



DON WARREN

Musician, Inventor, Teacher

BY JENNA CAPUTO

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Some people seem like they can see a guitar and pick it up and magically be able to play. The rest of us don't have a clue where to start but have daydreams of rocking out onstage and partying with rock legends. While that's just a fun fantasy for most of us, Don Warren has actually lived it and is working hard to make those dreams a reality for others, too—regardless of age or musical ability.

Born in New Jersey, Don grew up in Cambridge, NY with his parents, brothers, and 13 foster kids over the years. Watching his mom and dad work with these troubled teens inspired him more than he realized at the time. "My dad had a way of reaching in and helping those he spoke with feel heard—valued. His ability to help them understand some pretty complex ideas as to what motivates their behaviors was something to witness," says Don.

While he'd absorbed seeing the power of teaching in this way, becoming a teacher was not on the forefront of Don's mind. Growing up he enjoyed playing football and baseball. A creative and inventive child, Don also liked to work with his hands, taking apart old speaker cabinets and building new ones to suit his needs. He even had his room wired to accept a full PA and amps so he could play with his brothers and friends. Their whole family was musical. His brother, Mitch, sang opera. His brother, Lee, also a gifted singer, played in a band with Don for a while. Bob became the more recognized brother, becoming the longest running, back-to-back annual sold-out show at Caffè Lena for 50 consecutive years. He was the only act that Lena Spencer, the founder of the famous café, had personally sought out to perform. Bob has numerous albums of his own and has been marked as country music star Hal Ketchum's inspiration from when

they played in a band together as teens. Bob has come to be regarded among "musicians' musicians" as one of the finest lyricists out there.

Even though music was always a big part of Don's life, he ended up taking a job as a corporate executive, doing things like conducting listening sessions to determine which opportunities existed to improve morale and productivity, and conducting preliminary interviews to screen potential candidates for companies such as GE and Motorola. While successful, Don knew that he wasn't fulfilling his true purpose. "I never came home feeling rewarded," he says. When the 9/11 attacks happened, he was forced to look at his life in a new way and knew he needed a change. "After the attacks, I decided that I was no longer going to follow those things that don't resonate within and allow me to pursue interests and my passion to teach. That moment really pressed upon me just how precious every moment is and that I wanted to make each of mine count in a way that meant something to me."

Besides playing with his talented brothers, Don has an impressive background himself. As a professional musician, he has shared studio credits with icons like Trey Anastasio of Phish, Hal Ketchum, John Sebastian (Lovin' Spoonful), Richard Bell (The Band), and the Nashville session legend, Arlen Roth. Don has now appeared on about 15-20 albums and singles so far as both a lead guitarist and backing vocals.

Along with being a versatile musician, Don also has become a renowned guitar maker. Taking his love of inventing things and working with his hands, Don wanted to find new ways to improve the music industry he so loves. "All I've ever wanted to do is create a guitar that would let me do a studio session or gig with the best



tone possible. After years of owning countless guitars, I knew there was something missing but could not quite put my finger on it," remembers Don. He focused his energy and learned all he could about the process of creating a guitar. He took apart existing guitars to study them. He read what he could and observed other guitar makers, but without the "proper" tools of the trade, he fashioned his own tools and methods, listening to his intuition and doing what seemed to make sense. "Many years and countless hours of experimentation allowed me to take all I had learned from working with some of the best pickup makers, wood suppliers, and guitar makers in the world to bring what I truly believe to be an incredibly inspiring instrument," says Don. Some of the biggest names in the music industry now seek Don out for his guitars.

Don also strove to improve pick options for students learning to play. "I wanted a way to reduce the frustration new students experience when they drop the pick, or it shifts in their hand. By creating this pick, it effectively reduced not only the frustration, but greatly accelerated the necessary picking skills to advance in a number of ways," he says. This invention was so innovative, it was purchased by the biggest guitar accessory company in the world.

As his guitar business grew, so did his connections, and Don soon found himself working with guys like Dan Toler of the Allman Brothers. Don was invited to attend a party for James Taylor at the Staples Center in Los Angeles in 2006 and asked to bring some of his guitars

to show players in the area. During his stay, he spent time with many of his musical inspirations including Sting, Bruce Springsteen, James Taylor, Bonnie Raitt, David Crosby, Keith Urban, Weird Al, and Neil Young. Through some of those conversations, it was suggested he get involved with the Grammy committee. He has been a voting member of the committee ever since.

