

Hal Blaine

Mary Anne Jeansonne

Hal Blaine was born Harold Belsky on February 5, 1929 to Meyer and Rose Belsky in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Hal began playing with drumsticks to the radio when he was about 8 years old. He made his first pair of sticks from furniture dowels that came off the backrest of a chair in his living room. Hal used to go to the State Theater in Hartford, Connecticut where he saw every drummer and big band of the 40's, among them being Glenn Miller, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Woody Herman and the Herd, Les Brown, Gene Krupa, Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Artie Shaw, and Harry James. He was hooked very early on.

For Hal's 13th birthday his sister Marcia bought him his first set of drums. Hal recalls, "It consisted of one bass drum, wood, unknown brand; one snare, also wood, unknown brand; one short hi-hat with small 10" cymbals; one bass drum pedal, Ludwig or WFL, the old pedal that looked like a skeleton. This was a terrible kit.

Due to Hal's father's bad health from asthma the family left Connecticut for California in 1944, where he attended San Bernardino High School. In 1946, with the enlistment age lowered to 16, Hal joined the army where he was drafted into the base band. He actually became a corporal and was discharged in 1948. At age 20 Hal moved to Chicago to study at the Roy C. Knapp School of Percussion. Old man Roy Knapp personally taught Gene Krupa. Hal studied there for 3 years. In 1951 Hal completed his Knapp training and returned to San Bernardino.

When Hal signed on to tour with Tommy Sands it was a great career break. He gained valuable

studio experience drumming on Tommy's records and meeting Capital Records producers. Hal also learned much from Earl Palmer who led Hal to play with the Tijuana Brass. His first *Record of the Year* was "A Taste of Honey". Hal became part of a group of regular session players who called themselves *The Wrecking Crew*, a nickname that came about because the older established studio musicians thought they were wrecking the music



business. The Wrecking Crew dressed in jeans and t-shirts and had a laid-back spontaneous approach. Hal's discography of top ten hits proves that he is very likely the most recorded drummer of all time. His drumbeats helped make the Phil Spector sound. He has worked with legends such as Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin to rock royalty ranging from The Beach Boys, The Mamas and The Papas, The Fifth Dimension, and John Denver. Hal holds a key place in the golden era of popular record making.

I had the extreme pleasure of meeting Hal Blaine last September at the Atlanta Vintage Drum

Show where he gave an insightful clinic to a full house. To sum up my impression of him is simple; he is truly down-to-earth nice guy with a great sense of humor. I corresponded with Hal and he answered some questions and filled me in on what he's been up to lately.

Mary Anne Jeansonne: Tell me about your personal collection, your snare drums.

Hal Blaine: I have donated a 60's Ludwig kit to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. I donated several drums to the Los Angeles Unified School District, several others to young students that I heard about from their teachers. These were ghetto poor kids.

MAJ: What drum company endorsements have you had in your career?

HB: Ludwig, Rogers, Pearl, and Mapex.

MAJ: How many years have you been giving clinics?

HB: I started with Pearl, about 10 years ago.

A Partial Discography of Hal Blaine

Can't Help Falling in Love - Elvis Presley

Surfin' USA - The Beach Boys

Everybody Loves Somebody - Dean Martin

Mr. Tambourine Man - The Byrds

California Dreamin' - The Mamas & The Papas

Midnight Confession - The Grass Roots

Bridge Over Troubled Water - Simon & Garfunkel

I Am I Said - Neil Diamond

We've Only Just Begun - The Carpenters

MacArthur Park - Richard Harris

Be My Baby - The Ronettes

Fun Fun Fun - The Beach Boys

I Got You Babe - Sonny and Cher

Strangers in the Night - Frank Sinatra

Tracks of My Tears - Johnny Rivers

Aquarius - The Fifth Dimension

I Need You - America

Half Breed - Cher

Jose Cuervo - Shelly West

I Just Dropped In - The First Addition

MAJ: Did you ever give drum lessons to students?

HB: No

MAJ: Did you have a favorite recording studio?

HB: The Gold Star Studios in Hollywood with owners Dave Gold, Stan Ross, and Larry Levine. Eventually it burned down.

MAJ: Can you tell me what drummers influenced you at the start of your career and who do you admire at the present time?

HB: Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Dave Tough, Joe Jones, et al. Jim Keltner, Earl Palmer, Steve Gadd, Greg Bissonette, teacher Larry Levine, Liberty Devito, and Vinnie Colaiuta.

MAJ: What advice would you give to drummers as far as ways to practice?

HB: Don't over practice, stay considerably loose. Read as much as possible, DON'T EVER CONSIDER DRUGS!! Listen to everything including classical. Learn all kinds of rhythms from all the Latin and European countries.

MAJ: You're planning to publish a book of your photography. Tell me about it. When will it be available and can it be purchased on your website?

HB: Eventually it will be finished. I'm working with Robert L. Dean, a great photographer at 20th Century Fox. Probably a year from now. It will be on the website, a number of publishers want it.

MAJ: You've worked recently with Nancy Sinatra again. Can you fill us in on what you're doing with her?

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HB: We just played our last concert at The Whiskey A-Go-Go. I played and recorded there with Johnny Rivers. I did a live album there with Nancy, looks like we're both retiring.

MAJ: I'm a huge Frank Sinatra fan. I just finished Tina Sinatra's new book, "My Father's Daughter". Have you read it?

HB: I haven't read it. Tina is sort of the matriarch of the family and is the head of Sinatra Enterprises. His fabulous desert estate was just sold, including his train collection probably worth \$ 200,000 or more.

MAJ: What other hobbies or projects are you presently working on?

HB: No more hobbies since yachting. I just did a Hawaiian album with Rick Cunha, the grandson of Sonny Cunha, a major songwriter of the 1920's thru the 50's

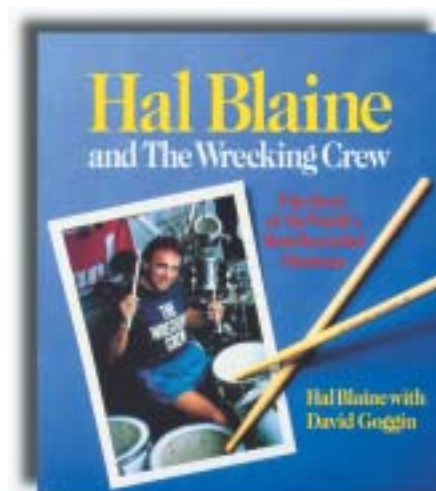
MAJ: Your discography list is truly amazing. If you had to pick a favorite recording would it be MacArthur Park?

HB: Probably, because of the time element. I don't mean drum time, I mean the 60's. Also any of the 8 Grammy Record of the Year songs.

MAJ: Thanks Hal !!!!

Hal Blaine and The Wrecking Crew

details the life of Hal Blaine and his prolific recording career. An excellent book of one of music's most in-demand musicians.



A Picture From the Past - 1965

From left to right, Jr. Normand, Bobby Brodnax, Errol Briggs, Pete Jeansonne, Ralph Gibson, Bobby Howard, Danny Fontenot
Peacock Club - Marksville, La.

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