

Lucky Drummer

From NYC Jazz to Johnny Carson

by Ed Shaughnessy
with Robyn Flans

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MY CHILDHOOD

I was an only child. My parents were Tom and Theresa Shaughnessy. My dad was a longshoreman who worked on the docks in New York. My mom sometimes worked in the sewing factory. I grew up in downtown Jersey City, New Jersey, across from City Hall, in a blue-collar area. It was mostly populated by families who were Irish, German, Italian, Polish, and Russian, and maybe an occasional Jewish family, like my friend Marty, who lived not too far away. There wasn't a black soul to be seen.

Everyone on my mother's side of the family played piano. In those days, there wasn't television, so listening to the radio and playing piano and singing songs with the family were big parts of the social interaction. My mother's brother, Uncle Harry Geetlein, was an engineer and the only one in the family with a college education. He had an engineer's job with Bell Laboratories, and I really looked up to him. He was also a part-time bandleader. He had a little seven- or eight-piece group that would play for dances. I only heard them once or twice because he lived quite far away from us, but I liked him a lot. He was a really terrific guy.

My father was what I would call a "kindly alcoholic," meaning he wasn't abusive, but any alcoholic is a problem. My uncle, whom I only saw a few times a year, was really a better role model for a young boy. I loved my dad, and he was a good man, but he also was a very involved alcoholic, meaning he wasn't home most nights. Good man that he was, however, he brought me my first two drums, toting them on the subway from New York. A guy owed him twenty bucks but couldn't pay, so he said, "Doesn't your son like music?" And the guy gave my dad the drums instead of the money. My dad brought home a bass drum in kind of a case, and a snare drum and a pedal—the most rudimentary things you could think of. I was fourteen and had never expressed any interest in playing the drums. I had played piano, but fate intervened. I set up the little drum set in the basement. I think it took me a day and a half to set it up, even though it was only a bass drum, a snare drum, and a dinky little cymbal.

At age twelve I started taking piano lessons—everybody was supposed to play the piano in those days. Although we lived in the blue-collar district of Jersey City, everybody in my family had to take piano lessons. I really didn't like the piano lessons that much, but being a good son, I went—although half reluctantly. My teacher was Miss Martha, who was pretty and nice, and I took lessons from her for about two years. Then, all of a sudden, my dad brought me home those drums, and my attention could not stay on the piano. I asked to stop taking lessons.

As soon as the drums came into the house, I got fired up and I started listening to late-night radio broadcasts of Count Basie, Woody Herman, and Duke Ellington. These were live remote broadcastings from hotels and nightclubs, and I really got the jazz bug. I would play my funny little drums along with the music.

I was a paper delivery boy—if I wanted to have something, I earned money for it. I delivered my papers, saved my money, and then went over to Silver and Horland in New York, which was the big store we all knew about in Jersey, and I bought my first cymbal. I would just sit and play it—ching, ching, ching. That sound of that cymbal compared with that dinky thing. I just had a feast of sounds. I kept delivering papers and kept saving for things like a cheap hi-hat stand and cheap cymbals.

Within six months of my having the drums, I saw the movie *Blues in the Night*, the great classic movie from 1941, with Billy Halop as the drummer, and I thought he was it. He was a dynamic, good-looking guy. The movie was about a jazz band that traveling around and was really broke, but it gave me a sense of camaraderie, even though I didn't have anybody but me and the drums at the time. I watched it a few months ago, and it's still so great. Billy Halop was such an inspiration to me, and it was a good time for me to see that movie.

I was a Boy Scout and my scout master, Joe Ryder, who was a great guy, was a marching drummer. I asked him to give me some lessons—he didn't have a drum set, but it was a way to get started. At age fifteen or sixteen, my very best friend Kenny O'Brien, who first played clarinet, switched to bass, and we practiced together in my basement. I was later able to get him a job with Charlie Ventura when we were eighteen. In later life I really appreciated that I'd had such a good buddy, whose fanaticism for music was just like mine. We'd both get up at 4:00 in the morning, and start out on the subway for New York, with a sandwich in a brown bag, so that we would be first or second in line at the Paramount to see a band. We'd stand in the winter cold, sometimes for two hours, so we'd get a good seat and never thought anything but "Ain't this great!" We'd get there at 6:00 a.m., they'd open the doors at 8:00, and they'd start the first show at 9:00. We'd stay for three or four shows—we'd know that frickin' movie really good!

The pièce de résistance was we went to see Gene Krupa at the Capital Theater. Gene Krupa did a great show. He brought out two white timpani, and

he played a symphonic piece on the timpani, and then he played on the drum set. We thought that was the greatest—we stayed for two shows. The movie shown at the Capital when Gene played there was *Since You Went Away*, about WWII veterans. The movie ran two hours and twenty minutes, and with the the fill-in extras and the news, we had to wait close to three hours in between each stage show. One of us would go pee while the other watched his seat. And we'd eat our bagged sandwiches—it was a great time. All that waiting—we didn't care about the movie— was worthwhile when that band came up in the orchestra pit and the light went on.

Four years later, I was sitting up on the drums with Tommy Dorsey's band when Buddy Rich had left. The stage went up for the first time and Dorsey began to play the theme, and the hair on my neck stood up because I had sat on the other side of the stage. I thought, "Boy, you are one lucky guy. Four years ago, I was watching; today, I'm sitting up here."

