal to me.

His daughter Amy is an editor, and working on the foreward to his last book. I have heard a hundred Nat Shapiro stories in the last two weeks...

I am not a writer, I can't spell, I can't type, and I don't express myself well. I imagine someone who can will write something wonderful about Nat, perhaps you will; it would make so many of us happy. His office was an oasis for all of New York music. I was so happy to be able to use desk space there. His mind was an oasis, too.

I know that he adored you and the *Jazzletter.* He hipped me to it. He smiled when we would talk about it. You know, we all talk about it. And he smiled when he talked about you.

We are all so lucky that we knew him. I just wish that I could hug him one more time. Don't you?

Ann Johns Ruckert
New York, N.Y.

Gene Krupa: The World Is Not Enough

by Bobby Scott

NEW YORK, N.Y.

Eugene Boris Krupa was an enigma.

His tiny frame belied his impact upon the music scene of his heyday. People could not associate a small man with the sound of his drumming. It was only after a double take that he was recognized and entered the ken of the viewer. That was, to him, just fine: he'd spent half his life living down a "slip" he had never even made.

The Ol' Man, as I called him, in keeping with the tradition of the band era when all leaders were thus called, never used narcotics, nor could he ever have been in even remote danger of addiction. As one might try a roller-coaster ride, once or twice at most, he had tasted them. But in fact they frightened him, in a way that liquor never did.

In the year or so I worked and traveled with him, occasionally taking meals with him, we spoke of his "hitch" two or three times at most. And always it was wrenched up out of his memory. It was not the recollection of the bars on the windows and the isolation but the shame of it that troubled him. He said it changed him inwardly.

He remembered arriving in prison. "This one screw took me to the laundry, where I'd been assigned to work, Chappie," he said. *Chappie* was his nickname for me. "The screw and I stood there before all the convicts and he said, 'I've got a guest for you fellas. The great Gene Krupa.' Well, not one of the convicts cracked a smile. Then he gives them a big smile, don'cha see, and says, 'The first guy that gives 'im any help... gets the hole.' You understan' me? He meant solitary. Well... the minute he walks out, all of 'em gather aroun' me, shakin' my hand, and one of 'em, a spokesman, says to me, 'What is it we can do to help ya, Mr. Krupa?'"

He chuckled, remembering that moment of friendship. The convicts knew he'd been railroaded. They made sure his drumming hands never touched lye or disinfectants. One afternoon an old-timer inquired of the Old Man, "How long's your stretch, Krupa?" When Gene told him, the convict retorted, "Geezus! I could do *that* standin' on my head!"

Gene said that was the best tonic he got behind bars. It made him see things in a jailhouse long view. He was bush league in that hardened criminal population. He did a lot of deep thinking while he was "inside". Hard thinking, too. He said that he hadn't used much of what he learned until quite recently, about the same time I had joined his group, in the fall of 1954.

That's what I liked about him, right off the bat. He was as honest as he could be. I had to keep in mind, of course, that I was a sideman and a kid. I expected he would hide behind what he was, but obfuscations were very rare.

I auditioned for him one afternoon at Basin Street East in New York. He had never heard me play. I had been recommended to replace Teddy Napoleon on piano. He wanted to see if I could fit in comfortably with tenor saxophonist Eddie Shu and bassist Whitey Mitchell. We played, the four of us, for ten or fifteen minutes, and I got a decent idea of the head charts they had been using. Afterwards, Gene and I talked salary and the upcoming jobs and travel. Then, out of the blue, he said, "I know you'd have more fun playing with a younger drummer more in the bebop bag, but I still think we can make a few adjustments and enjoy ourselves."

Coming out of a living legend, such self-deprecation startled me. Yet I knew he meant it. I came away that day thinking that I could certainly learn something about deflating my own ego from this tiny, soft-spoken, dapperly-dressed older fellow.

When you're young, and foolish, you think every thought that comes into your head is of oracular origin. But many of one's youthful ideas are of worth. Gene helped me through a sorting process. His own contributions to the quartet were insightful, and they came out of his tested experience.

Like all the successful bandleaders of the 1930s and '40s, he knew his primary task was to choose the right tempo for each piece. It doesn't seem all that important. But it is. The tempo can make the difference between success and failure.

One night in Las Vegas he picked a tempo for *Drum Boogie* so fast that he couldn't double it. He had either to play a solo that differed from the recording or slow the tempo. Though the listeners expected the doubling up, he slowed it as he began his solo. Very, very infrequently did he make such a mistake.

Although he asked us to play certain tunes, for the most part he gave Eddie Shu and me a free hand with new pieces and the arranging of them. Occasionally he'd insist on something. He wanted us to learn *Sleepy Lagoon.* When he mentioned the Eric Coates classic, the three of us threw glances at each other. The old man reminded us of the melody's rhythmic character. He said it'd lay well as a four-four bounce, though it was originally in three-four. When we finally got it into a form, it proved a staple of our repertoire. Eddie Shu and I would never have considered it.

It was Gene who first got me to sing, and though the first recordings I made under my own name were done for ABC Paramount, I had already recorded a single under Gene's aegis for Verve. *Danny Boy* and *She's Funny That Way* were recorded in 1955, with Norman Granz as producer. Although the performances I turned in were hardly what I'd find acceptable today, Gene told me, "You've got to start some time, Chappie, and it might as well be now."

Gene continued to encourage me, even insisting that I sing a song in each set of an engagement at the Crescendo in Hollywood. He told me that he had no doubt I would make a success with singing and writing, and this amazed me. And then, once, in a rather serious mood, he urged me to address my thoughts to the success he insisted was coming.

