

THE EDDY DAVIS STORY

In 1958, being a senior in high school and having a desire for more money, I managed to get myself drafted on banjo by a Dixieland band called The Salty Dogs. The Dogs were one of those 1950s college bands. They were at Purdue University, which was across the river in West Lafayette. We used to perform as the opening act for college shows all around the Midwest. We opened for such musical acts as The Kingston Trio, The Four Freshman and George Shearing. The bill would also contain top comedians like Jonathan Winters, Shelley Berman and Bob Newhart. The great, much under-rated pianist John Cooper taught me the Dixieland repertoire from his little chord books while riding to jobs in his old green Plymouth and that's how I learned to play the tenor banjo (which I found out later was originally known as the tango banjo). I took some banjo lessons from "Smiling Jimmy Wilson" at Mahara Music Center where I worked after school teaching brass instruments and string bass. I also conducted the store's band. Rudy Mahara used to let me get by with the darnedest things. His number one salesman Joe Atkinson could tell some stories I probably wouldn't want known.

After graduating high school, I attended Purdue University for a year. During that period The Salty Dogs performed many times in Chicago at the Sabre Room and Red Arrow. These were famed night clubs where I met the likes of Junie Cobb, Darnell Howard, Booker T. Washington, Little Brother Montgomery, Quinn Wilson, George Mitchell and Franz Jackson's great band which included Bobby Shoffner, Al Wynn, Rozell Claxton, Lawrence Dixon, Bill Oldham, and my drum inspiration Richard Curry. After those experiences, I decided I should pursue music in the Windy City, so I piled my belongings into my Austin Healy and headed out for Chicago.

I became a composition student first at Cosmopolitan Conservatory of Music and then switched to the Chicago School of Music. Both were located in the Creative Arts Building at Wabash and Van Buren Streets in the Chicago Loop. I was living at the Lawson YMCA on Chicago Avenue that was located across the Chicago River from downtown Chicago in what is known as the Near North Side. A couple of blocks away was the infamous Rush Street.

I started playing music at Burton Brown's Gaslight Club with Joe Wiedman (trumpeter with the Will Bradley Band and roommate of Perry Como on the Ted Weems Band) and Frankie Raye on piano. This was the original key club before the Playboy chain. Then I started my own band at Bourbon Street (Bob Scobey's club on Rush Street). The marquee read: Eddy "Dixie" Davis and His Dixie Jazzmen. For the next eight years I worked for The Syndicate. First in this club (playing opposite the original Dukes of Dixieland), then around the corner at the Velvet Swing. During this period Woody Allen was performing comedy at Mr. Kelly's. This famous nightclub was a block away and on occasion Mr. Allen would bring his clarinet and sit in with my band. Also at this time I wrote two original songs, Penny Candy and Now I'm Blue, for The Village Stompers. I ended this period at a club called The Old Town Gate in the Old Town section of Chicago. It was here where I recorded my first record album Live at the Old Town Gate on the Blackbird label. By this time I had become roommates with good old Jack Kuncl who is now the banjo player with the Original Salty Dogs. Around the same time the infamous Jack "The Bear" Brown moved in with us. We had a marvelous three-story townhouse.

Around this time, while on a session for a B-B-D-and-O jingle, I

observed what was called a trumpet gig bag (a soft case). Being tired of carrying that heavy, hard banjo case, I took the address of the manufacturer off the gig bag, telephoned the manufacturer and had a bag custom made. Thus, the first banjo gig bag. For many years banjo players told me I was crazy to carry my precious banjo in a bag, but now look!

In 1967 I went to Los Angeles to open a new club The Fire Station Inn. In 1968 I worked for the David Merrick office playing banjo and guitar with various productions of Hello Dolly starring Eve Arden, Betty Grable, and Ginger Rogers.

In 1968 I went to New York City to perform the show Mame in the pit of the Winter Garden Theatre; then went out with Celeste Holm on the National Tour of the show ending up back in Chicago. There I organized a comedy musical trio with Jack the Bear and Mike Zudis known as Banjo's Unlimited, which numbered among its accomplishments playing the opening of Circus, Circus in Las Vegas.

