

“GENE MUST WEIGH ABOUT A HUNDRED AND FIVE POUNDS WHEN HE’S WRINGING WET, AND YET WHEN YOU LISTEN TO THE RECORDS, HE SOUNDS LIKE THREE GORILLAS WITH CLUBS KILLING EVERYTHING.”

TOM DOWD - ATLANTIC RECORDS ENGINEER

GENE CHRISMAN

THE ESSENTIAL MEMPHIS DRUMMER

BY ALLEN SMITH

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF GENE CHRISMAN

AS THE ABOVE QUOTE FROM TOM DOWD SUGGESTS, MEMPHIS-BORN

drummer Gene Chrisman packs a lot of power in a relatively small frame. When meeting the man in person, it’s hard to believe that this soft-spoken, southern gentleman has laid down drum grooves for the likes of King Curtis, Wilson Pickett, Joe Tex, and Aretha Franklin.

He’s no stranger to country music either. He has played on Nashville sessions for Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and Merle Haggard—to name just a few.

And versatility? That may as well be Gene’s middle name. Consider Dusty Springfield, Neil Diamond, Herbie Mann, Burl Ives, B.J. Thomas, and Julie Andrews. He’s backed them all.

As a founding member of producer Chips Moman’s American Studio rhythm section, Gene played on over 120 hits that were recorded in a little over five years. In 1969, Elvis Presley used the American Studio group to produce *Suspicious Minds*, *Kentucky Rain*, and *In the Ghetto*.

A complete listing of Gene’s recorded output is proof that Gene is eminently qualified for a “most-famous-drummer-you-never-heard-of” award.

To say that Gene is prolific is an understatement. But he remains modest in the face of his accomplishments. His take on the whole thing? “I just did my job.”



Allen Smith (AS): You're one of the essential Memphis drummers. Were you born in Memphis?

Gene Chrisman (GC): I was raised right behind where Elvis lived. He lived on Highway 51 South (now Elvis Presley Boulevard). If you go out his back door, and turn to the right and walk about a mile or so—that's where I grew up. I went to Whitehaven High School and then I later switched to Southside.

AS: How did you get into music?

GC: My mother gave me piano lessons when I was in the fourth grade. I didn't learn it. I didn't know anything about piano and didn't care for it. I hated it.

AS: So you switched to drums. How did that go?

GC: I first started playing on pots and pans and boxes. And playing along with the records. Then my mother got me a set of Gretsch drums at a pawnshop.

AS: Did you play drums in the school band?

GC: I did at one point sign up for band—for about two weeks. But I didn't care for it. I wanted to play R&B or rock and roll.

AS: How did that lead to playing in bands?

GC: I started listening to Fats Domino, Little Richard, Ray Charles and all those guys. Playing along with the records. Some buddies and I got a little group together and we'd piddle around at each other's house or go down to the park and play for nothing.

AS: What did radio stations play back then?

GC: They played rock and roll or R&B, and if they liked it, they'd turn around and play it again. What was neat back then—thank goodness—was that you didn't have to be on a major label. They'd play anything if they liked it. Now you've got five or six major labels—if you're not on one of those, you can forget it. You might as well sell them out of a bus or something.

AS: Were there any drummers that you listened to when you were coming up—did you buy records to study drummers?

GC: No, never bought one. I never bought any record of any drummer—I didn't know any of them back then. I never tried to copy anybody's playing. I just play what I feel



Accompanying Chuck Berry at the Nashville Exit Inn - BMI Show - Early 1980s

and that's it. I like to play to a groove and play to the singer. I don't like being a show-off. I've never been like that. You've got to accompany the song.

AS: Did you hear country on the radio in Memphis?

GC: Yeah, I remember when I was young hearing Johnny Cash and those people. I didn't really know that much about it. Of course in school, when you went to the sock hops they never played country. It was more up-tempo or R&B.

AS: Back then, country didn't have drums on the records...

GC: No, there were no drums at all on the Opry for the longest.

AS: You were more interested in driving songs?

