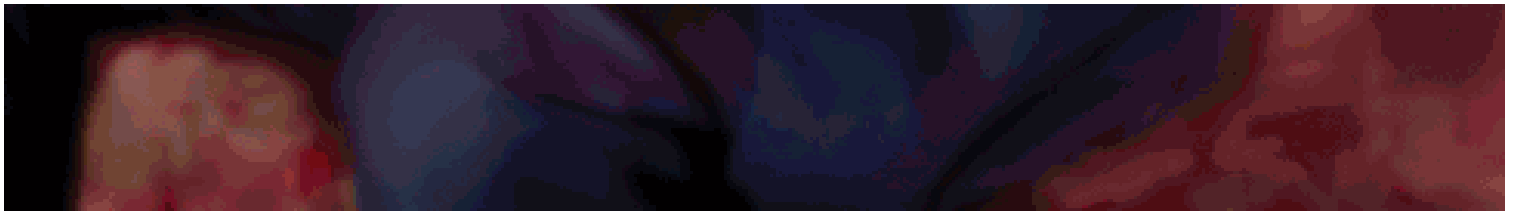


# Kermit Ruffins

11/30/2012 by [Sue Strachan \(https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/\)](https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/)





**MARYLOU UTTERMOHLEN PHOTOGRAPH**

If waiting to interview musician Kermit Ruffins means that I had to spend time inhaling the aroma of food wafting from the kitchen of his latest venture, Kermit's Treme Speakeasy, so be it. On the menu this night is everything from fried catfish to stewed rabbit and a quail dish ... so, I may just have to stay for dinner and see Ruffins perform. He soon arrives from a photo shoot – for this magazine, as it turns out – dressed in his signature hat with bandana underneath and bespoke suit. As he enters, I think: When hasn't Kermit performed? Who in New Orleans hasn't seen him perform? With a schedule that has him working almost seven nights a week throughout New Orleans, one would be hard-pressed on where and when not to see him – or have seen him.

As one of the city's most noted musical ambassadors, Ruffins shows New Orleanians and visitors how to have a good time – on stage and off. With a professional musical career spanning from high school to present day, and a well-known side-gig as chef – his barbecue has now taken a mythic status – Ruffins embodies the *laissez les bon temps rouler* attitude that many try to copy, but don't quite succeed.

**So how does one describe Ruffins to a person who hasn't heard him?** I turned to the CD, *Live at Vaughan's* (Basin Street Records), recorded with his band, the Barbecue Swingers: “Kermit Ruffins is the closest the 21st century is likely to get to a personification of the spirit of traditional New Orleans jazz. Possessed of a bright, shining trumpet tone and warm, relaxed vocal style, Ruffins recalls Louis Armstrong in personality and presentation, but moreover he represents the friendly good-times vibe of the Big Easy.”

**Who did you pick the trumpet up from?** My uncle Percy. When you saw him, you knew you were in for a big treat. He used to come by our house on Saturday, and he would let my brother and me play on his horn. When he opened up that horn case, the smell of that brass, it was so exciting! He gave me a mouthpiece and I would march around the Lower Nine with it.

At about 14 years old, I got home [and] there was a trumpet from my uncle. So (my brother and I) joined the band at Lawless – where I learned how to play by Herman Jones, who also taught my kids.

**Tell me about forming Rebirth Brass Band and why you then went out on your own and formed the Barbecue Swingers.** I started playing in the marching band at Lawless (school) then when I went to Clark I met Philip Frazier. We were in the marching band together – I was first chair. Phil asked me at the end of the summer, “Let’s start a second-line band.” I said, “Sure give me the address and I’ll be there the next day.” I was with them from about 1983 to ’92.

After my two daughters were born, I was like, I can’t be going to Europe like this – I won’t see them. Rebirth was big! I already had a solo career on the side, and I was so excited about the instrumentation of swing music, traditional music. Wearing the suit and tie. I also liked being out there and singing, and I had more control.

One of your most famous regular spots to perform is Vaughan’s in the Bywater. It was originally for a birthday party for [owner] Cindy Wood’s dad. I knew Daddy-O when I played with Tuba Fats and a few other people in Jackson Square. (I was playing with them for tips when not playing with Rebirth.) We would take breaks at the Alpine restaurant where Daddy-O was the bartender. He would let us smoke reefer in the coatroom.

