

Vintage drum historian/expert Mark Cooper says,

“Brooks Tegler has done it! This long awaited history of Gene Krupa and the Slingerland instruments he played have been the subject of much debate over the years. The history of this drumming legend has been surrounded by myths, inaccuracies, misinformation, and untruths. Mr. Tegler’s exhaustive research has resulted in a wonderfully comprehensive book, which will hopefully shatter the myths, correct the inaccuracies and debunk many of the stories and theories about Gene Krupa that have long been accepted as “fact”. The author backs up all of his claims with a staggering collection of photos, catalog images, interviews, and verified facts. He is not afraid to challenge the “conventional wisdom” that is too often believed without question. He pulls no punches in his attempt to correct the falsehoods that have perpetuated over the decades. This book is a fresh look at Gene Krupa and his Slingerland drums from his first drum set to his last and everything in between. No detail is too small or insignificant. Brooks Tegler’s apparent photographic memory and encyclopedic knowledge of all things Krupa is mind boggling. In my many conversations with Brooks, he rattles off Slingerland catalog parts numbers, drum models, musician names and historic dates with astonishing recall and accuracy. This book is a “must have” for the vintage drum enthusiasts. Gene Krupa fans, and drum history buffs of today and in the future and are indeed fortunate to have access to this incredibly detailed work by Brooks Tegler.”

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FORWARD

When Brooks asked me to write a foreword for his book GK I thought, "Boy have you got the wrong guy". My knowledge of Gene Krupa fits neatly under one fingernail...and I trimmed that this morning. Like Brooks, others have made an intensive study of "The Ace Drummer Man". Wouldn't they be a better choice? Why me? Then I thought, "Why not?". Who better to be enlightened? Like most of you who have bought this book I am a student eager to learn. Sure I know my share of drumming history but the opportunity to exponentially expand that knowledge from someone who obviously dedicated many painstaking hours of research is one I cannot pass up. As Brooks aptly notes "the minute details of a musician's equipment choices become very important 'threads' in the fabric of that player's legacy". This, my fellow drummer/historians is a quintessential work on the subject of Gene Krupa's equipment.

In his introduction, Brooks describes his work as "a technical treatment". Generally a fair assessment, but I also found it to be a loving tribute to the world's most renowned drummer. It is obvious that Brooks made a concerted effort to not only document Krupa's equipment but also finding the back story of those equipment choices. I found the back stories riveting. Krupa's choices were sometimes a collaboration but seeming always ones from natural intuition.

Krupa knew what worked and it served him well.

Brooks meticulously archives these choices chronologically throughout Krupa's illustrious career. Not only his peers but thousands of young drummers recognized Krupa's mastery, setting a standard both in style and equipment that his followers eagerly emulated. Krupa was also a man of warmth and integrity. His loyalty to his fans and equipment manufacturers was without peer. Both benefitted not only from his extraordinary talent but also his keen sense of what worked. Krupa forever changed the course for today's drummer and we owe a lot to this man. Fortunately we now have this work that details the legacy and equipment choices of the master. Thank you Brooks.

Chet Falzerano

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GK

“Drummers are the most beautiful people in the world.”...Gene Krupa, 1973

There are things in history that endure, regardless of the passage of time. Even in the face of constant attempts to minimize their importance. So many examples seem to be impervious to every effort to make them irrelevant. They forever continue to exhibit irrefutable quality. Perhaps it is that level of quality that makes them become iconic. In truth, it is of minor consequence either way as they just keep reappearing with each successive generation. There to be “discovered” over and over again.

For so many million young drummer ‘hopefuls’, since as far back as 1935, one icon has been deeply etched into their minds. A specific group of images that became the starting point for nearly every kid who HAD to play the drums, regardless of the level of proficiency. It was the Standard by which nearly everything else in the world of drums and drumming became. The center. Much like Saturn and its rings. Each ring comprised of billions of smaller parts that orbit around that center. Held by its gravitational ‘pull’, the parts can spread millions of miles into space but they are always ‘anchored’ by the core. For the fledgling drummers, that ‘center’ was Gene B. Krupa. Even for millions of non-drummers, he was a ‘presence’ that immediately garnered attention, just by walking in.

For this author (merely one of those billions of orbiting particles) the earliest phase of this particular project really started to develop some time around 1960. It was then that the serious ‘study’ of Slingerland catalogs and their greatest “salesman”, Gene Krupa, began. But the insatiable curiosity (‘obsession’, really) with Gene and his drums only became more and more important as time went on.

