

## Don White 2012 Bio

There is no one-word description for what Don White does. He has survived and thrived for twenty-five years, bringing his audiences to laughter and tears in his live performances, studio recordings, and on the printed page. He is a storyteller-comedian-author-troubadour-folk singer-songwriter. He is a walking challenge to the phrase “file under.” Best to just sort him under “Don White.”

Don’s approach to music is a weird, unique blend. If he just played folk music, it would be a handy label. But he has invented his own genre with a mix of humor and powerful songwriting. White’s arc as a writer and performer has taken him from his industrial hometown of Lynn, Ma across the country as hitchhiker, through Boston’s comedy clubs and coffeehouses, and onto the stage with greats like Christine Lavin, Arlo Guthrie, Taj Mahal, Ritchie Havens, Patty Larkin, Bill Morrissey, Tom Rush, and Loudon Wainwright III. At every point, White has been the ultimate observer, infusing his work with his experiences as a husband, a father, a seeker, and a joker.

White guesses he wrote his first songs sometime when he was eight years old, tunes he could hum or sing in his head. “I remember writing songs when I was a little, little kid,” he says, “kneeling down to say my prayers and then jumping in bed and showing my mom a song I wrote. I was born with the disease.” As a teenager, he would skip school to write. He took journalism courses. Things started to click when his parents bought him his first guitar at age 15, when White was absorbing music from John Prine, Arlo Guthrie, the Grateful Dead, Frank Zappa, and Bob Dylan. He became a student of music.

“I liked Bob Dylan and I realized he liked Woody Guthrie, so I went and bought Woody Guthrie albums. Then I learned about Cisco Huston and all the guys who were there before that. Pete Seeger. So I would take what I liked and trace it back. With the Dead, I realized at one time they were a jug band. So I started looking up Jim Kweskin, and where did they get their stuff? Anything I liked, I followed backwards from that. It’s just the way I’m wired.”

It was the Dead that inspired White to leave his working class hometown after high school graduation in search of the strange, cool people with long hair he met at local shows. He spent three years hitchhiking across the country, building a foundation for his personality and writing. “Every day for three years, I’m meeting people that I have nothing in common with. I’m getting in their car, they’re taking me to their house, I’m camping out with them. I’m learning about b’hai and vegetarianism. My world blew open exponentially.”

By the early 80s, White had a wife and two kids, and started thinking he might be able to play music for a living. After a brief stop in Maine, he settled back in Lynn, and by the late 80s, he took his growing repertoire of songs to some of Boston’s most prestigious folk open mics with the likes of Ellis Paul, Vance Gilbert, Martin Sexton, and Dar Williams. He got the bug quickly. “The first time I went and played, and I got a gig out of

it. And then the next time I played, I got a gig out of it up in Cambridge at the Naked City and the Nameless Coffeehouse.”

Then came the slots opening for big-name performers like Bill Morrissey, Patty Larkin, Cheryl Wheeler. His first big show as an opener was for Taj Mahal, a show that left quite an impression on White. “I listened to him when I was in junior high school. I was out of my mind. I couldn’t even sleep for days.”

White’s career took a whole new direction when he started hosting a music open mic at one of the country’s hottest comedy clubs, Catch A Rising Star in Harvard Square. “I was still playing folks clubs, but I was living basically at Catch a Rising Star. They would do nine shows in a week and I would go to every show and just watch and study. And then when I was on the bill with people – I did a week with Jeff Dunham, I was down there with Lewis Black.”

After impressing Catch’s booker with his wit and storytelling abilities, White began to emcee comedy shows. Just as he had studied music as a teenager, White began to study comedy, watching some of the best comedians on the planet – Janeane Garofalo, Jimmy Kimmel, David Cross, Wendy Liebman.

“I watched these guys do the same show, the same 45 minutes, nine times in four days. I was more intrigued every time I watched it. I know where the jokes are now, so now I’m not looking for the joke, I’m looking at the trickery. The setups. ‘Look how he leans forward a little bit before he delivers this line, or how he pauses because he knows this is a killer line. How he makes people think he’s going this way when he’s going that way. Every night, he makes this seem like he just made it up.’ Stuff like that. And I was not the same. After two years of doing that, I stepped earnestly into folk music, and I was bringing with me something that nobody else had.”

White now had the toolkit of both songwriter and club comedian – he was “comedian funny,” not “folk funny,” he says. But he quickly realized that the comedy club environment wouldn’t work for him. He wanted to take what he’d learned and bring it into an environment where he could be serious, too. That meant the folk world, where his abilities were unique. “I was bringing comedian sensibilities to a show, and then I had a couple of songs like ‘I Know What Love Is’ so now they’re laughing their head off, and now they’re crying, and that is my niche.”

White applied those skills to his first studio recording, *Two Vagabonds in Disguise*, in 1992. The album featured one of his most touching songs, “I Know What Love Is,” which captures beauty of love and loss over the course of its subject’s entire lifetime. That is sandwiched in between two other Don White staples – “Project Girl” and “The Shameful Ballad of Lijah.” Both songs are lighthearted, both drawn from real life experience.

Many songwriters use their real lives for inspiration, but few do it like White. He often draws inspiration from his family, whether it’s a touching song about the circle of life or

an uproarious story about dealing with his daughter. “It’s what I’m comfortable doing. It’s what I know. I’m always amazed by people who write songs about the Civil War in a convincing way and were never there. I assume they were never there. Write about what you know. I’ve been raising kids and being in a relationship since I was a kid myself. I mean, I could try to write about other things, and I do, occasionally, but that’s what I know best.”