I remember the trio was playing at the Scotch Mist in Chicago when Joel Schiavone opened a Your Father's Mustache Club there. The trio played a total of 36 instruments between us. I would put my banjo on a strap like a guitar so I could swing it around on my back while playing other instruments. Joel came in to see our show and told me it didn't look right to be playing standing with a strap holding my banjo. Up until that time banjoists sat with the instrument in their laps. However, I noticed it wasn't long until the banjo players at Your Father's Mustache were playing "standing with a strap holding their banjos."

In 1969 I came back to New York to put a comedy act together with David Huddleston (an actor with whom I had become friends with on the

Mame tour). During this time the tubaist Howard Smith, pianist Al Walker and myself worked as house musicians for The Peer/Southern publishing company. Peer/Southern had a recording studio in the famed Brill Building in New York. While there we produced one of my favorite albums Whiz Bang. It was our stab at musical-black comedy.

On December 24, 1969 I performed the Mike Douglas Television Show with The Village Stompers. I performed the week of December 29 with The Village Stompers at The Embers in Indianapolis, Indiana. On Thursday February 19, 1970 I made the original demo recording of the song Radio in the Peer/Southern Studio. At this time I was also playing at the Hillside Lounge in Chester, New Jersey with a terrific band put together by the wonderful clarinetist Bobby Gordon which included Manzie Johnson – drums, Joe Thomas – trumpet, and Nat Pierce of Woody Herman fame on piano. This led to Bobby, Howard Smith and myself recording tracks for National Music-time. This was a group that put music on airline flights.

In August of 1970 I went to work for the Harvey Weise office at 1465 Broadway. I was hired as a music scout at The Anderson Theatre, the famous old Jewish theatre, where young rock groups took turns playing 30-minute audition segments hoping to become stars. Then I became guitarist/musical director for Tina Kaplan who was managed by the Joe Namath organization. Tina was the leading jingle singer in New York at the time. This group performed on the Johnny Carson Tonight Show on November 9, 1970 and May 3, 1971 and the Mike Douglas Show on June 17, 1971. Tina and I wrote the theme song Hey Joe Willie for a Joe Namath cartoon produced by Larry Spangler Productions. In March of 1971 Tina and the group became the opening act at the famous comedy club in Manhattan

called The Upstairs at the Downstairs. One night Jackie Vernon's piano player fell down and cut his head and was taken to the hospital, consequently I became the house piano player for that night and the rest of our six-month run. Highlights of which were accompanying Jackie Vernon and Professor Irwin Corey whose brother I met sometime later at the Disney Studios.

Then in 1972 I was asked by the Your Father's Mustache organization to transform their Show Band into a Las Vegas type act. It was at this time I met Banu Gibson who was performing with the group. Two highlights of this job were performing in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and at the Kentucky Derby.

On May 22, 1972 Banu and I went to Los Angeles to open a show at Disneyland called The Class of 1927. There I performed mostly on soprano saxophone. In September I met George Probert and started attending Fire House Five noon sessions at Disney Studios. This is when I recorded two albums for Pada Records (Ragtime with Buck Kelly and Just for Fun with a great bunch of guys at Disneyland). During this period I met a young Dan Barrett and Hal Smith and played the club Concert by the Sea with Probert. Still at Disneyland in 1973, I went to ragtime pianists' party for Eubie Blake on January 15, 1973 and played the famed New Orleans bassist Tootie Garland's birthday party on January 19, 1973. It was then I started hanging out at Milt Larsen and John Shrum's Magic Castle. Milt owned the Electric Lemon record label that released my Whiz Bang album. Buck Kelly introduced me to the OME Banjo Company and I started playing banjos for them. In March I flew to Memphis, Tennessee and recorded at Sun Records with Gene Mitchell and Lyle Emmons.