"The toughest thing in life, Chappie, is to mellow with success. A lot of people with talent never seem to be able to handle success." Now I give him high points for perceptiveness, but when you're seventeen, as I was at the time, you can't understand such things. Gene meant me to stash the thought away. He hoped, as he later told me, that I'd begin to set up a value structure to lean upon when I had to face what loomed ahead. Gene *knew* how success can destroy. He had witnessed what it had done to others — what it had done to himself. He remarked upon an imaginary pow that, like a snake, sneaks into your breast and ruins you fro within. I used precious little of what he'd told me as I stumbled and bumbled my way through the next ten years of my life and proved to myself that human nature is a disaster.

Gene was, as I've said, physically small, with delicately shaped fingers, salt-and-pepper closely-cut hair, and a compellingly handsome face. Though it was never a strut, his walk told you much about his well-made character. There was magic in his eyes and smile and, in fact, his very presence. These attributes made him both a ladies' man and a man's man. Even kids loved Gene Krupa.

For me he symbolized, maybe epitomized, the Swing Era; the driving dynamic of his drumming characterized the whole period.

In the winter of '54-'55 during an eight-week gig at The Last Frontier, I got an opportunity to clock the Old Man. I was delighted (and sometimes dismayed, I admit) by his traits.

In a town flooded with Show Biz people, Gene was a loner. Though he was always convivial and warm, in his own genteel fashion, he never let casual acquaintances grow into friends. He gave me the feeling that he'd rather be home in Yonkers, New York. It was as if he'd seen enough towns to last him the rest of his life. And of course there was that question behind the eyes of every listener. Was he still using drugs? What a colossal bore it must have been to him, never having been even a casual user. So he kept

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his contact with the general public short, and he avoided making new fans or friends.

He was ritualistic about his day, which had a shape and constancy. In the earlier hours he took his meals in his room. He left the hotel grounds rarely, and spent little time with us, his sidemen. He was troubled. At home, his wife, Ethel, was entering upon an illness that would take her life before the close of the year.

A woman who watched us every night became enamored of him. She couldn't understand his remote attitude. She cried on my shoulder on several occasions. She was in her thirties, quite beautiful, and mature. He just had no interest in her, not even platonic. Finally I took up her cause with him. He received this intercession in a surprisingly sweet manner. He discussed her lovely disposition. Then he alluded to home. And his clean-shaven, tanned face wrinkled a bit. "It'd be wrong, don'cha see, Chappie," he said.

"Hell, we're on the *road*, Ace," retorted the morally bereft teen-ager. *Ace* was my nickname for him.

"Certain things you just don't do, Chappie. Certain things you just can't live with, son."

When I heard "son", I knew it was my cue to zip up.

And he stayed to his lone regimen. After our last set, he always played a few hands of Black Jack, then started off to bed. On entering the lobby of the casino, he would play a dollar one-arm. He must have beaten the machine with some consistency, for he showed me several bags of silver dollars he was "going to take home for the kids in my neighborhood." He was a celebrity in Yonkers. There was even a Krupa softball team, made up mainly of Yonkers policemen and neighborhood friends.

Gene exuded an aloofness most of the time. But there was no *hauteur* in it. He never used his position. He was in fact the least leaderish leader I'd worked for till that point in my life. And now I think of it, never did work *for* anyone after the Old Man; I worked *with* them. Only Quincy Jones, later on, in the 1960s, had an ease of leadership that echoed the Old Man's. Q.J. had gained a fund of respect for his arranging ability, but he never picked a player who could not cut the charts, nor one he'd have to "bring along". He was luckier than Gene, who had to put together road bands, not often peopled with great talents. Still, Gene was proud of his bands of the past, proud of encouraging and championing talents like Anita O'Day, Roy Eldridge, and Leo Watson. He was quick to take a bow for letting new people like Gerry Mulligan write freely for the band. (*Disc Jockey Jump* is a classic from that pen.)

One afternoon in Vegas, the four of us were in Gene's room, rapping. Gene sat on the huge high bed, his short legs hanging off the fat mattress, much as a child's would, feet not touching the floor. Eddie Shu, bassist John Drew, and I sat in chairs semi-circling our leader. The conversation turned to "serious" music, that is, the written variety of music so often and incorrectly called "classical" music. (The "classical" was but one period of "serious" music's history.)

Eddie was talking of his beloved Prokofiev. Gene introduced Frederick Delius into the conversation. Having ascertained that we all had a passing acquaintance with that much-traveled Englishman's music, he sent his bandboy-valet-aide Pete off to the center of town to buy a stereo phonograph and every available recording of Delius' music. With a fistful of large bills, Pete disappeared. We ordered sandwiches and beer to consume the time. Our anticipation had reached a zenith when Pete came through the door with a brand new portable phonograph and an armful of LPs. (Oh for those halcyon days of the 1950s when record shops had inventories!) That armful of music made the afternoon one of the most pleasurable I've known. Sadly, one is today hard put to find a single album of that wonderful music.

I had touched on the music of Delius with my teacher, but his academic fur had been rubbed the wrong way by the inept way in which Delius often developed his materials. In fact my teacher though it "pernicious" to treat one's musical thoughts in such a lack-a-day manner. I had to admit he was right. But for me it was a matter of the heart, not the brain. There was a glowing genius in Delius' vision, his sheer individuality. That uniqueness could not easily be dismissed. Of course, when you're studying, you address yourself to examples of lasting structural achievement, including the engineering of Bach, and, among the moderns, the neatly dry but marvelous Hindemith. To the teacher of composition, Delius is unnecessary baggage, ordinarily used as an example of what shouldn't be done with one's musical ideas.