One of my favorite places to go during my teenage years was the Café Rouge in the Hotel Pennsylvania, down at 33rd Street. This was really a treat—I'd take the subway for ten cents from Jersey City and would get off at 33rd Street. Then after I walked through a long tunnel, the Hotel Pennsylvania was right there. As usual, I'd wear my good confirmation suit with a shirt and tie. I tried to look like a neat, young teenager—and hoping to look older than I was, of course. I found out I could stand outside of the velvet rope in front of the Café Rouge, where I wasn't in anyone's way, and nobody ever bothered me—they were very nice. I think they knew I was there to hear the music. I could see the band quite clearly, straight ahead of me, and hear it, too. That's where I went to hear Les Brown's band, with the wonderful Dick Shanahan. I went a lot of times to hear the '44-'45 edition of Woody Herman's band, with the great Davey Tough on drums. I had been listening to him for close to two years on the radio on "remotes," which were radio broadcasts from hotels and nightclubs around the country. That was a great for the jazz listener. I had to stay up a little late at night to listen, which I did by putting my radio under the covers in bed. I'd hear Davey just swinging his butt off with Woody's band. When I finally got to see him for the first time, there was this little guy, who looked like he weighed 95 pounds. He was small and frail-looking, yet he was driving with a Mack truck power, and he made great big, flowing motions with his arms when he played—very loose, about as loose as you could imagine a drummer playing. I was so thrilled to death to finally see this vision of rhythmic intensity. I got friendly with him, and he was so nice to me. He took me down to his house in Greenwich Village, gave me a couple of intellectual magazines (because he was an intellectual) and told me what would be good to read—the *Partisan Review* and things like that. He was just so very friendly and helpful. He had an abstract sense of humor and was a great writer. He would have written great stuff if he had lived longer.

We really didn't talk too much about drums. He liked to talk about lit-

erature and other things. I met his lovely little wife, Casey. I would go to Café Rouge three times a week when Woody and Davey were there for a couple of weeks. They would play something that would last maybe ten minutes, like “Flying Home,” and they would be swinging so hard. I was so impressed that I finally snuck over by the bandstand on a couple of nights, and when the musicians walked off the bandstand, little Davey was still sitting there wiping himself off—he was soaking wet with sweat—and as they went by him, almost every musician said, “That was great, Davey,” and it made such an impression on me because he didn’t play a note of solo drums. He played what was more important—a great rhythmic foundation for that band.

Boy, I’ll tell you, no one could swing harder in a big band than Davey. It was just uplifting to hear. It was a selfless sort of thing. He was only concerned for the group, with what he could contribute to the band. They respected him so much that his nickname was Jesus Christ (seriously, that was his nickname), meaning he could do no wrong, and that’s how everyone looked up to him. It was a great, great listening experience. He used to let me sit in once in a while on 52nd Street. He was another example of the older, friendly drummer who had a lot of heart and patience for younger guys like me.

Davey was a great guy, a wonderful guy, and he was very kind to me—very encouraging—and he let me play every once in a while. But he was a terrible drinker. He fell and hit his head while intoxicated, and died at age 41. It was very tragic; it was a shame. My idol, Sidney Catlett, also died early, at age 41, but he didn’t bring it on himself. He liked to stay up and party a lot, but as far as I know, he wasn’t known as a big drinker. He died of a heart attack while at the theater. We lost those two guys much too soon. Both were wonderful drummers and great guys, and they both treated a young guy like me so very, very well. Big Sid Catlett would see me over in the nightclub. By the time he noticed me about the fourth time, he said to me, “You a drummer?” And when I answered, “Yes, sir,” he said, “I think we’ll have you play a tune.”

Oh, my God! It was Ben Webster on saxophone; Erroll Garner, who became one of the world’s most famous pianists, on piano; and a great bass player named John Simmons. Big Sid had me get up there and play two tunes with them—I was only seventeen! They all told me that I sounded good, but I think they might have been lying.

THE GOOD OL' DAYS— THE STAGE-SHOW ERA

I started going to stage shows when I was fourteen or fifteen, which puts it about 1944. At that time, we had the Paramount Theater, the Strand Theater, the Capital Theater, and Loew's State all going at the same time. Each presented a movie and a show, all year, seven days a week. Loew's State didn't have the biggest acts, but that's where I first saw Louie Jordan's absolutely sensational little big band, and Louie Jordan sang, "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby." That was his big record. The theaters presented a stage show, which was a variety show that usually featured a big band, so it would be Tommy Dorsey, and as a very excellent guest star, it would be Tony Martin, the singer, and maybe a great dance act, like Buck and Bubbles.

One of the reasons I did well in that field was that I played a very good show. That helped me a lot, because besides playing with the band, I had to play new music with the acts all the time. The band acted as the back-up for all of the acts, so I had to be a good reader and show drummer. It was a lot of fun. I have always enjoyed pretty much all aspects of show business. I enjoy playing for a good tap dancer, with good timing and good steps. I even enjoy playing for jugglers, even though they're the hardest to play for because you have to keep the band together by the drumbeats with your feet, while drumming with your hands to catch the tricks—and they're never in time. Jugglers throw a ball in the air and catch it, and it never comes out in rhythm. So the secret, which I'm giving publicly for the first time now, is to keep the band together with your feet and catch all the abstract things with your hands. Many drummers screw up when they play with a juggler, because they try to do everything with the tricks, and the band goes bye-bye. They don't keep the band together enough because they're concentrating on the act.

It was a great era; it was a time when the crowd wasn't turned over—they could stay through to the next show. Once, as a member of the audience, I stayed for four Woody Herman shows. I remember the stage coming up from below the floor, and he was playing "Blue Flame," very slowly with tom-toms, and the lights would flicker, and the audience went wild. It was very, very glamorous at that time for young musicians. Once the stage was up, the band