

Gene Lees *Ad Libitum* &  
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## Socks

Bobby Scott has been frequently on my mind of late. Bobby was tall, and very thin. In later years he wore a beard which was, like his full head of hair, gray-white. He had a Bronx accent. His idol Lester Young nicknamed him Bobby Socks, because he was only eighteen when he joined the Gene Krupa Quartet and toured with Prez in Jazz at the Philharmonic. This got shortened to Socks, and I never called him anything else.

He was a marvelous arranger and orchestrator, one of the many invisible ghost writers for Quincy Jones, along with (especially) the late Billy Byers. He was an exceptional pianist who could play in any style. He had been trained by the teacher who had trained William Kappel. He was a splendid accompanist who had been music director for both Bobby Darin and Dick Haymes. He was a good singer himself, in a rough sort of style, and added to the evidence for my hypothesis that the best accompanists can themselves sing.

He was also a songwriter whose tunes included *A Taste of Honey* and *He's Not Heavy, He's My Brother*. Bobby's music was not restricted to jazz. He wrote some exquisite pieces for the distinguished harpist Gloria Agostini, a full album of them, which alas will never be issued. He also wrote some wonderful music for himself on piano and the virtuoso Brazilian guitarist Carlos Barbosa-Lima, with whom he toured, doing concerts. I have tapes of their work together, which I will treasure always. It isn't jazz, it isn't "classical" music. I don't know what it is. It's just marvelous, gentle, very original music that often sounds Irish.

When I first knew him, I thought Bobby didn't like me and avoided him. Then he recorded one of my songs with sensitive attention to my lyric. Soon thereafter I ran into him on Broadway a few blocks north of Times Square and thanked him and discovered that he *didn't* dislike me. I just didn't know him. That changed in the years ahead. We developed one of those friendships that is best defined as love. When I started the *Jazzletter* in 1982 on the premise that it wasn't about musicians but *for* musicians, Bobby became an impassioned letter writer: I'd get two or three long letters a week

from him, on all manner of subjects.

Bobby was, from what he told me, a mixture of Irish, Seminole, black, and I think Jewish. At one time he was a very hard drinker. Once when he was well into his cups, his mother said, "Which drunk am I talking to, the Indian or the Irishman?" His father was a Broadway actor who taught him an early skepticism about show business. He was volatile, and there are those who would argue that he was mad. Maybe he was, a little. But it was an inspired madness, full of dark and flashing insights. He was an ardent Catholic and a dedicated student of theology.

Bobby apparently had another and secret life, which I first heard about from the late publisher Nat Shapiro, then from others, and finally, in bits and pieces, from Bobby himself. Bobby was a mercenary soldier, an expert with weapons, who would disappear from time to time to go to God-knows what jungles and savannas and do things I don't even want to know about. He was incensed by the West's indifference to the genocide in Africa, and he knew the subject intimately.

In 1984, I wrote the lyrics for an album recorded by Sarah Vaughan in Dusseldorf. The suite was a plea for preservation of this planet, based on poems of Pope John Paul II, which I translated rather freely. Bobby was the pianist on that epic session, which I described at the time in a *Jazzletter*. When Sass saw the size of the orchestra and the scope of Francy Boland's arrangements, she got scared. I taught her that entire score in three days. But my backups were Bobby and my dear friend Sahib Shihab. I remember Shihab, in frustration, singing her the lines; he'd done the copy work on the score, and knew it thoroughly. And I remember Bobby in the basement of a Dusseldorf hotel playing accompaniment on a spinet while I sang the songs and she sang unison with me, trying to assimilate this material. We made it, though.

I learned that Bobby had cancer. He didn't want it known. He told me, "I'm going to beat this." He had reason to. He and his wife Judy had a daughter named Amber, who had become the soul and center of his life.

On November 7, 1988, I was having lunch with a friend in Santa Barbara. He said, "I read in the *New York Times* this morning that Bobby Scott is dead." It hit me hard.

Later, as I drove through the mountains, I wished I had another piece of Bobby's to print. When I got home, my wife said, "Here's a letter from Bobby Scott, and something he wrote for the *Jazzletter*." I told her he was dead and she burst into tears. She remembered Bobby taking her to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York to light candles with him.

What follows is Bobby's last letter to me.

October 1, 1988

Dear Gene:

I've just come back from Spain, London, and Puerto Rico, partly touring with Carlos, and being received well at the festivals. Even sang pop things in Cordova!