I spent that summer in Florence, Italy where I wrote an instructional book *The Theory Behind Chord Symbols*. It was there I met Vince Giordano while leading the band for a Red Garter Night Club. I spent the fall of 1973 with Buck and Debbie Kelly in Denver, Colorado and then went back to Chicago for the winter.

On January 2, 1974 I drove from Chicago to Reno, Nevada where I performed on electric bass and banjo with Big Tiny Little of Lawrence Welk fame. From there we went to Las Vegas, Jackpot, Tahoe, etc.

I went back to Florence for the summers of 1974 and 1975 and while there I wrote *The Ridiculous Quartet*. I spent the winters in New York City.

In the winter of 1975 I joined Jack Maheu's band *The Salt City Six*. Jack was the clarinetist who had replaced Pete Fountain with the Dukes of Dixieland. While on Jack's band I met and recorded with the great pianist Don Ewell. Don had played with everyone from Bunk Johnson to Jack Teagarden. It was at this time that I took the resonator off my OME banjo. I first replaced it with a flat piece of aluminum, but that was cold and made noise when it hit my belt buckle and the buttons on my shirt. I was staying in the Dinkler Motel where we were playing and just over the hill was a place that sold Plexiglas, so I had this fellow cut and mount a piece on the back of my banjo. Since then it's become a fad. OME eventually said I can't make money with a piece of Plexiglas, so Chuck started making a small wooden resonator model.

In 1976 I conducted and orchestrated a musical entitled *The Life and Times of Warren G. Harding* with music by Terry Waldo and lyrics by Lou Carter famed as *The Singing Cab Driver*. That winter I made a European tour that took me behind the Iron Curtain to Debrecen, Hungary. This was

the beginning of my performing regularly in Budapest and other major cities around the world.

Around this time in New York I began playing at a club called The Red Blazer Too. On Wednesday nights I was the string bassist with a group called Jazz Accordes which consisted of me on bass, two rhythm guitars (Vince Giordano and the great Carmen Mastron), Charles Wizen on violin and Mike Peters on D'Jango style guitar. On Tuesday nights I played drums with Vince Giordano's original (New Orleans) Nighthawks, a hot 1920's style dance band that contained some of the great musicians from the Swing Era. The aforementioned Carmen Mastron on banjo; Dick Wellstood, Dill Jones or Johnny Varro on piano; a brass section of Dennis Drury on trombone and Bernie Privin and Jimmy Maxwell on trumpets; a reed section of Moe Dale or Artie Baker, and Sal Pace and Clarence Hutchenrider; and Vince on tuba, string bass and bass saxophone.

In 1979 I spent time as a member of the Turk Murphy Band at Earthquake Magoon's in San Francisco. Bob Helm had become ill and John Gill moved over from banjo to cover the clarinet. John and Turk called me to fill in. When Bob returned to the band John went back to the banjo and I stayed on to play intermissions to allow Scott Anthony a vacation.

Starting in September 1980 I was musical director/conductor for the revival of the 1920's musical Whoopee (National Company). It starred Mamie Van Doren and Imogene Coca. It featured the 12-piece Eddy Davis Society Jazz Orchestra. We toured the U.S.A. and Canada.

In December of 1981 I and great friend Lew Micallef started the recording label New York Jazz Records. (You can read more about this label's history in the New York Jazz Records section of this site.)

In June of 1982 I started working with Jabbo Smith and his New Rhythm Aces. In the same month I started working with the actor/banjo player George Segal. This was a relationship that lasted awhile including two stints at Atlantic City. In October I played a series of concerts in Budapest, Hungary and on November 16 I played on the soundtrack of the film *Sophie's Choice* for Marvin Hamlisch.

I and my long-time companion Ruth Miller lived at 27 Washington Square North on the fourth floor. Phyllis and Eddie Condon lived on the third floor in a long shot-gun apartment. I remember after Eddie passed away Phyllis used to ask me to play on his plectrum guitar for her. I especially remember on her birthday April 3, 1983 her brother Paul Smith was in from his home in the Bahamas, so I went down to play some tunes with him. Paul was a very fine 6-string guitar player. That day Phyllis said to take Eddie's guitar back to our apartment and play it for awhile. I had it for sometime and made some home recordings on it. After Phyllis' death, Maggie (their daughter) asked for it back.