It should be made clear that this is an historical treatment. More so than anything else, a technical document. Its accuracy is, predominantly, supported by photographs of Gene playing the instruments or ‘displayed’ with all this equipment. This, by necessity, will involve repeated use of the same core photo images, at times, as focus is trained on one or two individual components in discussion contained within that image. There will be occasions where a photo image is repeated in its entirety as well. This reason being to prove different points about the same subject. As little speculation as possible is employed. There will need to be some, however. Certain ‘conclusions’ can, and will be drawn based on simple logic combined with the knowledge and experience of other contributors and the author. At times, the author’s collection of Slingerland drums provides detailed data to support certain points. He has not only collected these instruments for more than 35 years but, as a player and band leader, has used them even longer than that. Nearly all of the instruments he has used are identical to those used by Gene. It is, in fact, the focus of the author’s whole collection.

A sizeable portion of the information naturally comes from the knowledge and experience of several others who have spent a considerable amount of their lives being involved in Gene’s history. In a few instances, by personal interaction with Gene himself and in other cases, although purely anecdotal, supported (when possible) by photographic ‘evidence’. There are, of course, thousands of stories of fans being with, near or somehow associated with Gene Krupa out there. For the most part, they are only brief encounters and, although (rightfully) monumentally important to that person, carry little useful information for anyone else. Especially, information of a technical nature.

Since the beginning of Gene’s time in the music business, there have been those who have shared an evening or a moment with him. Sat in the audience or stood beside him for a picture, written him a letter, sought his autograph, etc. but very few who took notes as they did all these typical ‘fan’ related activities. It seems that only a very few, who were lucky enough to sit behind his drum sets or play one of his drums were, at that moment, alert enough to make any technical study of what they were experiencing. Such was the case with this author. There was far too much ‘awe’ surrounding a young kid’s moment with Gene to be aware of much else. So much of these experiences by thousands of devoted fans were possible simply because of how ‘accessible’ Gene made himself. It’s safe to say that, in most instances, Gene derived some enjoyment from the experience as well.

The purpose of this compilation is an effort to, whenever possible, establish factual information about Gene's equipment history and, when needed, to set an incorrect record straight about that same equipment. There has been a ponderous amount of inaccurate data pertaining to this subject. Slicing through the mythology to get to the facts has been, at times, an arduous task but its end results have been more than gratifying. This author hopes to shed some light on the vitally important facet of Gene Krupa's legacy, his equipment. Covering what they were as well as what they were not (alas, in some cases, according to long held myths, guesses and outright fabrications). A purpose, first and foremost, to, technically, inform those who have an interest in a truly great musician and to offer a more historically accurate guideline to future drummers who might be curious about what Gene had and his preferences about the "tools" he used.

Will there be some "educated" guessing? Certainly. The hope is for absolute, verifiable accuracy every time. Obviously, that is extremely difficult to get on any consistent basis. The over-riding hope is, nonetheless, still there. A vehicle for future corrections, adjustments, new data? Also answered with a hopeful 'yes'.



Beginnings and the Goodman Years

As it is with any accomplished craftsman, a musician's greatness can be, in no small way, directly related to the quality of his instrument(s). Those who study any musician, whether it be Maurice André, George Harrison or Judith Falzerano, are likely to also be well acquainted with exactly which instruments were played by them and when they were used. As the depth of the knowledge increases, the minute details of a musician's equipment choices become very important 'threads' in the fabric of that player's legacy.

The more devoted followers of Gene's history will probably have some sense of how he began his music/drumming career. One would think that the best resource would be using Gene's own words. Sadly, at times, even they tend to be confusing. Here are a series of (somewhat baffling) remembrances of Gene's in the beginning of Bruce Klauber's book, *World of Gene Krupa* (a compilation of published articles and other writing about or by Gene, assembled by Klauber). As the focus here is on his equipment, it's best to somewhat paraphrase those portions of Gene's narrative as it relates to the topic.

First drums said to have been acquired sometime between 1919 and 1920: "I was a chore boy (at age 11 (with brother Pete at the Brown Music Company on Chicago's South Side).Drums just happened to be the cheapest instrument in the wholesale catalog - \$18.00 for a Japanese outfit: large bass drum, snare drum, woodblock, a brass cymbal and a stand. After I made the purchase, I played at every opportunity. The sticks almost never left my hand."