But I did record this long suite before I left. I received the dupes on the day of my return. Knowing your inclination toward my harp writing, I have to send you your copy in the first batch to hit the mails. As usual, Gloria turns in a monumental performance of a rather difficult work. It required on her part an understanding, as the form is larger than the short pieces I wrote for her a few years ago, which you have. This suite takes things a bit farther along the road to the bigness of concert works. I also explored some newer sonorities, and, I feel, have succeeded rather well.

Though the suite smells of certain influences, I also see myself, my real self, dancing about inside of it. And I begin to realize that Delius' dictum about capturing tranquility had always struck a nerve in me. Maybe it is why I have always preferred Bill Evans to certain busier players. I no longer want to bring my hostility to the paper I'm writing on. I'll let the immature fellows bowl the listeners over. I just want to whisper in their ears, and maybe approximate the joy there is, and wisdom, in an ancient Gaelic couplet: "Like a candle in a holy place, such is the beauty in an aging face."

Amber grows like a weed, and is just four this month. She is as beautiful as the soft wind of a May day. I've lost a few pounds traveling, but I'll rebound. Age is the pits, I'm afraid, and traveling reminds me, with pain, that I'm not 22 but 52.

My ideal has always been to live myself to death, and I only ask God to grant it to me.

Much love from your pal in the Apple.

Socks

Bobby's abilities seemed to know no limitations. He could well have been a writer. His letters were highly articulate, dealing with everything from history to music to reflections on Aquinas.

At one point he asked me if I would be interested in his writing an essay on his idolized friend Lester Young. I said, of course, "You bet!" But he said he had no idea how in the

world to go about writing an extended piece. I said, "Write it like your letters. Do it in segments and send them to me. When you get to the right ending place, I'll know it and I'll tell you, 'Stop!'" And that's how we did it.

Every so often, I'll get a letter from some publication asking for permission to reprint that piece. I always grant it.

He wrote pieces for the *Jazzletter* on Dick Haymes, Bobby Darin, Buddy Rich, and Gene Krupa. It was the Gene Krupa piece that set me to thinking about Bobby recently.

From time to time somebody in the movie industry will contact me regarding a possible movie about a jazz musician. Sometimes the request comes with a script by someone else, asking me what's wrong with it and can I fix it? What's wrong with it, invariably, is that it's crap.

The latest came from a producer. It's about Gene Krupa, and it is simply godawful. Why the movie people are interested only in portraying jazz musicians as drunks, dopers, and all-round degenerates is beyond me. And the one about Krupa was disgusting, not to mention flagrantly in error.

Gene's place in jazz history in part rests on his role in the development of the drum kit. He recorded several sides in 1927 with Eddie Condon and Red Mackenzie, the first musician ever to use a bass drum played with a foot pedal. He collaborated with the Avedis Zildjian Company in the development of the hi-hat cymbals, also played with a foot pedal, and he was a pioneer in the use of the various cymbals, which he gave their names. He established the use of tomtoms mounted on the bass drum. He established his own band in 1938, and it was one of the best. He played with dramatic physical abandon, his dark hair waving on his forehead as he slammed his way through roaring solos on the kit he had done so much to develop. His drum method was published in 1938. It became the standard text and is still used.

When I was music and drama critic of the *Louisville Times* in the mid-1950s, Jazz at the Philharmonic came to town. Among the groups performing were the Oscar Peterson Trio and the Gene Krupa Quartet. I was impressed by Krupa's young pianist, someone named Bobby Scott, and said so in print. Years later Bobby sent me a photocopy of it. He had treasured it all those years.

That dreadful script about Krupa sent me back into memories of Bobby and the piece he wrote for the *Jazzletter* about Gene. Re-reading it, I found it more than a little moving, a sweet, dear, gentle piece. Since many of the current readers were not subscribers in 1983, and others may have forgotten it, I thought that I would not be remiss if I reprinted it, along with these thoughts about Socks.

I wish that there were some way I could tell him that his daughter is now 23.

# Gene Remembered

By Bobby Scott

Eugene Boris Krupa was an enigma.

His tiny frame belied his impact on the music world of his heyday. People could not associate so small a man with the sound of his drumming. It was only after a double take that he was recognized and entered the ken of the observer. That was, to him, just fine. He'd spent his later years living down a slip he had never even made.

The Old Man, as I called him, in keeping with the traditions 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, he had tasted them. But in fact they frightened him, in a way that liquor never did.

In the year or so I worked for and traveled with him, we spoke two or three times at most of his "hitch" in prison for a "crime" he never committed. It was not the recollection of the bars on the windows and the isolation that troubled him but the shame of it. He said it had changed him inwardly.

