

Legendary “Wrecking Crew” drummer Hal Blaine dead at 90

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Drummer Hal Blaine died March 11, one month past his 90th birthday. Blaine was an incredibly prolific studio musician who appeared on countless recordings during the 1960s and 1970s. Some estimates place his number of recording sessions at 35,000 and singles at 6,000. He featured on 150 US top ten hits, 40 of which went to number one. He also appeared on many film and television soundtracks.

As part of the “Wrecking Crew,” a tight-knit group of session players based in Los Angeles, Blaine recorded hits for a diverse range of artists, including Sam Cooke, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, the Byrds, Simon & Garfunkel, Johnny Rivers, Glen Campbell, and John Lennon. Blaine and the Wrecking Crew also made lasting contributions to producer Phil Spector’s famous “wall of sound,” as well as the music of Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys.

Blaine was born Harold Simon Belsky on February 5, 1929, in Holyoke, Massachusetts. His parents, Rose and Meyer Isaac Belsky, were Jewish immigrants from Lithuania and Poland, respectively.

In his memoir *Hal Blaine and the Wrecking Crew*, Blaine described his early life: “We always lived in tenements in a ghetto, where you put dimes and quarters in the gas meter to keep the water hot. We never had a car or a phone. The costs were prohibitive for a poor family. Privacy was something we weren’t familiar with either. You could always hear your neighbor going to the bathroom, walking or even fighting.”

When he was seven years old, Blaine and his family relocated to Hartford, Connecticut, where his father, a shoemaker, had taken a job with the Connecticut Leather Company. Just across the street from Connecticut Leather was the State Theater, where the young Blaine was sent every Saturday with a quarter to

watch an entire day’s worth of shows. That quarter bought him access to some of the leading big bands of the day, including those led by Lionel Hampton, Artie Shaw and Gene Krupa.

Blaine became hooked on the drums. He would return from the shows each Saturday and use wooden dowels from the family furniture as drumsticks to work out the patterns he had heard Krupa or Buddy Rich play.

In his teenage years, Blaine’s family moved to California where he would later have a career. But his first stay there didn’t last long. He joined the army at 16 to avoid trouble with the police, having struck a teacher who pushed a female student down some stairs. He played drums in various army bands, including in Korea just prior to the outbreak of the Korean War.

After a stint in the army, Blaine attended the Roy C. Knapp School of Percussion in Chicago on the GI Bill. Knapp had been the teacher of prominent swing drummers Krupa and Louie Bellson. Like them, Blaine had dreams of playing drums in a big band or some other jazz combo. But by the time he went to work as a professional musician in Los Angeles, the music industry and movie studios were ready to embrace the rock ‘n’ roll craze that began in the 1950s, at least for business purposes. Blaine was open to the new sounds. In any case, that was where the work was.

Blaine most famously supplied the unforgettable drum beat—like a heart palpitation—that opens “Be My Baby,” the classic 1963 “girl group” recording by the Ronettes, produced by Phil Spector. This was one of several densely layered “wall of sound” productions by Spector that Blaine would play on. Others included “Then He Kissed Me” and “Da Doo Ron Ron” by the Crystals and “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’ ” by the Righteous Brothers.

Along with the Spector recordings, Blaine regularly

recorded with the Beach Boys, including on songs such as “ I Get Around ,” “California Girls” and “Good Vibrations,” and virtually the entire *Pet Sounds* album (1966), a landmark in pop music. Following Blaine’s death, Beach Boys’ leader Brian Wilson commented, “Hal Blaine was such a great musician and friend that I can’t put it into words. Hal taught me a lot, and he had so much to do with our success—he was the greatest drummer ever.”

During the 1960s and 1970s, Blaine would drum on songs such as Johnny Rivers’ “The Poor Side of Town ,” Sam Cooke’s “Another Saturday Night.” Simon & Garfunkel’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water” and “Mrs. Robinson,” Frank Sinatra’s “Strangers in the Night” and “That’s Life,” the Byrds’ version of Bob Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man,” “This Diamond Ring” by Gary Lewis and the Playboys, “These Boots are Made for Walkin’ ” by Nancy Sinatra, “Monday, Monday” by The Mamas & The Papas and “I Got You Babe” by Sonny & Cher, to name only a small selection.

Musically, Blaine was a tasteful drummer who knew how to support a song. He was unobtrusive, almost invisible when it was called for—though you would miss him if his part were removed—but he also knew how to get out in front of a song when necessary, as on the propulsive Elvis Presley song “A Little Less Conversation.” His almost melodic phrasing on the drums often became an important part of a composition, as on Cooke’s “Another Saturday Night.”

On these and other recordings, Blaine was joined by the many talented musicians associated with the Wrecking Crew. Among them at various times were bassist Carol Kaye; guitarists Glen Campbell, Tommy Tedesco, James Burton and Barney Kessel; pianists Leon Russell and Don Randi; saxophonist Steve Douglas; and many others. Another of the great drummers involved was Earl Palmer, who had gotten his start playing with rock ‘n’ roll legends like Fats Domino and Little Richard.

Rarely if ever did these musicians receive public credit for their work. They were the musical equivalent of ghost writers. The Wrecking Crew were “secretly” the Monkees, the Partridge Family and sometimes the Association, the Byrds, Paul Revere & the Raiders and whoever else they needed to be. An interesting surf rock band called the Marketts was the Wrecking Crew, Blaine included, on recordings and another band

entirely on tour. Not until the theatrical release in 2015 of the documentary *The Wrecking Crew* by Tommy Tedesco’s son Denny would their names and faces become known to those beyond the most avid music aficionados.

It was reportedly Blaine who gave the Wrecking Crew their nickname, recalling how the old guard of session players felt the new generation of studio musicians playing rock and pop in jeans and T-shirts were going to “wreck” the business.

These wreckers were a generation of musicians who brought with them new sensibilities and attitudes into the music industry. Their young lives coincided with the Civil Rights Movement and the postwar boom. Some of them, like the teenage Blaine and his family, went from living in tenements on the East Coast to nice houses with a garage in California. For a while at least, there was opportunity, room to stretch out. Optimism, openness, sensitivity...all those terms could be used to describe the music of the Wrecking Crew.

Traditional assumptions were being challenged during this time, including existing attitudes toward race relations. The Wrecking Crew were open to things. Unlike the old guard session players they would replace (also very talented, of course), the Wrecking Crew held no prejudice against any genre of music. On the contrary, they listened to and absorbed the best of everything and could play convincingly in many styles.

While guitarist Glen Campbell became a country music star and pianist Leon Russell had a successful career as a singer-songwriter, none of the Wrecking Crew appeared preoccupied by fame or stardom. They were head over heels in love with music. Some were virtuosos, some simply knew how to lay down the right groove at the right time, but all of them were committed to serving the song and becoming great accompanists. They were a real band and one of the best of their times. Blaine’s drumming was their driving engine. His playing feels as fresh and alive today as it did 40 and 50 years ago.



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