But Krupa found much in Delius' music to commend it. He credited Delius, if the English will forgive him, with developing an American voice, melodically and harmonically. Gene pointed to a bass figure, a fragment, in the orchestral piece *Appalachia* to show us what Delius was "into" in the 1880s. That phrase shows up in the opening strain of Jerome Kern's *Old Man River.* Gene didn't mean to imply that Kern had plagiarized it. He meant only to show that Kern, like others, was affected by Delius' music.

That afternoon, acres of hours were consumed listening to *North Country Sketches, Paris: Song of a Great City,* and the shorter tone poems *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* and *In a Summer Garden.* To my delight I discovered that I was disposed towards Delius' music, that it *spoke to me of myself* in an odd and mysterious way. It also offered relief from the rhetorical now-hear-this quality of the Late Romantic literature — that consuming desire of composers to out-Wagner Wagner. Since that afternoon, I have read a learned critic's assessment that I find marvelously on the mark. He placed Beethoven as the dawn of the Romantic Era, Wagner as its high noon, and Delius as its sunset. There is a point that has been made before that still bears emphasizing. Delius, unlike Wagner, never rages. It is his *understating* that draws his listeners. Though other composers have captured nature in her glory, with splashing colors that cover the score pages, none has captured her tranquility as Delius did. No one.

Krupa pointed to the folk-song elements in the last scene of the opera about miscegenation, *Koanga*, insisting, quite correctly, that Delius was years ahead of other composers, Gershwin in particular, in using what can only be termed American materials — those materials we've come to associate with jazz, blues, and popular music. This is no doubt a startling view to the many English fans who find Delius painfully English, a star brightly shining in the Celtic twilight. But Delius' own inclinations drew him to the ground-breaking American poet Walt Whitman, whose texts he used for *Sea Drift* and *Once through a Populous City.*

Krupa was astonished that Delius could have been born of Dutch parents in Bradford, England, write his marvelous early music in the United States, live the better part of his life in Grez-sur-Loing in France, and speak nothing but German in his home. Gene revealed a hitherto unseen excitement in putting the composer's life before us. (He would later laugh on discovering that I shared Delius' birthday, January 29.)

It was the longest non-stop conversation I'd had with him, and he began opening up some of his memories. He spoke of a time when he was a kid, playing in a speakeasy in Chicago. It was brought to his attention that Maurice Ravel was in the audience. History, it seemed, had stepped right on his toes. That visit started another love affair for Gene, one that culminated in his recording of Ravel's *Bolero* in Japan. The recording was never released because Ravel's one remaining relative, a brother, sat heavily on the composer's estate. Gene never did tell me what departures he'd

made from the score.

Most surprising to me, as a student of music concerned with its historical periods, was Gene's knowledge of what had gone before. Even as a kid, he said, he'd been interested in and inclined towards "serious" music. So were his confreres. Wasn't Gershwin a departure? he'd ask. And what of Paul Whiteman's efforts? He'd laugh that chuckle of his but never allow himself a guffaw. Then he'd draw attention to the obvious differences between the freer jazz playing and written music. Having been in the pit band put together by Red Nichols for Gershwin's *Strike up the Band* on Broadway, he had more than an adequate idea of how the wedding of the seemingly disparate elements of the "played" and "written" was to be effected. Among the movers of his generation, he was one of those who favored the marriage of "serious" music and jazz and never disparaged attempts at a Third Stream. This was of enormous value to me, then, because I leaned toward it myself. Once I mentioned Stan Kenton. Gene commended the adventurous nature of what that California orchestra was doing. But he was put off by the martial quality that came from those blocks of brass. He was not disposed to the materials, either, prefering the work of Woody Herman's and Duke Ellington's bands.

I wonder now whether there'll be any more Krupas or Woodies or Dukes. There may not be, in fact. Will they be missed? *I* will miss them, mused the war-weary typist. We've witnessed the battle of the camera and the turntable over the last sixty years, and though the phonograph record/tape has made enormous strides, they are small beside the gains of motion pictures and television. Not to mention that there no longer are dance halls and cabarets, and there are too few jazz clubs. The extinction of the latter means there'll be no places to woodshed. For the new recording artist, the making of an album is not the end but the beginning of a now-larger process. The videotape of the song, the actuating of it, is the new culmination. There lies the defeat. The LP was a complete parcel of entertainment. The pictures you saw were of your own mind's making, like the fantasies of the young. Sinatra sang a song and you saw the face of your own loved one in your mind's eye. *You* added the lazily falling snow when Nat Cole painted a warm familial setting in *The Christmas Song*. No more is that the case. It's as if a great bell tolled the knell of all that was musical and precious. What must it be like to be raised with the "pictures" on the boob tube?

Bill Finnegan once predicted: "Soon, people will be dancing *by themselves* in ballrooms and clubs." He said it in the old Webster Hall RCA studio, now gone, to Larry Elgart and me. It made us shudder, then laugh shallowly. How else could two dinosaurs react to their own imminent extinction?

Krupa tried his best to keep his band alive. "But going to jail," he said to me, "meant going through one fortune I'd saved and it took darn near another one to put it back together again." Worse was the damage to his morale when, in order to reinstate himself, he had to become a sideman in the Tommy Dorsey orchestra. Though he respected Dorsey's musicianship immensely, "I couldn't stomach the man, personally, Chappie. Too self-centered." Being a glamorous ex-con of newsworthy status, Gene no doubt brought out as many people as the band did.

