



LOU DONALDSON

"My first impulse is always to describe Lou Donaldson
as the greatest alto saxophonist in the world."

— Will Friedwald, New York Sun

Jazz critics agree that “*Sweet Poppa Lou*” Donaldson is one of the greatest alto saxophonists of all time. His musicianship, humor, and showmanship has earned him international acclaim as a performer with a worldwide following.

Lou’s first jazz recordings were with the Charlie Singleton Orchestra in 1950. He then gained national attention after the co-founder of Blue Note Records, Alfred Lion, heard him play at Minton’s Playhouse in 1952 and invited him to record for his label. Recording initially as a sideman with the Milt Jackson Quartet (later the Modern Jazz Quartet) and the Thelonious Monk Sextet, Lou also made recordings with Clifford Brown, Horace Silver, and Art Blakey that are considered some of the first in the hard bop genre. He was instrumental in bringing Brown and Silver to Blue Note, and as a bandleader for most of his career, Lou gave about fifty legendary musicians their debut sessions with Blue Note. Included in this prestigious group are: Grant Green, Blue Mitchell, John Patton, Curtis Fuller, Donald Byrd, Charles Earland, Stanley Turrentine, Tommy Turrentine, Horace Parlan, George Tucker, Al Harewood, Lamont Jackson, Baby Face Willette, Idris Muhammad (formerly known as Leo Morris), Jamil Nasser (formerly known as George Joyner), Ray Barretto, Herman Foster, Peck Morrison, Dave Bailey, and the 3 Sounds — who were personally scouted by Lou.

Lou made a series of records for Blue Note in the 50’s that have become classics, and in the early 60’s he made some excellent recordings for Cadet and Argo Records. His return to Blue Note in 1967 was marked by one of his most famous recordings, *Alligator Bogaloo*. A prolific songwriter and performer, Lou boasts an impressive catalog of eighty-eight titles or more. He spent years touring on the road, featuring an organ-saxophone format exclusively. This led to an invitation to play on Jimmy Smith’s seminal recording, *The Sermon*. Lou employed a variety of great organists, including Dr. Lonnie Smith (along with George Benson on Lou’s acclaimed *Alligator Boogaloo*), Jack McDuff, Charles Earland, John Patton, Leon Spencer, Pat Bianchi, and Akiko Tsuruga. The organ-sax groove sound — which Lou called “swinging bebop” — made jazz as popular for a while as it had been during the swing era. His hits on Blue Note Records are still high demand favorites, and he remains the label’s oldest living musician from that notable era of jazz.

Born on November 1, 1926, Lou is the second of four children born to father, Louis Sr., a minister and graduate of Livingstone College, and mother, Lucy, a graduate of Cheney University. Lucy was a music teacher, music director and concert pianist who recognized Lou’s expert ear for music and introduced him to the clarinet. At age 15, he matriculated to North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro NC where he was a member of the marching band playing clarinet. His education was interrupted by World War II when in 1945 he was drafted and entered the United States Navy. He was accepted into the Great Lakes Navy Band at Camp Robert Smalls where he played clarinet and began playing alto saxophone. Years later in 2003 he participated in a commemoration ceremony convened by the Commander, United States Navy Naval Training Center, in recognition of the first 5,000 African Americans allowed to serve our country as Navy Musicians instead of being restricted to the Steward’s Branch as was previously required because of segregation. While in the Navy, Lou took liberty in Chicago on several occasions and, after hearing Charlie Parker, embraced this style of playing and made the saxophone his instrument. He went on to

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develop his own sound, becoming known for his sweet ballads and earning him his legendary nickname — “*Sweet Poppa Lou*,” an honorific first bestowed upon him by renowned jazz producer and broadcaster Bob Porter.

When Lou was released from the Navy, he returned to Greensboro to complete his studies and received a Bachelor of Science degree in May 1948. His thesis titled *The Change from Swing to Bebop* was incorporated into a book that became required reading for students completing the music major program. In 1972 his alma mater established the Lou Donaldson Award for Excellence in Instrumental Performance, awarded to the most gifted jazz musician pupil. While in college, Lou played club dates throughout North Carolina with the Rhythm Vets, a combo that consisted of North Carolina A & T alumni who were Navy veterans. They recorded the soundtrack to the musical comedy titled *Pitch a Boogie Woogie* in Greenville, NC in 1947. He also had the valuable opportunity to hear and sometimes sit in with many famous touring bands that would come through Greensboro several times a year. All were impressed with Lou’s playing, and Illinois Jacquet and members of Dizzy Gillespie’s band especially advised him to move to New York to propel his career. Lou took the advice of these luminaries and moved to New York in late 1949 where he attended the Darrow Institute of Music. He lived in Harlem at 127th Street and 8th Avenue in the heart of New York’s jazz scene with his new wife, Maker, his longtime sweetheart from Albemarle, North Carolina. She remained his wife and business partner for 56 years until her death in 2006. Together they raised two daughters, Lydia and Carol. In New York, Lou got to hear all the celebrated jazz musicians of the day and is proud to have had the opportunity to play with many of them, including his idol, Charlie Parker. He later moved the family to the Bronx, New York. There he penned many of his tunes that remain acclaimed classics today. In 1963, he moved to “The Valley” neighborhood in the Bronx where up-and-coming rappers who lived there were inspired by his soul-jazz, jazz-funk tunes and call “The Valley” their music’s birthplace. Lou’s music has been sampled numerous times. Because of the success of his career, working as a professional musician was the only job Lou ever had and totally enabled him to support his family and put his children through college. He continued to delight audiences around the world with his soulful, thoroughly swinging, and steeped-in-the-blues performances until after his 90th birthday when he later retired to South Florida.

His outstanding contributions to jazz and consistent promotion of the success of fellow musicians and the genre brought Lou countless honors and awards. He received the Charlie “Bird” Parker Memorial Medal in 1975 from the Charlie Parker Foundation. Lou was responsible for helping to establish the Foundation in Kansas City under the direction of Eddie Baker, now deceased. In 1982 he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Humanities degree by his alma mater, now North Carolina A & T University. Lou was inducted into the International Jazz Hall of Fame in 1996, and in 2001 he was inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame as a recipient of the esteemed Jay McShann Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2012, Lou was inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame, and that same year he received the Fine Arts Award from the State of North Carolina — the state’s highest award bestowed upon civilians. In 2013, he was named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts — our nation’s highest honor in jazz. Then in 2022, the North Carolina Department of Transportation named the section of NC Highway 740 that runs through his birthplace and childhood hometown — Badin, North Carolina — “Lou Donaldson Boulevard.”

Lou continues to receive tributes from fans worldwide who call and write to tell him how much they still love listening to his recordings. Jazz journalists travel from near and far to visit him, expressing great appreciation for the opportunity to talk to the jazz legend and document his lifetime achievements. Lou is proud to have written his still unpublished autobiography about his unique experiences as a musician, bandleader, and businessman that counter the stereotypical narrative about jazz musicians, and that includes his unabashed criticisms about the music business as well as his informed commentaries about jazz — America’s “classical music.”