GC: Yeah, or something with a good feel. It didn't have to be driving. Like the Platters' *The Great Pretender*—it's slow, but what a great song.

AS: Your early years sound normal, except that you turned professional. How did that happen?

GC: I started out playing in nightclubs. I was playing one club and Jerry Lee Lewis came in and was looking for a drummer. He hired me and I went on the road with him.

AS: Tell me about that. Who was in the band?

GC: When I worked with Jerry, it was just three of us. He and I and his father-in-law, J. W. Brown, on electric bass. I started in 1960 and played about a year and a half.

AS: What was life on the road like in those days?

GC: Well, back then you didn't make a lot of money. I made maybe 30 or 35 dollars a show.

I've seen Jerry play some old uprights and the strings were hanging out of them. And he'd just reach in and pull another handful out. He'd get hot about some of those pianos.

I enjoyed it at first because I got to see the country. But after you ride with three people in a car and you're driving three to five hundred miles every day it would wear you out.

One night we played Cincinnati and the next night we played Princeton University in New Jersey. You figure that one! Got there just in time for the show. Jerry used to get so mad at his booking agent for making those shows like that.

But the road got old to me. It does to a lot of people.

AS: So then you came off the road and went back to Memphis. This was the period where you met some of your American Studio colleagues, right?

GC: I met Bobby Wood who had a group with his brother Billy, called the Starlighters. Their drummer was getting ready to go study dentistry and so I quit

Jerry Lee and went to work with Bobby. Bobby was doing some studio work with the Starlighters and with Stan Kessler. Stan had a little studio called Echo, and we went to work there.

AS: So you really had no designs on the studio thing?

GC: I had no idea. It wasn't pre-planned. It just fell into place. They asked me if I wanted to record. I said yes, and I went in and started doing it. It was just a lot of luck.

AS: How did the American Studio guys come together? Did Chips Moman recruit you?

GC: I had worked with Chips in clubs, just sitting in. But Tommy Cogbill (bassist) is the one who got me in with Chips. I did a lot of work with Tommy. We played the Peabody Hotel and had kind of a big band sort of thing.

Bobby Emmons and Reggie Young had been working at Hi Records. Later Bobby Wood and Mike Leech came in. Then we all just stayed in the studio from about 1965 until about 1971.

AS: Those were great years at American. You drummed for an incredible lineup of artists: King Curtis, Wilson Pickett, Elvis Presley, Joe Tex, Dusty Springfield, Dionne Warwick, The Box Tops, Neil Diamond, Herbie Mann, John Prine. The list goes on and on. All those records still sound great today—in large part due to your playing. Any thoughts on that?

GC: It was great working with the American Studio band. We always got along great together. No cross words or put downs and we all enjoyed what we were doing, which was making hit records.

We all put our heads together and started playing the song after we heard the demo. Things just seemed to fall into place. If we didn't like what we played, we would try a different rhythm or tempo. Whatever it took to get a groove and feel that matched the vocalist.



Bobby Emmons, J. R. Cobb (Atlanta Rhythm Section), Reggie Young, Bobby Wood, Mike Leech, Gene Chrisman (All except J. R. Cobb are founding members of the American Studio rhythm section). This picture taken during Class of '55 (Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash) recording session at the original American Studio in Memphis, Tennessee. (1985 or 1986)

GENE'S GREATEST HITS:

A brief sampling of recordings that Gene played drums on:

- (You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman* – Aretha Franklin
- Son of a Preacher Man*– Dusty Springfield
- Always On My Mind* – Willie Nelson
- Kentucky Rain, In the Ghetto, Suspicious Minds* – Elvis Presley
- Memphis Soul Stew* – King Curtis
- You Look So Good In Love* – George Strait
- Pancho and Lefty* – Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard
- Angel of the Morning* – Merilee Rush
- Memphis Underground* – Herbie Mann
- Cry Like a Baby* – Box Tops

AS: What impresses me is how authentically you played—in any style. Not to mention your taste and precision. What's your secret?

GC: Listen to the song and the artist. Get a feel and play to the artist. Don't make yourself the artist—don't overplay. A song overplayed on drums or any other instrument takes away from the feel of the recording.