Somewhere on the path he was traveling, it became clear to him that he needn't bother leading a big band any more. After the stay in jail, he said, he found he'd lost the degree of understanding necessary to be surrogate father to a group of young players. "The problems *never* end, Chappie. Musicians are *great* human beings, but face it: we're all kids! And I don't mean Boy Scouts, either."

The other side of it was that Gene didn't have the inclination to adapt to small-group drumming either. He tried, sure, but night after night of restraining oneself is not fulfilling. He'd smile and say, "Tonight, the way I feel, I'd love to have sixteen guys out there with us...and push the walls back!"

He was frugal, but I overlooked that because he wasn't greedy. The two years I was with him, though, were a searching time for him. He told me — straight out — that he was looking to make a deal for the rights to his life story, hoping that the movie monies would provide for him in his slow autumn walk. When we worked Hollywood, he was always in the company of a screen-writer, retelling the story. It took a toll on him. The memories no longer had any sweetness for him. Confronted with the residue of his past, he found himself unable to bring order to it. There was always a *Why?* on his face, though he hadn't an inkling that it was there.

By the end of the Vegas gig, we'd worked out every wrinkle in the group and could have sleepwalked through the performances that month in California. Norman Granz recorded an album with the new group, which now featured the English-born (and now late) John Drew on bass. Thus for the first time I got the chance to hear the group "from out front", as it were. I was brought down by my own work, but the Old Man had a better knowledge of how talent matures, and he encouraged me, bolstering my sagging ego. On one ballad I played so many double-time figures I could only say, "Why so many goddamn notes?" Gene said, "It'll all come together one day, Chappie. But it won't if you don't go at it seriously." I told him I thought I sounded like a guy killing snakes with a Louisville Slugger. "What do you think people want to hear?" he said. "Lullabyes? Hell. Keep on playin' with that kind of *drive*. It'll come together, don't worry. You've got a *good* problem. You've got more energy in one finger than most piano players have in their whole body."

I perceive now that acting as Gene did — responsively — is the largest part of leadership. What he offered wasn't unqualified back-patting but an attempt to infuse bristling youth with a dose of much-needed patience. It was within his capabilities to understand my adolescence. Why, I'm still not sure. Oddly, he'd had no experience in child-rearing, never having had a family of his own.

Gene was a product of his own making — the self-made man of American myth. But is it myth? And who, having witnessed the unexpected emergence of talents of such large artistic dimension, could not applaud jazz for serving the commonweal, as the Church of medieval times raised up the peasant-born to the penultimate seat of power and influence? Jazz is truly a wonder of magnitude. It can even make a piece of well-wrought written music sound quite parochial. When Gene Krupa and the other burgeoning talents were confined to bordellos and speakeasies, the heartbeat of the American experience remained in limbo. But once the hats of respectability were tipped as jazz passed by the reviewing stand of life, the system proved it could loose the sources of its strength. What a terrible reminder to the social scientists, too — to find out that it is neither our minds nor a polling place that brought us together. It is *shared aspirations in the same language* that does it. Regionalism. Nonsense. When Louis Armstrong ventured north, bringing his New Orleans-born "Dixie", he found a Chicago version, a dialect of the music, already in existence. Jazz had proved it is the homogenizing influence, and the social historians have myopically passed over this fact.

When you enjoy the people you're playing with, you naturally perform to your limit, and sometimes even touch on the tomorrow side of your talent. I grew while I was with Gene's group. But by the end of a year and a half, I knew it was time to move on. And so I took leave of the quartet. Such partings were familiar to a man

like Gene. I was pregnant with ideas I had held inside for that period of playing and traveling. I learned a lesson from my grinding dissatisfaction: the score pad was where my talent should be directed. In a musical sense I had, to my sadness, passed the group by. I couldn't go back, either. Writing was the way I'd begin making my own personal history, and I am reminded that the most important events in an artist's life are those that transpire inside oneself, the invisible journeying and mental mountain-climbing. Artistic endeavor is reduced to a war between two or more parts of the self. The playing of jazz was at that point too diverting. When you play every night, you don't listen to what others are playing. And so I became a listener and reaped the rewards of hearing others speak.

I would have loved to have done some writing for Gene, had he seen fit to record a special album. But it was not to be. Gene looked on recording as something worth only perfunctory effort. "It's dollars and cents, Chappie." He thought that his name or likeness sold the albums; what was the point in loading up the initial cost?

In that year, 1955, the Old Man settled before my watchful eyes. He was in his fifties and secretly unhappy with what was happening to his life. He never gave me the idea we were doing one thing of productive purpose, other than pleasing ourselves. The audience was an invited undemanding adjunct. It was as if the Old Man knew the hotels and clubs were paying for his celebrity and little else. We drew the head of the Nevada State Police narcotics squad. He came in night after night to watch for dilated pupils.

The Jazz at the Philharmonic tour that fall lifted Gene's spirits, at least for a while. But the traveling paled them. I often watched that pointless drum battle with Buddy Rich on every concert, and

Addendum

I met Gene Krupa only once. Well, twice, actually. But the first was one of those occasions of kids scrambling over a bandstand at intermission, the little wolf packs, seeking autographs. I had no idea what good autographs were, but the other kids sought them, and it was the thing to do. I got his and looked at it in awe. I had detested the name Gene as long as I could remember, because other kids said it was a sissy name, and I consoled myself with thoughts of those who proved otherwise, including Gene Tunney — and Gene Krupa. I took to writing the name the way he did, the G looking like a J, and by the time I realized this had serious disadvantages of confusion, it was too late: it was by now my way of writing it too.