Years later, my first solo album had come out, *World on a String*, and Cindy goes, “Who is this guy? I need to get him to play for my father’s birthday.” I played, then asked if I could do it every Thursday.

I don’t know when I started the barbecue at Vaughan’s – I like to tailgate, and we wanted something to munch out on. Now, it’s spontaneous [if I cook].

Now Chris, Cindy’s husband, does a huge pot of beans.

**So I hear you do the cooking for Kermit’s Treme Speakeasy.** I get up at about 5:30 a.m. I watch news on Channel 6. I get to the restaurant about 7-7:30 a.m. to start cooking.

**You started making your shows earlier about a year ago and in nonsmoking venues. To party early. And, you can get the same crowd early.**

**You have the lease to Ernie K-Doe’s Mother-In-Law Lounge. What are planning to do with it?** I want to do the same thing they were doing before ... to do it how Antoinette [K-Doe] did it. I want to follow up on that. Hopefully it will be open by January.

**I read that you try to keep a lot of your shows local. Yet, are you still traveling out-of-town for shows?** I’ve been doing a lot in Brooklyn; recently played in Philadelphia. Israel is coming up – I just have to make myself say yes.

**What is your favorite song to perform?** “On the Sunny Side of the Street.” I love that tune. It’s a happy song.

**What is your favorite Christmas song?** (He sings ...): “Christmas time is here ...” Charlie Brown Christmas song.

**True Confession:** I have a big bush! When I go to church, I can’t wear a hat. So I comb my hair out with a big pick; there’s a lot of it!

*Ruffins and the Barbecue Swingers performs regularly in New Orleans: Sundays and Mondays, Kermit’s Treme Speakeasy (6 p.m./nonsmoking); Tuesdays, Bullet’s Sports Bar (6 p.m./nonsmoking for Ruffins); Wednesdays, Irving Mayfield I Club (in the JW Marriott. 6 p.m./nonsmoking/DJ set), Thursdays, Vaughan’s (8 p.m./nonsmoking for Ruffins); Fridays, Blue Nile (7 p.m./nonsmoking for Ruffins)*

***Ruffins CDs are available on the Basin Street Record label (which just celebrated its 15th anniversary.)***

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## **At a Glance**

**Name:** Kermit Ruffins (Kermit was his grandfather’s name.) (**Age:** 47 (Turns 48 this month))

**Profession:** Musician **Born/Raised:** Lower 9th Ward **Resides:** Gentilly (on Music Street)

**Family:** Fiancé, Lexine May (we got engaged on Election Day); father, Lloyd Ruffins, deceased (he worked at the Louisiana Superdome); mother, Esther Ruffins (retired; worked at WYES-TV); brother, Lloyd Ruffins (pharmaceutical/medical sales rep); sister, Imani (police officer). Five children: Tawana Ruffins (who helps run his restaurant, Kermit’s Treme Speakeasy); Kermit Ruffins (a chef in San Antonio); Christina (attending Spelman College; she wants to be a dancer on Broadway); Neshia (attending Southern University in Baton Rouge; she plays classical piano and performs with Ruffins when in town) and Kaylin Orleans (attending Ursuline Academy). **Education:** Thomas Alva Edison **Elementary School;** Alfred Lawless Junior **High School;** Joseph S. Clark High School. **Favorite book:** Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong by Terry Teachout (I’ve gotten about half-way through it.) **Favorite movie:** Star Trek. Every time I get on an airplane, I get a bloody Mary and put the film on. It kills the hour and a half. I like science fiction ... Planet of the Apes. All the most recent versions. And, I also like Titanic. **Favorite TV show:** The “Today” Show **Favorite food:** Salmon, broccoli and white rice (my favorite thing to cook). **Favorite restaurant** (other than your own!): Maximo’s **Favorite music:** In my car, usually two things: Pandora: Godfather Waltz; or Isley Brothers.

**Hobby:** Cooking Favorite vacation spot: I don't do vacations. I can't remember when I did anything like that. But I do like Amsterdam and Nice (France).

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