And then, from the same assemblage of quotes: "I started out playing sax. In high school I worked after hours as a soda jerker in a small dance hall. The drummer and his drums got me. I used to sneak up when the band was off the stand and try them out. My older brother Pete finally bought me a set of traps. That finished me at high school. The sax and drums - and I flunked out." HOWEVER... from the same group of quotes (and actually preceding the one above), there was this one: "...But, before I met the Austin High boys - (Eddie) Condon, (Bud) Freeman, Davey Tough and the rest - I was in a kid band at the age of 12... " (playing drums or saxophone?)

Bearing in mind that Gene's date of birth was January 15, 1909, when he was twelve, he was that age for two weeks shy of all of 1921. Is Gene interpreting his own memory accurately? High school, generally, involves kids older than twelve. The presumption would follow that, if high school was then, as it is now, students would not be starting therein until, roughly, age fourteen. Not a crucial point but adds to the mystery.

Career beginnings

Although very limited in quantity, the photographic 'evidence' that Gene would have used much the same set as most other jobbing jazz drummers working in the late 1920's and early '30's does exist. It can also be fairly safely said, based on historical records, that (following the reported \$20, \$18, and some say \$16, "Japanese" drum set), what Gene played on when he actually began to become a 'pro', could have been from one of the the major drum manufacturers of that period (Leedy, started in 1900 and Ludwig & Ludwig, soon after). That said, as Slingerland started drum production as of the late 1920's Gene's earliest equipment could have also been what became his 'signature' brand. What has become accepted by some is that it was Ludwig & Ludwig equipment. Perhaps due to its proximity (Ludwig was in Chicago and Leedy was in Elkhart, Indiana), and some anecdotal information that Gene himself appears to have provided (as shown in Rob Cook's comprehensive book on the Slingerland drum company) regarding appreciation to one Frank Gault of Frank's Drum Shop, Chicago, for selling him his "first" drum. "First"? All of these points also provide further confusion in data.

And what of the anecdote from Russ Connor about Gene buying his first set from Carl Fisher in New York!?! Was this an actual Connor memory or was he merely quoting from the '36-'37 print ads that Slingerland began to circulate after the Goodman band's initial successes? Was THIS the first Slingerland set? Were not the drums Gene acquired from Brown's his 'first'? Were the drums from Gault's specifically his first Slingerland set? (this author is inclined to think this to be the case). The

Slingerland ads often stated that Gene had used their equipment starting in 1929. How long was that period between 1920 and when he got the drums from Frank's? From Fisher? Obviously, from the historical data provided by Gene, discographies, and peers like Eddie Condon (one of Gene's closest lifelong friends), as well as countless other musicians' remembrances, Gene clearly HAD (and was using) drums as early as 1920 or '21. Gene was, in fact, quite busy as a freelance drummer from the 1920's until finally deciding to go with Benny Goodman at the end of 1934. Ultimately, even busy enough to marry hotel phone operator Ethel McGuire and 'settle down' as well.

It is safe to say that, whatever the actual chronology was, the fact that, somehow, somewhere, some time, Gene had his own drums, studied with Roy Knapp while still in Chicago and learned much about music from Father Ildelfonse Rapp while at St. Joseph's (a seminary school in Indiana), the primary question still remains unanswered. WHAT KIND of DRUMS WERE THEY??! Time for more 'discoveries'...

The Man

The impact of Gene's choice of musical instrument is well known, as his name will forever be synonymous with the word "drums", and vice versa. Through his own dedication to music in general and the drums in particular, Gene Krupa's legacy holds a place on the top shelf of history alongside many other great names. Few others are so commonly known in direct relation to the 'tools' of their trade as Gene is. Rembrandt is considered one of the great Masters as an artist and painter but few actually know what brushes, pigments, palettes, easels, etc. he used to achieve such a highly respected place in art history. Art students and historians perhaps but not the average 'man on the street'. Sadly, in today's limited public attention span, Artie Shaw is remembered more for the number of times he was married and how he felt about dancers than the utter genius he displayed as a clarinetist/band leader/musician (not to mention all his other remarkable accomplishments!). As with "Gene Krupa" and "drums", say the word "trumpet", and "Louis Armstrong" immediately follows. Greatness often sets precedents. Establishes standards. Innovates. Commands honest respect. Gene achieved all of these in ways that are being discovered and re-discovered all the time. Through his life-long relationship with his instrument, Gene has, in essence, 'become' the instruments he used.