In May of 1983 David Huddleston, Cynthia Sayer and I made a Happy Birthday tape for Dave's old friend James Cagney. In June I made a Japan tour with Stanley's Washboard Kings. An album came from this. That same year I played the Battleground Indiana Fiddlers Gathering with Jethro Burns and a very young Alison Krauss. I spent August playing a nude beach in St. Tropez, France.

Back again in New York I and Cynthia Sayer organized, performed and recorded with The New York Banjo Ensemble, a group that used the talents of Howard Alden, Frank Vignola, Bill Keller and well-known Luthier Joel Eckhaus.

On February 12, 1984, at 3:00 PM, I recreated the banjo parts for Maurice Peress' new Paul Whiteman Orchestra at Town Hall (recorded for Music Masters). This concert was a recreation of the original 1924 concert that introduced George Gershwin's Rhapsody In Blue. The next week the orchestra flew to Rome, Italy for two concerts. Later, during a series of Carnegie Hall anniversary concerts, I once again worked with Mr. Peress. First on July 12, 1989, recreating a 1912 concert about the black composer/conductor James Reese Europe and His Clef Club Orchestra. The second in the series on July 14 recreating the 1927 Concert of the Music of George Antile where I combined the original two banjo parts into one (also recorded on Music Masters).

A second Japan tour by way of Beijing, China took place in May and June of 1984. On November 2 I sold the Banjo Ensemble's first recording The New York Banjo Ensemble Plays Gershwin to Kicking Mule Records. On November 26, 1984 Cynthia Sayer and I flew to London to be with old friend David Huddleston while he filmed Santa Clause: The Movie. On December 3 I flew from London to Dusseldorf, Germany to perform a live TV special about celebrities that people want to meet. In February of 1985 I arranged and recorded the theme song for the Mr. Belvedere TV Show, sung by Leon Redbone. This led to touring and recording for the next couple of years with Redbone.

In June 1985, Gil Weist of Michael's Pub infamy asked me to put together an early 1900 Tea Orchestra. The Early Tin Pan Alley Orchestra performing the Roots of American Jazz was formed. It played an astounding 10-week run at the Pub. The critics and the classical world loved it. During this year I also played the Kennedy Center with the Whiteman Orchestra,

recorded on the Kurt Weill album with Tom Waits and played Mondays with Woody Allen at the Pub. Along the way I played jazz cruises on the high seas for the Norwegian line.

Back in New York on November 4, 1985 I recorded on the soundtrack of Woody's film Radio Days. In the spring of 1986, Bob Woodmansee and Barbara Archer adapted two of my OME banjo necks which were used as parts of my fold-up banjos. The mechanism to release the neck was invented by my buddy and partner in New York Jazz Records Lew Micallef.

From April 23 to May 3 I worked on banjo at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival with the musical One Mo' Time. On May 29, 1986 I delivered a W.C. Handy script to Mr. Weist at Michael's Pub. The script eventually became The Blind Man On The Corner Singin' The Beale Street Blues.

On Friday, June 6, 1986, I started what was to become a ritual. I started going to Woody's home to run over some tunes. I still do this but along the way some Saturdays have gotten added in. In July I flew to Hungary to be featured along with Freddie Hubbard, Joe Newman, Al Grey and Buddy Tate on one of my many tours of Budapest. On July 31, I performed with a Dick Hyman orchestra at his annual 92nd Street Y concerts. The program included James P. Johnson's Yamakraw plus George Antile's A Jazz Symphony. Through the years people like Benny Goodman (who played the song Sugar in a duet with me) and Toots Thielemans have sat in on Mondays with the Woody Allen Band. On Monday, September 15, 1986, Mel Torme sat in on drums.

