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Music THE Don Julin way

An interview with the
master of the mandolin

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Music

THE DON JULIN WAY

An interview with the "master of the mandolin"

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM

MUSIC
continued from page 7

Chances are that if there is an innovative or hot new music project going in the northern Michigan area, local musician Don Julin will have something to do with it.

Julin, a Traverse City native, has been synonymous with the local music scene for two decades now as a respected musician, composer, arranger, producer, recording engineer, and the driving force behind a countless number of local bands. Versatile on a variety of instruments—but primarily known as a master of the mandolin (enough so to earn him a reputation as Michigan's preeminent player of this challenging instrument)—Julin usually has about a half dozen or so projects on the front burner, about as many on the back burner, and an eye (and an ear) tuned towards inviting possibilities down the road.

His recent accomplishments are some of the most interesting of his eclectic and fascinating career. Over the winter, Julin released "Tractor," a CD of instrumental songs that *Mandolin Magazine* described as "hip and hoppin', funky and funny, bluesy and beautiful." When spring rolled around, Julin was voted Best All-Around Musician in the annual *Northern Express* Reader's Poll, and then he took off for Italy with fellow musician and frequent band-mate Ron Getz for two weeks of performances, workshops and recording.

Just back in Traverse City, Julin took a few minutes to catch up with *The Bay Area Times Magazine* (BAT) to share his perspective on a number of different topics, most of which—in a case of art imitating life or vice versa—have something to do with music.

Bay Area Times: What is new in the life and work of Don Julin these days?

Don Julin: My daughter, Zara, just turned 14 years old, so here we go. I now have a teenage daughter who is a freshman at Interlochen Center for the Arts and she just got accepted into the theatre program. I am very proud of her. When I'm not performing, I'm

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either practicing or recording, and in general trying to make a living—just ask my wife and daughter.

BAT: How many different groups are you performing with, and what are some of the upcoming gigs to which you are looking forward?

DJ: It is really hard to say how many groups and combinations I play in, because it seems to change weekly. There are four, for sure. They're the Neptune Quartet, in duos with guitarist Ron Getz and singer Claudia Schmidt, and the solo gigs I do. I also play with just about anyone who wants the sound of a mandolin and is willing to pay me, so in the summer it could be a different group every night of the week.

As far as upcoming gigs, I just started an acoustic jazz night at Union Street Station (in Traverse City) every Tuesday from 9:00 p.m. to midnight. Each Tuesday, there's a quartet made up of a revolving cast of musicians but the theme is acoustic jazz. Musicians you'll most likely see on Tuesdays include the likes of Ron Getz, Claudia Schmidt, Jack Dryden, Crispin Campbell, Glenn Wolff and Angelo Meli, to name just a few.

BAT: How do you develop your different musical projects?

DJ: I like to blend many different musical styles in an attempt to create an audio landscape that can take the listener to a familiar place. It might take you back to remembering your grandfather telling you about coming to America, or sharing stories about the Great Depression. On the other hand, another song might remind the listener of a clown riding a unicycle or the famous R. Crumb illustration of Mr. Natural—that 1970's "Keep on Truckin'" guy. In order to develop this kind of music you need open-minded, high-quality players who are willing to put in a lot of time rehearsing and experimenting with creating these emotions.

BAT: You're known for consistently surrounding yourself with some of the most talented musicians in this part of the state—people who are able to do the kinds of things you just described. What is your overall take on the quality of players we have living and working here?

DJ: We are very lucky to have so many great musicians right here in this little town of ours. I do not know if it is because we are so close to the Interlochen Arts Academy or because this is just a nice place to hide from the rest of the world, but for some reason, there are many world-class players in the Grand Traverse area.

BAT: Tell us about the "Tractor" CD, which has earned as much acclaim for you as a mandolin player as it has for you as a recording engineer and producer, which is basically your day job with The Cloning Lab in Traverse City. The new disc has many memorable cuts on it, from "Folgarelli's Two-Step" to "105-Year-Old Cat." How did this project evolve?

DJ: "Tractor" is a collection of in-

strumental songs that I have been working on for years. It started out being more of an archival project than a CD that I was going to sell. After a few months of work on the project, I noticed that this collection of songs is quite unique and some people might even like it, so I decided to put it out and see what would happen.

BAT: How has the response been to the disc?

DJ: Fantastic! I can't believe what people have said about it. So far, it has received favorable reviews in two national publications and is in regular rotation at WNMC Radio (90.7FM), in Traverse City.

BAT: One of your most recent undertakings was two weeks you spent in the beautiful and historic Tuscany region of Italy with Ron Getz, where the two of you returned at the request of Italian mandolin master Ugo Orlandi. What were the highlights for you?

DJ: It was two weeks of great food, wine, music, friendly people, and no stress. I highly recommend it. An old band-mate from my first band, the Microtones, lives outside Florence and happens to be a great bassist and vocalist. Last year, Ron Getz and I went to play with Wes Ivankovich for a short tour of five days and, musically, it really worked for us so we decided to try to make it an annual thing. This time, we played a series of concerts that included giving a master class and performance at the Cesare Pollini Conservatory of Music in Padova. They still teach mandolin at this 300-year-old school and the course of study for the last seven years. We also had a chance to record some original tunes that I am currently trying to make into a CD.

BAT: What did you learn as a result of that trip?

DJ: Sadly, that Americans are really uptight and stressed out, and that we eat terrible food (laughing).

BAT: What are the next musical projects you'll be tackling? Yours, or those you're doing in collaboration with other artists?

DJ: I am currently finishing two new CDs that will be for sale this summer. One is with the Neptune Quartet, and the other one is with Ron Getz and Wes Ivankovich.

BAT: You have established yourself as one of a handful of mandolin masters in the country, and certainly one of the hardest-working. You're a member of the Classical Mandolin Society of America (CMSA) and were featured at their 2001 conference, and you've also performed as a soloist in the CMSA En Masse Mandolin Orchestra and the MandoFest Orchestra. That all sounds pretty heady. Do you think you're perceived as an ambassador for the mandolin?

DJ: Maybe around here, but nowhere else. One night after playing with Big Swifty & Associates at Little Bo's Bar (in Traverse City), Mark Perry proclaimed, "Don, you must be the best mandolin player within five city blocks." That kind of puts it all in perspective!

Note: Don Julin's "Tractor" CD is sold at area stores; retail price is \$15.95.