He was one of the glamorous figures of his era, the drumming man, head shaking, dark hair flying, and that radiant grin. The irony of his life is enormous. A bust for pot came by the 1970s to be a badge of honor. Indeed, Flora Purim's conviction for a far more serious drug, cocaine, made her a martyr, and martyrdom was by then a coin easily exchanged for stardom. But the pot bust in 1943 hurt Gene Krupa terribly, and haunted him ever after. It was still the age of Harry Anslinger, and the movie *Reefer Madness*. To kids then, pot seemed like the final degradation, and when Gene Krupa, not long out of prison, appeared with the Tommy Dorsey band (which itself seemed to me at the time to be some sort of humiliation), teen-agers mockingly threw cigarettes at him on the stage.

The further irony is that he apparently was innocent of the charge. Convicted men of course usually claim to be innocent, but in the case of Gene Krupa I believe it. For one thing, Bobby Scott believes he was telling the truth, and I have come to trust Bobby's perceptions of people. But I believe it for a second reason: my second meeting with Gene Krupa.

His band played Hamilton, Ontario, where I was born and was working then as a young newspaper reporter. One of his tenor players, Mitch Melnick, was from Hamilton, which alone was enough to boggle the mind: the idea that any Canadian was capable of playing with an American band of that stature was all but incomprehensible. (Such condescension toward the country's own talent is still a virulent national disease in Canada.) There was a party after the gig, and I ended up sitting at a table in Mitch Melnick's mother's kitchen, having a drink with one of my idols, Gene Krupa. I do not remember one word that was said, but the manner of the man, the air of him, was as Bobby describes. The slight aloofness, oddly mixed with a gentle warmth. The kindness. The utter lack of pretense or self-importance or condescension. His acceptance of people, including me. He honored me by that acceptance. The memory of his absolutely solid character is indelible, and if he were alive today, I would trust him without question. If he told Bobby Scott he was framed, I believe it — on Bobby's judgment and on my own.

A bandboy got busted by two narcs who then planted some grass in Gene's dressing room. They said they'd forget it for ten thousand dollars. They did not know they were facing a man of principle, and he said he would fight them in court. Roy Eldridge was ready to fight them physically, there and then, but the narcs threatened to send him to jail too. And so Gene went to court. Courts have the habit of believing cops, particularly when they come in pairs, even though it is not unknown for two men to conspire to lie, and Gene Krupa went to prison in a flurry of lurid headlines.

For the younger folk among us, it should be noted that Gene Krupa was born in Chicago January 15, 1909. He was associated with that group of young musicians who became known to legend as the Austin High Gang, although he did not himself attend Austin High School. After various other jobs, he joined Benny Goodman in March, 1935, and was of course its drummer when the band exploded into fame in August of that year, launching the so-called Swing Era. He formed his own band in March, 1938. It lasted until 1943, when his arrest caused him to disband. Coming out of prison, he rejoined Goodman for a few months at the end of 1943, then went to work for Tommy Dorsey, and finally organized a new band in 1944. He continued that band until 1951, then scaled down to a trio or quartet. Teddy Wilson, with whom he was associated in the Benny Goodman trio and quartet, once told Leonard Feather, "He was undoubtedly the most important jazz drummer in the history of jazz music. He made the drums a solo instrument, taking it out of the background." Not everyone of course would rate Gene Krupa quite that highly, but he was indeed one of the most important jazz drummers, and he was certainly the most visible.

He affected my life once more, and this time quite profoundly. I had been recommended for the editorship of *Down Beat*. The president of the company, who knew very little about jazz, tried to determine if I in turn knew anything about it, and he set up an impromptu version of Leonard Feather's blindfold test for me. He played a record I had never heard and asked me to identify the drummer. I listened for a while and said, "It's one of the older drummers trying to play modern and not making it. I would deduce that it's Gene Krupa."

I was right, and got the job, but I have always been a little ashamed of saying that about him.

— G.L.

wondered what it was doing to his ego. Buddy was like some great meat-grinder, gobbling up Gene's solos, cresting his triumph in traded fours and eights and ending with an unbelievable flourish. Gene took it in the finest of manners. He didn't think music had a thing to do with competition. He had a way of carrying himself correctly when he walked on, and used that strut of a sort to the fullest at the close of those demoralizing drum wars. I broached the subject to him once. Just once. "Anyone playing with Bud is going to get blown away, Chappie. And remember, the audience isn't as perceptive as you are." His answer was matter-of-fact, with no hint of malice.

No one cared less than Gene about press notices. There is a danger in listening to what is said about your talent by non-players. Gene never gave them even a momentary attention.

I let him down one night in Vegas. I got thoroughly sloshed and had to be carried out of the Last Fronter. And who did the carrying? You guessed it. Gene tried to get my six-foot-one through the outer door sideways and ran my head and feet into the frame. It served me right.

After that night, I was cut off in the Gay Nineties room. But Gene, a merciful judge, saw to it that I could have a taste in our band room. And he never counted my drinks. He accepted that everyone slips, and he didn't carry your mistakes around inside him. What I did was one occasion to him, nothing more.

I believe his Catholicism kept his judging of others to the minimum. If you made an apology, he cleaned the slate. But then, Gene never chalked a thing like that on a mental blackboard in the first place.

His wife Ethel had only antipathy for musicians, seeing them as wayward and malicious little boys. Wonder of wonders, though, she liked me very much. As young as I was, she thought my lapses were excusable. Not so those of Gene or Eddie Shu.