While he enjoys playing professionally, Don gets his greatest satisfaction from teaching, and it's through his work with his son at Warren Lessons that he gets his greatest challenge. Offering lessons for all ages and ability levels in guitar, bass, ukulele, songwriting, performance, stage presentation, gear use & maintenance, and leadership skills, Warren Lessons goes beyond the typical modes of instruction. Using their unique ability to truly meet students where they're at, the Warrens have a knack for helping each of their students overcome any physical or mental roadblocks they have from achieving success. "Students have commented for years that we seem to connect and really find what sparks the most enjoyment and application of what we teach. It really has to do with how we interact with the students and find what works best for them on their time frame and learning style," explains Don.

The Warrens adapt their teaching style to the individual needs of each student. Kids generally have different "roadblocks" from adults. Physical limitations can often be children's biggest issue, but the Warrens build on small increments of success, finding something

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within each player's capabilities at that moment to show them how it can contribute to a song. Each step feels rewarding and instills the concept that persistence with patience and focus can be its own reward.

Adults can sometimes have physical limitations as well, but often their challenge is more mental—self-perfectionism or self-doubt. And while adults usually have specific goals in mind too, they're often playing as a stress and anxiety reliever from their daily responsibilities. Don recommends that the best thing an



adult student can do is to relax and let this be a time to step away from the demands of everyday life. Enjoy the process of discovery, both on the instruments as well as within, to let the journey be the best part of whatever destination may be in mind. "I can't tell you how many adults come to treasure this as part of lessons with us!" says Don.

In fact, it's watching the students that step outside of their perceived limitations that Don loves most about his job. The satisfaction from seeing them leave feeling empowered and capable is all Don wants to see. "Some will thank me, but I don't want them thinking I did it. I tell them that all I did was believe in them and thank them for trusting the process and allowing me to be a part of it."

It is the Warrens' unique teaching method that makes them so successful. While they can provide the classic methodology training if a student wishes it, they instead usually focus on using intuition on what each student individually needs. "It works!" says Don. "We've helped a number of students earn major scholarships to schools such as Berklee, Crane, and Julliard." Their method allows students to begin playing songs immediately and is so successful that they even have the "\$100 bet." Don has had a \$100 bill on his desk for 15 years now, and tells his students, "If I can't get you to play in the style of Carlos Santana within 30 minutes when we do a certain lesson, I will give you this bill." If they lose, they owe him a cup of coffee. They all take the bet, but that bill still sits on his desk (and he never takes the coffee either). The best part? They all leave with a smile stretching from ear to ear. Word spread quickly about this teaching style, and even professional musicians stop in for a lesson or two to sharpen their skills or to learn a new style to broaden their skill set.

In addition to their in-person private lessons, the Warrens also offer small group lessons, performance groups, jam sessions, full weekend camps (for both kids and adults), and online lessons. In fact, their online lessons took off during the pandemic. Their unique teaching style works well with the virtual medium, offering a different experience than other online classes, and has become one of their most popular options. Their variety of options has been instrumental throughout the pandemic and has allowed many students to have a welcome escape from the stress and anxiety of the situation.

Outside of work, Don enjoys spending time with his sons, grandson, wife, and rescue beagle, Dorian, who loves to be sung to. His son, Michael (29), works with Don and is well-loved among their students for his laid-back demeanor and talent for connecting reminiscent of his grandfather. "He has emerged to be the star of our teaching programs," says Don. "I am in awe of what he can do and inspire in others."



Chris (24) is the guy that knows the rock camps, and with his many years of seeing Don work, is also starting to become more active in the guitar making as well as the lesson aspect of their business. Also musically talented, Chris plays guitar and drums and has an eclectic taste in music from Sinatra to Van Halen and everything in between. He can also do a variety of voices and has an awesome sense of humor and an adventurous spirit. "Both are incredibly creative and brilliant," says Don. "They fulfill a dad's dream of being the better version of the man he is."

Don continues to have a passion for learning new things and looking past what he "thinks" he knows to bring in fresh ideas and concepts to challenge his previously held beliefs. COVID has proven



following a musical dream or just want to learn something new, to remember that "no matter the age or whatever you hold as beliefs about your musical ability or lack thereof, *please*, put all that aside and trust me when I tell you that you aren't going to tell me something I haven't heard many times before. If you want to experience music as it is intended to make you feel, either Mike or I will get you to that place. Trust the process!"

For more information about Warren Lessons, visit warrenlessons.com.