

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword, Mel Tormé..	.1
How This book Was Written	.5
Legend of Gene Krupa	.7
Chapter One, Style of Gene Krupa	.11
Chapter Two, Early Years through the Goodman Years .	.19
Chapter Three, Goodman Breakup	.29
Chapter Four, The First Bands	.39
Chapter Five, The Drug Bust .	.53
Chapter Six, Second Bands .	.57
Chapter Seven, Blindfold Test .	.73
Chapter Eight, End of an Era	.77
Photographs .	.87
Chapter Nine, Reviews of Small Groups .	.107
Chapter Ten, Basis of Jazz	.113
Chapter Eleven, Gene Krupa/Buddy Rich	.119
Chapter Twelve, Gene Krupa Story	.127
Chapter Thirteen, Slowing Down	.133
Chapter Fourteen, Gene Krupa on Drummers .	.139
Chapter Fifteen, Musicians on Krupa	.143
Chapter Sixteen, Interviews	.157
Chapter Seventeen, Krupa and the Symphony	.175
Chapter Eighteen, Beat of the Drum	.185
Chapter Nineteen, Death and Tributes	.189
Appendix	.193
Chronology	.194
Awards	.198
Gene Krupa/Collective Personnel	.199
Filmography.	.204
Album Titles	.207
Index	.212

*Gene Kemp*

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**FOREWORD**

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**BY MEL TORMÉ**

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## FOREWORD

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BY MEL TORMÉ

In 1940 I was 15 years old and growing up on the South Side of Chicago. Three blocks away from where I lived was a street called Kingston. One block up from Kingston there existed a corner grocery store, replete with green awning. I used to walk over to that store a few times a week, just to stare at the awning. On it, in faded white lettering, were two names: LYKKE and KRUPA. Gene's family owned that store and the sheer magic of those five letters – K-R-U-P-A – acted upon me like a magnet.

Like every other aspiring young drummer in the country, the very mention of the name "Gene Krupa" conjured up images of excitement, glamor, jazz and that conglomerate of white pearl Slingerlands and burnished Zildjian cymbals that set this neophyte percussionist's heart soaring.

I had met Gene as a child, when I was appearing in kid vaudeville units in and around Chicago. He never spoke down to me, never treated me with anything other than kindness and encouragement. I started playing drums in the Shakespeare Grammar School Drum and Bugle Corps when I was eight. By the time 1937 rolled around and Krupa had made history with Benny Goodman, I was as obsessed with being a drummer as anyone in America.

There is an old gag in our business: "Hey, man! Didja hear? Cootie left the Duke!" (Inevitably to evolve into "Chubby left Woody, etc.") When Gene left Benny to form his own band in 1938, it was no joke. Speculation was hot around our school. Would Gene make it as a bandleader? Who would he get to play in his band? And what about

Benny? What? Davey Tough? Replacing Krupa? Oh yeah, he keeps great time but...replacing KRUPA?

Krupa cost me a bike, the only one I ever had. My aunt Ruth bought me a Roamer bicycle for my 13th birthday. My family, like every other Depression era family, felt the terrible squeeze of the fractured economy, and a bike like that was a genuine luxury. My best pal, Vic Grenock and I took the Roamer on a shakedown cruise the Saturday following my birthday. Destination: the Tivoli Theater on Cottage Grove Avenue to see a new Bob Hope movie, *Some Like it Hot*. Debuting in that film was the brand new Gene Krupa Orchestra. I chained my beloved new bike to a lamp post right in front of the Tivoli. Vic and I sat through two shows, tapping our feet and pounding the seats in front of us in time to *Wire Brush Stomp* and *Some Like It Hot* and *The Lady's In Love With You* and *Jungle Madness*. When we walked out of the darkened theater into the fading light, the Roamer was gone. Never another bike, but I saw that movie again and again. It turns up on TV occasionally, re-titled *Rhythm Romance* for obvious reasons.

When I moved out to California with my folks, toward the end of WWII, the Hollywood Palladium was in full swing. Gene's band played there regularly and every night I saw them there, and that was every night, Gene let me sit in with the band on drums. A red letter day (actually night) in my life was that evening when he asked me to join the band as alternate drummer. By then I had a vocal group called the Mel Tones and was unable to accept his offer. Wish I could have.

During the war, he had forsaken his now-famous heraldic bass drum monogram with the familiar "GK" painted in large, black relief, and opted for a patriotically-devised rendering in red, white and blue, with bombers in the center of the head, encircled with the motto: "Let's Go America - Keep 'Em Flying." His drums took one hell of a beating not only from his virile drumnastics but from the constant travelling, setting up, breaking down of the set, the throwing of tom-toms and snare drum and bass drum in and out of fiber cases. Yet he seemed to retain the same set of drums for years at a time. When I asked him why he didn't order a new set from Slingerland, he smiled and said: "Are you kidding? These drums are just broken in." "These drums" were six years old. When I became a

Slingerland user and endorser, "Bud" Slingerland and eventually Don Osborne, Sr. told me that they had to practically beg Gene to accept new drum sets. He never took unfair advantage of the fact that he had virtually "made" the Slingerland Drum Company and that his name, over and above anyone else's, was SYNONYMOUS with the word "drums."

Gene Krupa was as much a gentleman as he was a musician. The men who worked for him happily attest to this. Unquestionably, he was eclectic. He gleaned from the likes of Zutty Singleton, Chick Webb and perhaps even Baby Dodds. The thing is, he developed a style of playing that was comprehensible and copyable. That's what most of the drummers of the day, particularly the white drummers, did. Buddy Schutz aped Gene. So did the early Louis Bellson. Even young Buddy Rich incorporated several of Gene's "licks" in his outings with the Artie Shaw band in 1939. Like Ray McKinley, Jo Jones and Ray Bauduc, he was a highly musical drummer, not perhaps so much during his tenure with Benny, but afterward, with his own band.

In 1970, during a TV special in which we both participated, he told me how much he loved the music of Frederick Delius, an English composer who wrote, during the late 19th and early 20th Century, some of the most beautiful orchestral music imaginable. Since Delius is, coincidentally, my favorite composer, Gene and I talked animatedly about him for over an hour. Krupa was super-knowledgable on the subject. He really was an appreciator, a connoisseur and authority on music of all sorts, not merely a dabbler.

One night, in 1982, Benny Goodman came in to see me while I was appearing at a New York night club called Marty's. Between shows, I did something I have always wanted to do; I sat and talked with BG for over an hour about the old days. I was surprised to learn that he did not particularly care for the convoluted, avant-garde arrangements during the "forties" period of his band; that he did like Mel Powell's playing, composing and arranging was no great revelation. Fletcher Henderson was his all-time favorite arranger for the Goodman band, and that thirties band was closest to his heart.

Drummers?

**“How about Davey Tough, Benny? Harry Yeager, Buddy Schutz? Sid Catlett? Buddy Rich? Louis Bellson? They all played for you at one time or another. Who was the best?”**

**Benny smiled patiently. “Gene. Gene was the best. There was no one like Gene.”**

**Amen.**