One afternoon, when we were already late getting on the road for a gig in Connecticut, she insisted that "this young fellow have a sandwich" before we left their Yonkers home. Gene bitched about her "mothering concern" and the time, but he didn't get the last word. I was made to "sit down and eat it slowly." She was a fiercely dominating person, and I did as I was told. My colleagues in overcoats grumbled through clenched teeth as I finished the repast in record time and she told Gene to take better care of the "kids" working for him. "A good meal'd kill that skinny kid," she said of me, digging at the Old Man. I figured that once we were in the station wagon and on our way, I'd hear about it. But he didn't mention it. Months later I asked him about that little scene. "Better she's on your case, Chappie, than on *mine*," he said with a chuckle. By then I had witnessed a few of her verbal assaults on him, particularly when we brought him home behind a pint of Black and White scotch. But I never heard him bad-mouth her. Not ever.

Then, during the JATP tour, he became very detached. His eyes seemed far away in some other time and place. I asked about this obliqueness, and the conversation turned to Ethel. "She's *very* ill, Chappie." He stared out of the plane's window into the infinity of space, as if trying to decipher a future out there, his handsome face screwing up, the eyebrows knitting. "The doctors are lying to me. They say she's got an inner-ear infection. She's got a problem with her balance, don'cha see? But I know. It's a brain tumor." The last four words bled out of him. I let the subject lie there where *he'd* dropped it, and made useless remarks about worrying not meaning a damn thing, then pushed the button on my seat and reclined, feigning that nap time was upon me. We never spoke of her again until the day she passed away.

With all the trouble being married to Ethel entailed — and I got a notion of how hard she had tried him when they were divorced, from people who were close to him — he remarried her to put himself back into the Church's fold and to enjoy again the consolations of the Sacraments. To people outside the Church, the remarriage was viewed as a disaster. It smelled of farce. To the Old Man, however, it was all quite simple: he had contracted with God — to him a living God, a caring God, a right-here-and-now God. No amount of worldly knowledge, no rationalization, could alter his moral position. I certainly wasn't going to question the right or wrong of it. Gene believed it idiotic to take wife after wife, praying to hit on the right one. I tended to agree with him. Now of course I am convinced that the ordinances and Sacraments are not to be taken lightly. But even at the time, it struck me, this moral posture of Krupa's, that doing the right thing doesn't always make one feel good. And the difference is all one need understand to gain insight into the Old Man's decision. Life shows us, only too often, that what makes one feel good is not necessarily right for us. I need only mention booze, of which I have consumed my share, drugs, and promiscuity.

I was made to see, in a clear and distinct way, that there are higher laws and hard pathways. The world, of course, applauded someone who extricated himself from a "bad" marriage. Gene knew that. But he also knew that one cannot change one's mind except they step outside the Church's comfort. So he remarried her. He could not take the easier road because of his deeper commitment to his beliefs. Odd. Keeping a promise isn't worth much any more, is it? But the Old Man was right for himself. The life outside is a consensus affair at best, and nothing in the streets does a wise man use except so far as he is disposed to make a hell of his morals and existence. It is always the will of men that disrupts things, no matter how politely one wishes to view one's fellows. We are responsible for making cesspools of our lives. What Gene bit off, he chewed.

He gave me the impression that he'd had a hell-raising youth. That this was in contrast to the behavior of his devout Polish Catholic immigrant parents hardly merited comment. He mentioned a younger brother, apple of his mother's eye, who disappeared. Gene said his brother was "beautiful". There was a suggestion that some deranged sexual pervert had abused and then disposed of him. But whatever happened, no trace of the boy was ever found. And this put Gene in a strange position in the family.

In strong Catholic tradition, every family "donates" a son or daughter to the church. A tithe to the cloth, in a manner of speaking. After the brother's disappearance, the family's eyes fell on Gene. And he was suddenly in turmoil. He had tastes for both the world and the spiritual. But in accord with family wishes, he spent a term as a novitiate in a seminary, during which it became clear to him, he said, that he was not worthy enough to wear the collar of the priesthood. His faith never faltered; but the muddy waters in which he found himself swimming didn't seem to be clearing. And at last he decided against going on.

In 1955, his rocky Catholicism embarrassed me, even though I sensed that it was only a matter of time until I would be confirmed in my own beliefs. But in those days, sitting in the front seat of the station wagon, hearing him braying at the words of some evangelist leaking out of the radio, his speech slurred by scotch, froze me. "There is only one true faith!" crowed our leader. Eddie Shu, a non-believer, took no umbrage at this, but Gene's intractible position abraded my liberalism, my live-and-let-live view of things. The only church-going I had done as a child was to an Evangelical/Reformed Lutheran church, a dissenting sect, to my mother, a closet Catholic of no small dimension. It was only in the last year of her life that she let me know her secret: she had always gone to Mass, unbeknownst to all of us! My father had left the Catholic fold and communed in a Presbyterian congregation.

And he and my mother, being at odds, let their children practice whatever we chose to, or not at all.

But to Gene, the Church strictures were the bottom line, whether you met that standard of behavior or not. He felt the Church itself was an empowered instrument of Almighty God. Now, having put much study into the subject of validity that split the Christian world in the late Fifteenth Century, I've come to see Gene's view — the Church's position as regards the Apostolic continuance and tradition — as correct. But in 1955, the constant harping on the one and only true faith really upset me.

No matter what Gene had done in his life, what profession he had pursued, his faith would still have been his rock, his consolation, and his hope. He was not a proselytizing zealot. He honored everyone's right to feel, to believe or not believe, in a manner consistent with one's own judgment. The syncretic form of Catholicism I came in time to embrace would be too "mystical" and too free-thinking — too "apologetic" in the theological sense — to suit the Old Man. He was hide-bound, for he credited the very existence of the Church as proof of its *magisterium.*

I was then fascinated by the writings of the convert Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Several of his other books were published after the success of his autobiographical *Seven Storey Mountain.* Always I bought two copies of his books, one for myself and one for the Old Man. I was never sure how much of Merton's mystical approach Gene took to heart, but Merton's abiding commitment consoled him.