In 1995, he played with Christine Lavin for the first time, which gave him yet another career boost. “She said that it was the first time she ever had to start a set with a ballad because the audience was so wound up after me that she had to bring them back down. She took my brand new CD and brought it to New York, and the next thing I know, I’m on Vince Gelther’s show on KROQ, I’m playing at the Bottom Line. She did more for me in five weeks than I was able to do for myself in five years.”

That was also the year White released *Live at the Somerville Theatre*, a collection that produced his ode to his home town, “I’m From Lynn, What Can I Say?” and “Charley & Maureen,” a story that proves that sometimes settling in matter of love isn’t half bad. White followed that up in 1996 with *Rascal*, adding “Heartbeat of Heaven,” “Great Day,” and the title track to an already strong catalogue of songs that would remain popular in his live sets decades later.

Not long after that, White had another epiphany, opening for Arlo Guthrie. “The first time I opened for him, I had the feeling like I owed this guy a debt of gratitude, because when I was coming up, he made it seem normal, and nothing out of the ordinary, to talk for the whole side of an album. And then when I was opening for him, I had been doing that and telling these long stories, using comedy. And then I realized that there really isn’t anyone else that does it that I know of in this genre. He made it seem so normal and natural and easy that I sort of, without thinking about it too hard, I sort of assumed that it was common. And then when I finally opened for him, I had this realization that it’s not. He’s really the only guy who really did that the way he did do it, the way that I really like, where the stories are funny and interesting and engaging and clever. That meant a lot to me to open for him.”

White really hit his stride at the turn of the millennium, releasing *Brown Eyes Shine* in 1999, a collection that has come to be known as “the teenager album” for all of its material about dealing with adolescents. “Stupid” shows grandparents laughing at their kids as they have kids of their own. “The MTV Love Song” is the ultimate combination of White’s ability to make you laugh and tug at your heartstrings in a story of the struggle of different generations to understand each other. His storytelling is in fine form on “Adolescent Rant,” and his epic story of redemption, “Angel In Pieces,” closes out the album.

In 2001, White released *Little Niche*, which included the story “Testosterman in Estroland” and “Not Scared Anymore,” a song about learning to become someone your family can depend on. In 2002, White headed to the Lafayette Grand Ballroom in Pontiac, Michigan, a region that has become White’s second home, to record his *Live in*

*Michigan* album. A couple of old favorites turned up on that one in “Great Day” and “Sense of Humor,” as well as “Be Sixteen with Me,” a song about turning the tables on your kids that would eventually be covered by Catie Curtis.

In 2008, White released a compilation, *The Best of Don White 1992-2008*, and followed that up with a live album with his old friend and touring partner, Christine Lavin, called *Live at the Ark: The Father’s Day Concert*. He would finally get back to the studio after a seven-year absence to release *Winning Streak* in 2011.

The album contains eight new original songs, a couple of songs by White’s talented friends, and two live comedy pieces. “Water Wheel” was written by Randall Kromm, and “Good Morning Beautiful” by one of White’s music students, prodigy Hayley Reardon, who wrote it when she was 12 years old. On *Winning Streak*, White found a comfortable confidence born of being able to work with exactly who he wanted to work with, including friends Christina Thompson Lively (vocals), Matt Leavenworth (fiddle), Michael Cahill (drums), Kristen Miller (cello), Paul Alhstrand (saxophone), and his son, Lawren White (guitar).

“I wasn’t intimidated by the process,” he says. “I know what I want each song to sound like. I’m not sure how the world will take it, but I’m confident it sounds exactly the way I want it to.”

He also found a kindred spirit in producer Steve Sadler. White and Sadler collaborated and recorded *Winning Streak* at Sadler’s Renoworld Studio in White’s hometown of Lynn, Massachusetts. “Mr. Sadler was an amazing co conspirator on this project,” says White. “In addition to doing all the engineering and mixing he sang and played guitar, bass, keyboards, accordion, Dobro, bottleneck, mandolin, fiddle, banjo, and yes, penny whistle.”

Unquestionably, White is an odd fit in any medium. The folk world doesn’t know what to do with a guy this funny and sometimes sarcastic. The comedy world is suspicious of sentimentality. The one place no one questions what he does is onstage, where he can reach any audience. “I really don’t know anything else. But it comes with some liabilities. A lot of people who are funny and play guitar really fall under ‘novelty act.’ And I don’t really care for that myself. Parodies and things like that. I don’t find it entertaining. The serious folk world, they don’t embrace it. You have to find your audience.”

White has stayed involved in his community, often helping young musicians navigate the local scene, and creating outlets for creative expression like the Speak Up! Spoken Word Open Mic and Don White’s Sunday Night Open Mic at the Walnut Street Café in Lynn. “Now I’m an elder statesman, and I wanted to take what I’ve learned and let other people see how to do it. And create spaces and opportunities for other people to have this interesting outlet.”

He continues to grow and evolve as a writer. In 2006, he entered a new medium with the release of his autobiography, *Memoirs of a C Student*. The longer format allowed him to go take the stories he tells onstage and draw them out, to give a more complete picture of White as a performer and as a human being. “I think that writing the book is the most freedom that I’ve had as a writer, as a creative artist.”

What’s the next stage? Only White knows for sure. “As a writer, I’m interested in all kinds of things now. I have all these ideas now where I want to let the story tell the story, instead of coming out and saying, ‘This is how I feel.’ I want to write that way now.”