In October 1986 I presented The Great Freddie Moore Show at Michael's Pub. Mr. Weist had been asking me to put a Spike Jones show in

the Pub, so on December 4 we got permission from Spike, Jr. and The Best of Spike Jones opened on January 6, 1987. This show evolved into The New York Society for the Preservation of Illegitimate Music a/k/a Ill Music. For more about the Spike Jones Show, see Eddy Davis Projects.

I spoke of the wonders of Monmouth Park Raceway and sang and played "The Lazy, Hazy Days of Summer" to the horses in a television jingle on January 30, 1987. Thus I became the voice of Monmouth Park for a season. I went back to Budapest in March of 1987. On June 17 I recorded a Peter Ecklund album for Stomp Off Records.

Woody and I started a New Orleans style rehearsal band at The Harkness House on February 14, 1988. Tapes taken from these sessions eventually became The Bunk Project on the Music Masters label. During that time I recorded the Early Tin Pan Alley Orchestra at the same location.

In August of 1988, and again the following year, I produced a 25 member music and dance production for the City of Messina, Italy called New York In Messina. Back in Manhattan on December 8 I recorded an "All" soap commercial with Redbone. Over Christmas and New Years (much to the disappointment of my mother) I toured Australia with Stan King. I produced Lou Grassi's Dixie Peppers record session at Quad Studios on January 19, 1989. Then there were two more record sessions and a jingle in April. The first was Terry Waldo's Red Blazer Band and the other was Stan King with the great Australian cornet player Bob Barnard. The jingle was for Wendy's Hamburgers.

The musical of Ubu opened at Lincoln Center on June 25, 1989. The music was written by Greg Cohen and I played in his small ensemble. I played drums, xylophone, tympani and euphonium. Mike Carney was on

reeds, Mark Rebo on banjo, guitar, alto horn and trumpet, Steve "Blood" Bernstein on tuba and trumpet, and Greg on bass, alto horn and effects.

On June 5, 1990, Ruth and I moved from Washington Square to a building located directly behind Carnegie Hall. Around this time I accompanied Patti LaBelle on the soundtrack of Fried Green Tomatoes. It was a band put together by Greg Cohen.

In May and June of 1991, I toured Australia for a second time playing the Gold Coast Festival and a Festival at the Great Barrier Reef. Then I came back to the States by way of the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok and then through Paris. In October Stan and I played the Kobe Jazz Street Festival in Japan. Then on May 21 to 25, 1992, the Ill Music band played the Sacramento Jazz Festival. Our Russian reed buddy Lev Lebedev was working with us at the time. In October I was back to Hungary for concerts and recordings with the Benko band.

I signed the contract with Music Masters on December 11, 1992, and on May 11, 1993 the Woody Allen CD The Bunk Project was released. On February 7, 1993 I flew to The Friedrichstadt Palast in Berlin, Germany for a one-year contract to perform, co-create, music direct and conduct a musical show called Jazz Legs. I performed on banjo and drums. I was a musical clown and a star performer. The finale of the show was my banjo and Mr. Spoons (Joe Jones). Unbelievably it brought the house down. That's showbiz!.

During a summer leave of absence I went back to Australia for another tour. This time the highlight was performing in Noosa with my old friend the great piano player and bandleader Graeme Bell on his eightieth birthday. All this was set up by my old buddy Stan King. In July I was back

to Jazz Leggs in Berlin. While there that winter I recorded some songs with Pete Compo on fiddle (he was there playing bass in the show), Wolfgang n. Dalheisner on piano/synth, Maximilian Hughes on bass and Pete York on drums who is famous for the Spencer Davis group and is also well-known throughout Europe for his TV series on famous drummers. The show closed on February 14, 1994 and I was back to New York where I played on the soundtrack of the Ken Burns baseball documentary.

During the next couple of years I played and recorded with John Gill's Dixieland Serenaders. The CDs are on the Stomp Off label. In 1995 in Rome, Italy, I performed on a live two-hour television broadcast of the music of George Gershwin, which spawned a video and CD. My co-stars were Chaka Khan, Dionne Warwick and the one and only King of the Mouth Organ Larry Adler. Then in September, another Australian tour. November brought new territory. I took the Allen band without Woody to Brazil. We toured Sao Paulo, Fortaleza, Natal, Recife and Salvador Bahia.