For many musicians, music either has become or simply is their religion — the way through which their deepest feelings are loosened and brought to the surface, hopefully transfigured. There is a substantial value in this, although the according of too much value to a means to an end is often self-defeating and diversionary. What lies within one is not always enchained for wrong reasons.

I have come to believe through thirty years of writing music that there is at its source the *revelatory.* Simply, I believe there is *something else*, outside or inside me, that plays the major role in the process. No doubt everybody who "creates" feels the otherworldliness of the process. The mysterious is never farther away than the next blank bar on the music pad. The real trouble comes when one is forced to ascribe authorship. To please my own doubts, I have come to think of myself as an instrument through which someone else's music is played. I am an aide and abbetor of the spheres' ever-present sounds. If I be graced at all, it is in being able to hear in the chaos a hint of form and an incipient beauty.

Friends come and go, but enemies accumulate.
— Source unknown

Gene had no such grand pretentions. But he did see, as I do, a relation between spirit and sound. To ascribe a special grace to music wasn't what Gene would do. In fact he saw music-making as *one* of the many joys provided by Existence, i.e. God. For Gene, the religious state known as grace came only to those who found it of the utmost importance in their lives. His own faith struck down worldly measures and made his own success an anomaly to him.

I don't wish to mislead those who may not understand what being a Catholic of Gene's order entails, nor its salient characteristics. To Gene, making a friend unhappy had a direct bearing on how he thought he appeared in God's eye.

There are two seemingly opposed traditions in the written and oral history of the Church. One is the Pauline position. For St. Paul, reason, the use of the mind, was of little value to the discovery of faith, and at its worst an instrument of deception. He came down hard on the side of faith free, faith unencumbered, faith rooted in the fact that the "gift" Christ gave on Calvary had only to be believed and the inheritance collected. To Paul, the Passion and the Sacrifice cleaned the slate for Mankind with God. Then there is the Augustinian view, which is: God, in His wisdom, would not have created an entity as glorious as the human mind if it was not to be used to seek him! Therefore faith, through the use of the mind, must be able to withstand the assaults of reason. Fire to fight fire, as it were. In fact faith should be ennobled by the very process of reason.

These two positions were what Gene and I split hairs over, whether he knew it or not. I admit I envied him his faith. He saw my journeys as escapes into "esoterica" and, at best, "Words, words, words, Chappie." But then we needed different things. He was one of the fortunate believers. There are myriad pathways to faith, and I hadn't taken an easy one. But then no one gets to pick his path. Sometimes in my despair I feel with Nietzsche that "the only Christian who ever lived died on a cross." Ultimately we are shaped by our surrender to God's will.

The uneasiness that all devout people experience when the rules of men are imposed on them laid no less heavily on Gene Krupa. The optimism and idealism of the Christian ethic are burned by this worldly existence, with all its exigencies, into a smouldering relic. Morality mutates, and is no longer sound, and right or wrong are determined by the context. Subsequently, one is hard put to judge if religion doesn't further alienate the already alienated. Considering Gene's outlook, I am forced to say his rooting in the Church was both a boon and a bane.

The prophet of Islam was asked what was the one way to be secure in the eyes of Allah. "Speak evil of no one," he replied. Gene observed that rule, though he had no commerce with the thought of the man born in the Year of the Elephant. Whatever the Old Man felt about people, or questioned, it never got past his well-tended front teeth. His fairness rested on his acceptance of everyone's individuality. The confusion made life colorful to the Old Man, and he would never have endorsed uniformity.

He was so sensitive to the sensitivities of others. Once I tried to get him to come to my home in Westchester, not far from his modest house in Yonkers. He made every imaginable excuse for not coming. Finally I forced him to tell me the truth. And it was this: He felt that his emphysema would put us off our food. His wheezing by then had become constant. I couldn't get him to believe that it would not matter to us. He wouldn't budge. I told my wife why he wouldn't come. She was mystified. He was concerned what our kids might think. Such was the height of his deference. Such is the pride that lives in that tiny man, I told her.

Gene was a man who loved family life and had none of his own. He was sterile. It is impossible to know what damage this had done to him. He told me of trips to doctors and of ingesting substances supposed to make him potent. He even tried an extract of steer's testes. Why a man wants to go on in his progeny is something I have no ready answer for. It is too deeply encoded. As a way to defeat death, it would have little charm for Gene. He believed in eternal life as promised by God. But his sterility affected him. When on some occasion a conversation turned to manly prowess, Gene deprecated himself, resolutely assigning himself the last place on any list of great lovers. He poked fun at himself. How he came to grips with all this, I do not know. And to make things worse, his conviction for a narcotics offense he did not commit ruled out his adopting children. It was only some years later after my time in his quartet that — with the aid of the Catholic Church — he finally did adopt two children. And as life would have it, they were his only regret when he passed away, for he had separated from his second wife and had only visitation rights to quell his anxieties.

"Geezus, Chappie, I adopted the kids so they'd finally have a

home and family. Now they're shifted back and forth between us. What the hell did I go and do?"

It was the only subject we discussed during our last telephone conversation. He still would not break bread at my house, but he offered me a seat in his box at Shea Stadium to watch his beloved Mets. I couldn't get him to move on to another topic. He felt he'd let the kids down. No outs or rationalizations for Gene. And he said he had misjudged his wife, forgetting that "old men don't marry young women unless they're ready for problems." I tried to argue around things, but he'd have no part of it. "I'm a grown person, Chappie, and there's no excuse you could come up with that'd be good enough to get me off the hook. I made the damn mistake an' I'll have to live with it, and make the best of a bad situation." He paused, the portentous silence alive between us on the telephone line. "There's no one to blame...but myself, Chappie."