AS: I'd love to see you guys get some recognition like the Motown guys got in the *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* documentary.

GC: Well, there's been talk of it. But I don't know where that's at right now.

AS: Elvis Presley was quoted as saying he never worked as hard on recording as he

did at American. His sessions at American in 1969 really revived his musical career. You played on *Kentucky Rain, In the Ghetto, Suspicious Minds, and Don't Cry Daddy*. But you've stated that you guys treated him pretty much just like anyone else...

GC: Elvis was fine. But I'm not one to hang out with the artist, fraternizing or taking them to dinner. But we'd speak, say good morning, and how are you doing. And go on about our business. And all the guys were like that.

AS: You also recorded several songs with Aretha Franklin.

GC: They flew me up to New York to do those and I was only there for one night. We did three songs: *Dr. Feelgood, Soul Serenade, and (You Make Me Feel Like A) Natural Woman*. She was a great singer and pianist.

AS: Not a bad night's work! Who else? You were telling me about recording with Joe Tex.

GC: I loved Joe Tex. It was always a pleasure when Joe showed up to cut. He would bring in a big barrel of KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) and orange juice. As soon as he got into the control room he would put on his house slippers. We cut *Skinny Legs and All, I Gotcha, Chicken Crazy* and numerous other records. You never knew what he was liable to do.

AS: What about the interaction among the Stax, Hi, and Muscle Shoals rhythm sections? Did you guys hang out together?

GC: No, we didn't. But Duck Dunn, Steve Cropper, Ace Cannon, and I used to play golf a lot in the mornings with Tom Dowd (Atlantic Records engineer), when he was in town. But then we went our separate ways—they'd go to Stax and we'd go to American. So we never visited each other in the studio per se.

AS: In 1971, Chips moved American Studios to Atlanta. But you didn't make the move. Why was that?

GC: At that time I had finally had enough. I was burned out from the number of hours. I went to work for a collection agency. I had had enough of it. It wears you out when you do that many hours day after day. I really didn't see my son grow up that much. He was born in 1962 and I was in the studio until '70 or '71.

AS: It's hard to believe you dropped out of the business with credentials like that! But eventually you became a highly regarded Nashville session musician—how did that come about?

GC: I started doing some stuff in Memphis with Knox Phillips. And they finally started calling from here every once in a while. I came up and cut the Gatlin Brothers, Crystal Gale, Jerry Reed, and Don Gibson. I used to work some with Porter Wagoner. I moved to Nashville in 1979 and that's when I got into it full time.

AS: Well, you certainly reestablished yourself. You've worked out of Nashville for over twenty years now. How many Nashville sessions would you guess you've played on?

GC: Oh gosh, that's going to be hard to say. It's been a bunch. I'd probably say thousands. There for a while we did four sessions a day, although you wouldn't work every week like that. But by the time you work in studios and cut at people's houses and do shows and concerts, it's quite a few.

AS: How many tunes could you put down in a normal three-hour session?

GC: We have cut seven or eight songs in three hours. Usually five is the maximum, but you're pushing yourself to get five songs in three hours. You can get burnt out on a song real quick if you have to keep cutting it over and over. If you can't get a song down in at least three takes something's wrong somewhere.

AS: You played behind all the Nashville stars: Kris Kristofferson, Loretta Lynn, Reba McEntire, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings. Were many

of these with the original American Studio guys?

GC: No, we were all scattered. Every once in a while you might have the whole bunch but not like it was in Memphis.

AS: What about Willie Nelson? You played drums on *Always on My Mind*. What was that like?

GC: That was cut at Willie's studio in Texas. We'd cut two or three tracks and then play a couple of rounds of golf, and then come back in and cut more. I really liked Willie the first time I met him. We did a video on *Willie—Some Enchanted Evening*—that was cut at the Opryland Hotel.

AS: You did the *Class of 55* recording with Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash. Where did you do that session?