February 23, 1996 was a landmark! Woody agreed to a European tour – 19 concerts in 21 days. It was filmed and is shown as Wild Man Blues. See more under Woody Allen Band on this site.

April 23, 1996 was the end of an era! Michael's Pub closed. Gil Weist opened a new club in the Parker Meridien Hotel. Woody's band played there every Monday and I had a band Tuesday through Saturday. This lasted almost a year until March 13, 1997. During this time I performed in the Mike Figgis film One Night Stand. Should you happen to look for the crowd scene at Grand Central Station in Manhattan, you will see me with a ten-piece brass band I put together for the movie. After the Parker Meridien stint Woody's band was off until we opened on April 14, 1997 at

the Café Carlyle located in the Carlyle Hotel on Madison Avenue.

In August I played the Olympics in Atlantic City with a group of hot-shot studio men from New York. It was led by pianist Dave Matthews (not the pop star). Some of the guys were trumpeter Lew Soloff, trombonist Jim Pugh and tubaist Dave Bergeron. Chip Jackson was on bass.

In February and March of 1998 the Woody Allen band recorded a CD for RCA Records entitled Selections from Wild Man Blues. My partner Ruth, David Huddleston and his wife Sarah accompanied me to the premier of the film Wild Man Blues at the Sony Plaza on Broadway where I was interviewed by the press under hot lights with cameras flashing. What a deal for a boy from the banks of the Wabash. In the same month I started writing music for the New York City institution The Big Apple Circus.

What a year! On August 31, 1998 I started an acting part in the Woody Allen film Sweet and Lowdown. My last scene was shot on November 12, 1998. Ruth and I attended a screening of the film on November 18, 1999. On October 19, 1998, we attended a private screening of Mr. Allen's film Celebrity which contains a song by yours truly.

Hey, another landmark! June 6, 1999 was the first night for the best damn band I've ever had. It's called Wild Reeds and Wicked Rhythm and it is precisely that. It performs ever Wednesday night at the Cajun Restaurant at Sixteenth Street and Eighth Avenue in Manhattan. The members are an elite group: Scott Robinson on C-Melody saxophone; Orange Kellin on clarinet; Debbie Kennedy on bass; Conal Fowkes on piano and little ole me. Words cannot express what this group does for me. It's my heart and soul and it plays my original tunes too. The great alto saxophonist Mike Hashim is the number one sub.

On February 8 and 9, 1999, I recorded an album of the Sounds of New York with Uri Caine. On February 22 and 23 I acted in and played music for a Vernel Bagneris play entitled How Could Cupid Be So Stupid performed at the famed Village Vanguard. On August of 2000 I played on Mike Hashim's CD of Kurt Weill music.

At that time I had become acquainted with the lyricist Bob Cooke. So in October we began collaborating on lyrics for my play The Blind Man. January 16, 2001 I started playing at the Birdland jazz club with David Ostwald's Louis Armstrong Centennial Band. In April I produced a CD for the brilliant classical saxophonist Stella Tartsinis. It was recorded at the Knitting Factory.

From July 30 to August 9, 2001 there was a West Coast tour of the Woody Allen Band for the opening of the Dreamworks/Allen film The Curse of the Jade Scorpion. Just after New Years on January 4, 2002 David Huddleston and I presented a performance of my play The Blind Man for New York producers. One of the producers was accompanied by his wife Valerie Harper. She raved about the music and musicianship involved in the production. Since then the music and script have been recorded on New York Jazz Records.

During this time the master guitarist Frank Vignola and I recorded some of my original tunes, which became CDs on NYJR. On some tracks we were joined by Conal Fowkes on bass and Joe Ascione on drums. I am extremely pleased with the results of these recordings.

[This is not the end of the story - more to come]