He described his arrival in prison. "This one screw took me to the laundry, where I'd been assigned to work, Chappie." *Chappie* was his name 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, dontcha see, and says, 'The first guy that gives 'im any help . . . gets the hole.' You understand 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 from men he had never met. The convicts knew he'd been rail-roaded. They made sure his delicate drumming hands never touched lye or disinfectants during the time he was there. One afternoon an old-timer inquired, "How long's your stretch, Krupa?" When Gene told him, the convict retorted, "Jesus! I could do that standin' on my head."

Gene said that that was the best tonic he had received behind bars. It made him see things in a jailhouse long view. 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 had learned until quite recently, about the same time I joined his group, in the fall of 1954.

Gene Krupa was a totally honest man. 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. 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, Red Mitchell's brother, who later became a television writer and producer. 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 pending jobs and travel. Then 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 from a living legend, this self-deprecation startled me. I came away that day thinking that I could learn something about deflating my own ego from this tiny, gentle, soft-spoken, dapper older fellow. He was forty-five then.

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 contributions to the quartet were insightful, and they came out of 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 kicked 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 waltz, the three of us threw glances at each other. The Old Man reminded us of the melody's rhythmic character. He said it would lay well as a four-four bounce. 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 recorded a single under Gene's aegis for Verve, *Danny Boy* and *She's Funny That Way*, with Norman Granz as producer. 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 at the Crescendo in Hollywood. He told me

that he had no doubt I would make a success with singing and writing, which amazed me. And then, once, in a rather serious mood, he urged me to address my thoughts to what was coming.

"The toughest thing in life, Chappie, is to mellow with success," he said. "A lot of people with talent never seem to be able to handle success." When you're seventeen, you can't understand such things. He hoped, as he later told me, that I'd begin to set up a value structure to lean on. Gene knew how success can destroy. He had witnessed what it had done to others — what it had done to him. He remarked on an imaginary power that, like a snake, sneaks into your breast and ruins you from within.

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 epoch.

In the winter of 1954-55 during our eight-week gig at the Last Frontier in Vegas, I got an opportunity to clock the Old Man. I was delighted, and sometimes dismayed, 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. 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 contacts with the general public short and avoided making new fans or friends.

He was ritualistic about his day, which had a shape and constancy. In the early 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 remoteness. She cried on my shoulder on several occasions. She was in her thirties, and quite beautiful. 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, dontcha see, Chappie," he said.

"Hell, we're on the road, Ace," I said. *Ace* was my nickname for him.

"Certain things you just can'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 blackjack, 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 Gene Krupa softball team, made up mainly of Yonkers policemen and neighborhood friends.

There was no *hauteur* in his aloofness. 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 I 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 couldn't cut the charts or 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 people 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 his band. (*Disc Jockey Jump* is a classic from that pen.)

One afternoon in Vegas, the four of us were in Gene's room. Gene sat on the huge high bed, his short legs hanging off the fat mattress, as a child's would, feet not touching the floor. Eddie Shu, bassist John Drew, who had recently replaced Whitey Mitchell, and I sat on chairs semi-circling our leader. The conversation turned to "serious" music, the written variety so often and incorrectly called "classical."

Eddie was talking of his beloved Prokofiev. Gene raised the subject of Delius. He sent his bandboy-valet-aide Pete out to buy a record player and every available album of Delius music. We ordered sandwiches and beer. Our anticipation had reached a zenith when Pete came through the door with a new portable phonograph and an armful of LPs. The music we heard made the afternoon one of the most pleasurable I've known. Sadly, one is hard put today 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 Delius often developed his materials. He thought it pernicious to treat one's musical thoughts in such a lack-a-day manner. He was right. But for me it was a matter of the heart, not the brain. There was a glowing genius in Delius's vision, his sheer individuality. That uniqueness could not easily be dismissed. 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 Gene found much in Delius' music to commend it. He credited Delius 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 *Old Man River*. Gene didn't mean to imply that Jerome Kern had plagiarized it. He meant only to show that Kern, like others, was affected by Delius.

That afternoon, acres of hours were expended on *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*. I discovered that I was disposed to this music, that it spoke to me 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. Delius, unlike Wagner, never rages. It is his understating that draws the listener. 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.

Gene pointed to the folk-song elements in the last scene of the opera about miscegenation, *Koanga*, insisting that Delius was years ahead of other composers, Gershwin particularly, in using what can only be termed American materials, materials we've come to associate with jazz, blues, and popular music. This is no doubt a startling view to those who find Delius painfully English, a star brightly shining in the Celtic twilight. But Delius's own inclinations drew him to 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 that day. (He would later laugh on learning that Delius and I had the same birthdate, 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 Ravel's *Bolero* in Japan. The recording was never released because Ravel's one remaining relative, a brother, sat heavily on the estate. Gene never did tell me what departures he'd made from the score.