The worst part of writing about a departed friend is that you begin to miss them. It is painful. We may be ships that pass each other in the night, but don't overlook the great wakes we leave, and the affect, long after, of the ripples.

You don't get to know a person like Gene Krupa without gaining insight into the conflict between worldly goals and personal moral imperatives. I saw this private war from a near vantage point, and what became clear was that he was a complex man with absurdly simple needs and desires.

When a man of reputation says little about what is going on in his own profession, one may assume that he has critical opinions he deems better left unsaid. But that wasn't the case with Gene. It was rather a matter of his incapacity to pass judgment upon what others did, or did not do. When Gene offered praise, as he did on one occasion for the marvelous drumming of Art Blakey, he always prefaced his remarks by disqualifying them as objective evaluations. They were purely an expression of *his* taste, he said, and subjective. I asked him why he didn't make judgments of other drummers. It'd be pointless, he answered, to judge what it was they were doing if he wasn't privy to what it was they were aiming for. He refused to be presumptuous. And he never deviated from that.

We were listening one afternoon to an old album of his big band. He was extolling the arrangement and the arranger. I didn't care for the piece and said so. "Ah, but Chappie," he said, "it didn't set out to bowl everyone over. But what it set out to accomplish...it accomplished."

I told him, straight out, that it was second-class arranging.

And his eyes took on that twinkle. "Now," he said, "if you'd have written it, Chappie, I'd call it second-rate, too, because you've more to say than this other fellow." I didn't hear this as flattery. He wanted me to understand that there is perfection even when the journey isn't to the polar caps; that there is as much virtue in being featherweight champ as there is in being heavyweight champ. "Where your writing is taking you, Chappie," he said, "the air is *very thin.* A fall from up there can kill you."

It was such challenges that he offered to one's mind. Just when I thought I could easily say that the Old Man was only capable of seeing things simply, he'd turn the tables.

It is rare for an artist's personality to rank with his work. There are thousands of volumes of biography that do little to illuminate, though they paint disturbing personal portraits. It is as if the biographers were screaming out a desire that the artist reach in his life the perfection of his work. But the artist is precisely the one whose personal life is likely to be a disaster. Why else would he seek beauty and try to encapsulate it? This applies to "creative" people. But the "re-creative" individual, like Gene Krupa, doesn't suffer from involuntary surges of newness and individuality or visions of the unattainable. It is within the power of such a person as Gene to enjoy life, to accomplish things he never thought he could. It is sort of a middle man's role, but it is not without degrees of freedom that, say, a symphony player never knows. Krupa could *add* to what was happening, join his oar with Gershwin's, as he did in the pit band of a Broadway show, or give a Mulligan a chance to write. These achievements were the brickwork of his ease and fulfillment. I am sure he enjoyed the knowledge that he had helped me along the way.

It is a fact that he partook of that special world of dreams that made the usualness of day-to-day living a bane to him. It never sat on him as heavily as it might a creative person, whose visions never sleep, but he had tasted it, and one is never the same after that. My father called the world of music the only way one could glimpse paradise while still alive. He said that once you had looked through that portal, nothing in the world would ever mean as much as it once did.

Gene knew his limitations better than most men, and handled them in worthy fashion. Though he wasn't a pedagogue, he liked to teach, and had many students in the school he ran with his friend Cozy Cole. Teaching rudiments gave him the greatest pleasure. He knew that their mastery was the only way to escape frustration. "Too many ideas, Chappie. These kids got too many ideas an' no tools to realize them with. It's everybody's problem in the beginning." He played no favorites among his students. Kids with little or no gift got a share of his joy and encouragement. The sheer making of music was Gene's end-all and be-all. If you could play well enough to play with others, by his reckoning, you were a lucky person.

The last years of his life found him in the grip of leukemia. It doesn't take you in one swoop; you just feel it tapping your strength away, daily and monthly. True to his stylish and graceful way, he made light of it to me, saying he'd live with it. Being unable to get him out of his home, I decided to drive up to Yonkers and surprise him. At the time I had several pressing writing chores and I couldn't get a day to myself. My mother called to tell me not to go up one particular day because she'd heard on the radio that Gene had checked himself into a hospital for transfusions. She said it wasn't bad, though.

The next day was Sunday, if memory serves me. She called and said he'd gone home and was in satisfactory condition. Then she berated me for not making time to visit him. Well, I missed going the next day too, waking late on Monday afternoon after writing almost all night. But on Tuesday morning I was up like a shot, bathed and dressed, and starting out the door when the phone rang. It was my mother.

"What are you doing up so early?"

"I'm on my way up to see the Old Man."

There was a long pause and her sigh cut into me.

"Don't bother, son. He passed away last night."

She then read me out in her inimitable fashion, reminding me that friendship is a damn sight more important than earning a living. I finally slowed her down by reminding her that I was a grown person.

I went with her to Gene's wake. I can still feel his tiny hands under my own hand, the fingers intertwined with a Rosary in death's repose, as I said a prayer and squeezed my good-bye to him in the coffin. Charlie Ventura broke down before the bier, words fighting tears in a near holler. "You made me what I am, Gene. I'd be *nothin'* except for you! *Nothin'*!"

I looked toward my mother and caught her brushing a tear away.

"He wasn't too bad a step-father to you either, Jocko."