It's well known that Gene was the FIRST in many drum related categories. The first world renowned official "endorser" of a brand of drums. He was the first to push for (and utilize) separate (top and bottom heads), tunable tom toms. Until Gene's business relationship began with the Slingerland Drum Company (presumably) around the early thirties, tom toms were always either double-tacked pigskin heads or single (top) calfskin and bottom tacked pigskin or thick cowhide. Hence, only the top (batter) head allowed any tuning/tensioning capability and the pigskin heads were relegated to whatever atmospheric 'challenges' surrounded them. Curiously, snare and bass drums had been separate tension tuning since their beginnings but it took Gene's research, musicianship, growing prominence and popularity to get drum makers to realize the importance of "tune-ability" and tonal range for ALL the drums in a set, if the player wanted it.

Another lasting 'first' for Gene (with the assistance of a somewhat legendary drum "technician" of the time, Bill Mather) were the graphics that adorned the front bass drum heads on his first (and every one after that for the next 38 years) Slingerland bass drums. Gene (with Mather) was the first to come up with the idea of the initials inside a shield (in fact, a very typical men's wear monogram style of the well dressed gentleman of the 30's) as well as the larger initials of the bandleader beside that shield (a small 'window' into Gene's level of modesty to be careful that the band leader's initials be much larger than his). Needless to say, this immediately established a precedent that continues to this very day. More on this later.

Gene should also be (indirectly) credited for the choice of drum sizes that became the "standard" for many following decades. Due to the luck of fate (or just good timing) his rapid worldwide STAR status in the mid to late 1930's and well into the 40's, not only focused a different kind of respect for the drums and drummers, but also set indelible criteria for what the drum set-up and sizes should be, at

least, in the minds of thousands of professional and aspiring drummers. Anything Slingerland labeled as “The Gene Krupa Model” immediately set a popular standard for those hoping to share in the new limelight Gene’s work had produced. Preferred bass drum diameters, tom-tom dimensions, snare drum depth all became oriented toward whatever Gene was using.

Gene has been given due credit for working with Zildjian on what he felt were important traits for cymbals throughout his career. The “First” here is that Gene preferred thinner cymbals in a time where there just weren’t that many being made. Gene’s cymbal “sound” is now a matter of legend and the sizes, weights and characteristics he preferred, set further precedents for the drummers all over the world.

Although credited to Gene’s own, as well as Eddie Condon’s and Jimmy McPartland’s recollections, the accuracy of the story of Gene being the first drummer to record using a bass drum has been found to be wrong. An accounting of those recollections is well covered in Bruce Crowther’s book on Gene, *Gene Krupa. His Life and Times*. There is, however, enough evidence of recorded bass drums prior to that to discount that anecdote as a ‘universal’ first. As with the when and who played the first “ride” cymbals, we are lucky to have the recordings as an historical document for proof of any claims there as well. It was undoubtedly not Kenny Clarke!

Equally important to this endeavor is addressing the category of inaccurate information. To date, there remains a ponderous amount of it flying around out there. One of those is the popular legend that Gene’s father negotiated the first “deal” with the Slingerland Drum and Banjo Company in order to get Gene a quality set of drums. The ‘source’ of this fable, according to one writer, was Wm. F. Ludwig II. Although a tale worthy of a bad 1950’s Hollywood ‘B’ movie, also, patently false. Bartolmie J. Krupa was born in 1863 and died in 1916 at the age of 53. Gene (his youngest of 9 children) was 7 years old and purportedly, not yet even involved with drums. Gene’s rising star with Goodman was not until circa 1934-’36. Gene’s father had been gone for, at least, 17 years. Perhaps some other member of Gene’s family should get credit for this effort (the legend comes from a notion that whomever this “negotiator” was, tried a phone call to Ludwig first but the failed attempt sent said person to the local phone book to, essentially, “throw a dart” at the drum makers’ listings and come up with Slingerland!) In the period of history that is in question here, even the telephone was still very much a ‘luxury’ item for the average poor family of a Polish immigrant in Chicago (although Mrs. Krupa was said to have had a millinery business). In short, merely a popular myth and one must consider the source (a member of the Ludwig family, by all accounts, who could, indeed, spin quite a yarn at times!). If anything like this even occurred, whomever it was, it was not Gene’s father. It does, however, beg the obvious question; how did such a connection between Gene and Slingerland come to be?