Gene's knowledge of what had gone before was surprising. Even as a kid, he said, he'd been drawn to "serious" music. So were his confreres. Wasn't Gershwin a departure? And what of Paul Whiteman's efforts? He'd laugh, a little chuckle he had, never a full guffaw. Then he'd draw attention to the obvious differences between 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" were 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, preferring the work of Woody Herman's and Duke Ellington's bands.

Gene said he'd tried his best to keep his band alive. "But going to jail," he told me, "meant going through one fortune I'd saved and it took darn near another one to put things 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, "I couldn't stomach the man, personally, Chappie. Too self-centered."

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 a surrogate father to a group of young musicians. "The problems *never* end, Chappie. Musi-

cians are great human beings, but face it: we're all kids. And I don't mean boy scouts, either."

But Gene didn't have the inclination to adapt to small-group drumming either. He tried, 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 he wasn't greedy. The year and a half I was with him 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, with 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, 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. "Lullabies? 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. 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 our polling places that brought us together. It is shared aspirations in the same language that does it. When Louis Armstrong ventured north, bringing his New Orleans-born music, he found a Chicago version, a dialect of the music, already in existence. Jazz has proved it is the homogenizing influence, and the social historians have passed over this fact.

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 of loading up the initial cost?

He was 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 and 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." The answer was matter of fact, with no hint of malice. "No one ever played like that before, and no one will ever play like that again," he said another night as we listened to one of Bud's fabled solos. I was made to understand that Buddy was Buddy, and that was that.

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 Frontier. And who did the carrying? Little 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 from 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 his obliqueness, and the conversation turned to Ethel. "She's *very* ill, Chappie." He stared out of the plane's window into the infinity of sky, 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, dontcha 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 of 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 troubles being married to Ethel entailed — and I got a notion from people close to him of how hard she had tried him when they were divorced — 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 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 eventually 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 that time, I was struck by Gene's moral position that doing the right thing did not always make one feel good. And the difference is all one need understand to get an 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 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. What Gene bit off, he chewed.

He gave me the impression that he'd had a hell-raising youth. That was in contrast to the behavior of his devout Polish immigrant parents. He mentioned a younger brother, apple of his mother's eye, who disappeared. Gene said his brother was "beautiful," and if his own face was the measure of that family's appearance, one could believe it. There was a suggestion that some deranged sexual pervert had abused and then disposed of the boy. Whatever happened, no trace of him 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. 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 in Indiana, during which it became clear to him, he said, that he was not worthy to wear the cloth 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 see that it was 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 intractable 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. 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, 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 have been as solid as a rock, his consolation and his hope. He was not a proselytizing zealot. He honored everyone's right to feel, to believe or not to 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 hidebound, 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 transfig-

ured. I have come to believe after 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 aid and abetter 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.

Gene had no such grand pretensions. 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 ways 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 position of Paul. 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 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 smoldering 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 no evil of anyone," 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 in his later years 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 depth of his deference. Such is the pride that lives in that tiny man, I told her.

He 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 had 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. How he came to grips with all this, I do not know. To make things worse, his conviction for a narcotics offense he did not commit ruled out his adopting children. It was only some years after my time in his quartet that — with the help 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.

"Jesus, 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 an 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 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's good enough to get me off the hook. I made the damn mistake and 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 wakes we leave, and the effects, 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 on 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 said, 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 an 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 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 achieve 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 art with Gershwin's, as he did in a 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 and 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.

And I was lucky enough once to have played with the Gene Krupa Quartet. 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 Gene. I was pregnant with ideas I had held inside for that period of playing and traveling. I learned that 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.

The last year of Gene's 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 couldn't get a day to myself. My mother called to tell me not to go up one particular day because Gene had checked himself into a hospital for transfusions. She'd heard it on the radio. Gene was now sixty-six.

The next day, I think, was Sunday. 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 in the afternoon after writing almost all night. But the next morning, October 16, 1973, I was up, bathed and dressed and starting out the door when the phone rang.

"What are you doing up so early?" my mother said.

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

There was a long pause and then her sigh cut into me. "Don't bother, son," she said. "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 went with her to Gene's wake. I can still feel his cold and tiny hands under my own hands, his 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 shout: "You made me what I am, Gene! I'd be *nothing* except for you. Nothing!"

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

She said, "He wasn't too bad a stepfather to you, either, Jocko."

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