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“STRUMMIN’ ON THE OLD BANJO!”

Don Vappie is enjoying a storied career on his chosen instrument

By Anita Oubre



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DON VAPPIE

When speaking to American Banjo Museum Hall of Famer, Don Vappie, be prepared to be taken on a journey of many sounds and vibrant colors. Don's vocabulary largely consists of words and melodies. He is an award-winning jazz banjoist, composer, and educator who is known for preserving the unique Creole culture of New Orleans.

"I identify boldly as a Creole," Don emphasized. "When I was growing up, some people thought it meant that you were black passing for white, but Creole is not a color. It is a culture. New Orleans is a Creole culture based on all the influences that have come in. They include the Creole people from Haiti. Also, the Spanish people use the word 'Creole' as a way to say Spanish but born in the New World. And you have the French-based Creole people from around the world, including the Cajun people who came here and mixed with everyone else. So, it's a real blending of a melting pot."

Don's Creole upbringing and influence are a huge part of his music. He is widely known as a Creole banjoist and is recognized internationally as the only New Orleans banjoist still performing today in the unique tradition of such greats as Danny Barker. Don is proud to carry on the rich legacy of this music and tradition.

The only child of hard-working parents, Don was raised in the Uptown area of New Orleans on the corner of Coliseum and Valence. His grandmother was always there, helping with his upbringing.

"I inherited my honesty from my father and my practicality from my mother," he said.

Early on, Don knew he wanted to be a musician. He took piano lessons in the neighborhood from Marie Moton, a concert pianist who attended the Juilliard School of Music. "She gave me a foundation. It might have been as early as second grade, but I knew I wanted to make my living one day as a musician," he reflected.

Don comes from an extended family of musicians and he was constantly

surrounded by music, whether spending time with his grandmother or attending the symphony on field trips. There were brass bands on the street corners and musicals on television.

"I have a wide range of influences," Don said. "I grew up in a time when musical shows were popular family entertainment. Everything from the Lawrence Welk Show to Hee Haw and every variety show in between. Roy Clark would be killing it on that guitar. And then there was radio; WBOK, WYLD, and WTIH had the cross-over music, and I listened to it all."

In high school, Don played the trumpet and recalls he was pretty good at it until he had braces put on his teeth. From there he moved on to baritone horn.

"I fooled around with brass instruments because I had access to them," he explained. "I understood how they were all related and how they worked to create different tones. I could see patterns and that was helpful as I started playing bass and guitar."

Don's music career started the same way that many other musicians started their musical journey. He played in what he calls "garage bands." Along with his cousin and close friends, many funk bands were formed over the years and they played the talent shows as well as gigs throughout the city. They emulated music that was popular at the time from groups like The Meters, Chicago, and The Buddy Miles Express.

Don enrolled at Loyola University where he was a music major studying bass. He was young, full of vigor, and not feeling the so-called norms of the time that included racism. Don recalls how a prank turned into an unforgettable opportunity for him.

"I answered the pay phone down in the basement of the student center, saying something smart aleck like 'Burger King, may I help you?' and the guy says he's looking for a guitar player and asks if I have a tuxedo," Don laughed. "So, I end up with a gig in the Blue Room under the band direction of Dick Stabile starring none other than Peggy Lee."

COVER STORY



After hearing Don perform, his musical abilities made such a huge impression on Peggy Lee that she offered him an opportunity to go on tour with her. “But I felt that I was too young and not ready,” Don recalled. “So she wrote me an open invitation on the hotel stationery if I ever wanted to join her,” and he still has that note in his possession to this day.

The performance led to Don being the on-call guitar player at the Blue Room under the direction of bandleaders like Dick Stabile and Leon Kellner at the same time he was playing with the band TracOne. But, as well as things seemed to have been going for him, Don recalled that he became bored with hearing the same bass lines over and over all night every night.

This led to a bold move. Don sold all of his instruments and gave up performing.



It was a life-changing moment for Don as he took a job at the legendary, now-defunct Werlein’s music store. This is where Don first put his hands on a banjo.

“I’d pick up a banjo and care for the instruments as they were awaiting new homes. I liked the way it sounded when I played a muted single note on guitar,” said Don. “There were these single-note funk rhythms that added a groove to all the music that was being played on the soul stations and the banjo was perfect for that.”

Within three months Don was trying to buy back the instruments that he sold and he was back to playing music.

Performing for audiences from local conventions to sold-out shows around the world, Don has led a storied and celebrated career. He has performed at Carnegie Hall, the Smithsonian, and Lincoln Center,

to name a few. He performs annually at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

Don has produced seven albums, starting with “Papa Don’s New Orleans Jazz Band.” His latest album, “The Blue Book of Storyville,” was named the top Jazz album of 2020 by The Times of London. That recognition came with lucrative work throughout Europe.



Don has also co-produced and starred in a PBS documentary and performed with countless orchestras on both television and in movies including “The Jungle Book.” In 2021 he was awarded the Steve Martin Banjo Prize and the following year he was inducted into The Banjo Hall of Fame.

“The Steve Martin award really acknowledges the accomplishment and originality of a musician playing banjo, and then there is the influence that I’ve had on upcoming banjo players, so that was really nice,” Don mused.

Educating the next generation is important to Don. He has instructed countless young musicians over the years in music programs at the University of New Orleans, Loyola University, and the Don Jamison Heritage School of Music program.

The latest project under Don’s belt is “Louisiana Stories” (first edition) a collaboration of poems and music with Don Paul, Kirk Joseph, Roger Lewis, and Herman LeBeaux. “The album is ‘Louisiana Stories’ and it’s really fantastic,” Don proudly stated. “I got to play banjo as well as my electric guitar and do all the things I never get to do, like play slide guitar, use my pedal board and just paint pictures with the help of electronic effects.”

Don promises to continue painting these elaborate pictures made of melody and sound. Preserving and sharing the music created by Creole people is a gift that he cherishes and has passed on for generations to come.

“The Blue Book of Storyville” can be purchased at The Louisiana Music Factory. For bookings go to donvappie.com or [@vappiedon](https://www.instagram.com/vappiedon)



The Trac-One band in the early 1970s. (Standing, l. to r.) Tracy Griffin - trumpet, Clark Knighten - keyboard, Henry Dejan - vocals/percussion, Stanley Joseph - drums, Don Vappie - electric bass/vocals. (Seated, l. to r.) Pierre Poree - alto sax/flute and Joe Caruso - guitar.

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