This author’s theory? H.H. Slingerland seemed to have an uncanny gift of business ‘foresight’. He also did not react well to the fact that the Ludwig company suddenly launched an ‘assault’ into his Banjo making/selling territory. His solution was to get into the drum business. He did so with unprecedented fervor and proceeded to completely outsmart, out pace, out ‘market’ and quickly dominate the other two largest (of the early twentieth century) drum makers in the world within a mere two years in the late 1920’s. It could be said that he smelled ‘money’ and picked up that scent, approaching Gene with an offer in (or even before) late 1934/early 1935 when ‘word’ had gotten around that Gene had joined the new Goodman outfit and their popularity was growing. If so, it turned out to be a very wise move. The involvement and influence of Bill Mather also bears considerable ‘weight’ in this whole process. It is entirely possible that, like Gene’s introduction to Avedis Zildjian, Mather was the ‘vehicle’ for many other industry connections for Gene.

It is also certainly possible that Gene had chosen Slingerland drums prior to the Goodman period. Slingerland was indeed making the dark-stained, single-tension, two and three (and even five) ply shell bass drums as of 1929-’30, having purchased the Liberty Musical Instruments drum-making equipment in 1928. No specific data, however, has proven that what Gene had, early on, was either Liberty or Slingerland, or, for that matter, any known brand ...so far.

There were more subtle, but in the long run, more lasting and powerful “firsts” as well. Gene was one of, if not the, first drummer to place the instrument in a more prominent and respected position in the orchestra, immediately shedding the disrespectful “necessary evil” classification that many other musicians and critics held of it. For anyone watching, his honest and deep love of the music clearly came through every time he sat down to play. The effect was undeniable to fellow musicians and audience alike! Throughout his career, regardless of the near constant onslaught by intimidated, self-absorbed critics, desperately trying to remove him from a genuinely earned place on top, he never wavered from that dedication. Even to this day, there are those who cannot deal with the reality that was Gene. More energy and ink has been devoted to trying to point out what was ‘wrong’ about the man and what his ‘shortcomings’ were than what was ‘right’ about him. It is rare to find a piece written about Gene that avoids inane, useless statements like “not the best” or “not the fastest” or other ridiculous, meaningless qualifiers that attempt to “put him in his place”, hence allowing that author to make it seem as though they know what they are talking about. Denigration of his “showmanship” being, perhaps, the most often used slant. Anyone who is at all familiar with Krupa’s history knows full well that this was an entirely natural and reflexive side of how Gene played. Especially after he began studying with Sanford “Gus” Moeller. Not calculated, rehearsed or even thought of at the moment. This author seriously doubts Gene COULD have played as well without those reflexes! Compared to many other drummers’ displays of tricks, twirls and “show-Biz Pizzazz”, Gene comes across as a rather sedate performer. Should we not also chide Woody for turning his clarinet to the sky or Ellington for his extravagant arm motions at the piano? And what of the “flash” of a Chick Webb, Jimmie Crawford, Ray Bauduc or Lionel Hampton? Should we also not castigate Sonny Payne for all his “show-biz” antics? Of course not. But let the same standard judge everyone equally. The fact that it intimidated (and, to some extent still does!) critics is their problem, not Gene’s. In Gene’s case, in the eyes of his critics, they just happened to make it a ‘shortcoming’ instead of an asset. One only has to think about the ‘eyewitness’ accounts by his peers who saw him do exactly the same thing in the recording studio! Why on earth would he bother if it were a calculated “show”? No one can see that on a record. Gene, of course, was gracious enough to let the bulk of the nastiness pass. He once made that clear in a very wise comment saying, “Even critics need to eat.”. They certainly do their share of chewing on him!

“Who he was is how he played”

His Tools

Obviously, there are a few large gaps in this retrospective due to a lack of solid photographic (or even anecdotal) evidence. Little is known of Gene’s boyhood life leading up to his time at the music shop but suffice it to say, being in Chicago in the early part of the 20th century, a member of a large, poor Catholic family that, early on, had lost the father, was going to shape virtually everything about each member in different ways. Although impossible to know for certain, it seems that, for Gene, finding music in general and jazz in particular would prove to be his “calling”. This, instead of the Priesthood his mother hoped he would pursue. The choice proved to be a huge benefit for him and, of course, billions of the rest of us. As is often the case, however, that ‘blessing’ also proved to be somewhat of a ‘curse’ that would shape Gene’s later life profoundly.

At least, the musical developments that Gene experienced between 1920 and leading up to his joining Benny Goodman in 1934, are somewhat better documented in books and recordings. His time as a teenager studying with Roy Knapp and his Seminary school experience with Father Ildfonse Rapp. His recordings with the likes of Condon, Bix, Benny, etc. are all now well familiar. Although new information of Gene’s early life continues to slowly emerge, this data covers the when, where and whom he worked with. Sadly, not included in the historical data acquired so far is what brand he used until that seen in 1935.