GC: Half of it was done at the old, original Sun Records and the other half was done at the American Studios where we used to work. We had a big crowd down there. We had Ricky Nelson come in. John Fogerty was there. The Judds. Ace Cannon.

AS: The original American rhythm section also cut two of the Highwaymen albums (Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, and Johnny Cash). That also led to you going back on the road. How did that come about?

GC: We cut the album and they got a tour together, and they wanted the band that played on it to go on tour. Reggie Young, Bobby Emmons, Mike Leech, Bobby Wood,

and myself. And we got J.R. Cobb, who was a member of the Atlanta Rhythm Section. And then Mickey Raphael had always played with Willie so he was there. We had great fun doing the shows. We cut up a lot in the dressing room, talking about old times and songs.

AS: Some of your recordings have been used in recent movies and commercials. Tell me about that.

GC: *Suspicious Minds* was used in *Frequency* (2000), *Blackhawk Down* (2001), *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), and *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003). *Cry Like a Baby* was used in a movie. *Always On My Mind* was used in a commercial for Levi's jeans. Aretha's *Natural Woman* was used in commercials for Lady Clairol and Chic Jeans.

AS: Do you get paid for those recordings?

GC: Yes, I do. Anytime you played on the original track and you can produce the contract, you will get paid for it.

AS: What did you like or dislike about your drumming on your early recordings?

GC: I never really thought about that. I think I listened to the band as a whole and the song, and never really paid that much attention to what I played.

AS: How did you tune your drums at American Studios? I always enjoyed your crisp and precise snare sound.

GC: Back then I just tried to get it where it sounded comfortable to me. I'd wrap the snare in a paper towel and put duct tape on it. I've used a billfold on the snare a lot. And I'd stuff the bass drum with an amp cover.

AS: What snare do you play today? What do you take on sessions?

GC: I've got two snares. I've got a maple Pearl that matches my set. And Bruce Watkins (session guitarist) gave me a Slingerland that he found at a yard sale for ten dollars. An old Slingerland aluminum. And that's the one I use all the time!

AS: Tell me about other drummers that you like—or dislike!

GC: I don't dislike any drummer. Here in Nashville, I have deep respect for John Gardner, a close



Merle Haggard, Gene Chrisman, and Willie Nelson at Pedernales Studio (Spicewood, Texas) during Pancho & Lefty recording session. (1981 or 1982)



Gene during B. J. Thomas recording session, Nashville, Tennessee. 2004

friend. The late Al Jackson of Stax Record fame. And Larry Londin, who passed away years back.

AS: As a studio drummer, what's your opinion of all the new technology that's out there now?

GC: You can't beat live music. When everything is sequenced and programmed, it's got no feel. I'll take the old stuff anytime.

"What's something you've played on?" In addition, I try to sometimes shun that because I'm not into that ego thing.

After our interview, I spoke to two of Gene's long-time associates, keyboardists Bobby Emmons and Bobby Wood. Both have known Gene since the 1960s, and they are still great friends and studio colleagues. They offered the following

It's got a better groove and better feel. It's got live players!

AS: Studio guys work in relative isolation in comparison to the artists they work for. Did you ever regret the lack of credit and fame?

GC: I never thought about being famous. I just did my job. It's a God given talent. I hit the right place at the right time, and had a break. A lot of times I don't even talk about it unless someone says

testimonials:

Bobby Emmons: "It seems I have known Gene forever. My first impression was that he had a very strong handshake and an even stronger musical presence in the track, once we started to work. I loved what he played and where he played it. He has always been humble about his playing, but never during it, unless the song called for humble. If it called for power and confidence, he would have that coming at you by the ton!"

Bobby Wood: "He's always been a super drummer. He always plays with great time and feel. Anytime he works with us, he rises to a new level. He comes up with great ideas, even for the other instruments. And he still plays like he's fourteen years old!"

Having listened to, studied, and admired recordings that span Gene's forty-plus years as a studio musician, it's easy to understand why he has earned the support and loyalty of long-term associates and music industry pros.

Although Gene admits he's shy and reluctant to talk about himself, it's really not necessary. His work speaks for itself.



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