

## American Jazz Museum Presents Exhibition Highlighting Iconic Jazz Artist Louis Prima

By Trevor Powell  
CALL Staff Writer

On November 22, The American Jazz Museum of Kansas City, presented a new exhibit about the iconic Italian American trumpeter, singer, entertainer and band leader, Louis Prima, entitled, *"The Wildest Exhibition"*.

This one-of-a-kind exhibition celebrates the life and legacy of Louis Prima, an iconic jazz artist whose vibrant contributions continue to inspire generations.

Born December 7, 1910, to Sicilian immigrants in New Orleans, Louisiana, Prima grew up on St. Peter street in the Trem'e neighborhood. While attending Jesuit and Warren Easton High Schools, Prima got his first taste of New Orleans Jazz by listening to the integrated Italian and African-American night clubs that were stationed in the section of Trem'e and the French Quarter known as "little Palermo", where Prima became a loyal fan of jazz great, Louis Armstrong.

As a child, Prima, along with his brother and sister, played their instruments on the street corners for nickels and dimes. By the age of 14, he formed his first kid group.

Prima left high school before graduating, and was considered a professional musician at a young age. He joined the Musicians' Union and began playing in the Saenger Theater Pit Band and in a small jazz duo at night spots owned by his older brother, Leon, in 1928.

However, Prima faced adversity on his journey to music stardom. While in the New Orleans, the Musicians Union did take to his style of play and, wasn't as warranted as others who played in New Orleans theaters

So he left the Union promising that he would become bigger and brighter than those who did not like or approve of his style of trumpet playing.

Prima's first big break to fame came in 1934 when he was discovered during a Mar-

di Gras by Guy Lombardo, at his brother Leon's club "Shim Sham" on Bourbon street. Lombardo invited Prima to New York City, where he landed a job as house band leader at the newly opened "Famous Door" on west 52nd street.

Prima had the ability to read his audience well enough to know which songs to perform making him an all-around entertainer. Being the ultimate energized performer that he was, Prima made sure his audience had fun. His charisma and star power brought him the aura of "a ladies man", in which he accumulated five wives throughout his career.

Prima's philosophy was "familiarity breeds contempt", that perception made him a loner at times even outside of his family.

Based on his playing and performance at the "Famous Door" night club in New York as well as his Brunswick recordings with the New Orleans Gang, Prima moved to Los Angeles in 1935, opening his own night club dubbing it, "The Famous Door".

In the 1930's, Louis Prima wrote arguably one of the greatest and most successful jazz classics of all time called, "Sing Sing". By the 1940's, Prima developed his first big band, "The Gleeeee Rhythm Orchestra", Prima's objective was for his band to appeal to the public. He also began appearing in musical films during World War II, when anti-Italian sentiment was trending in the U.S.

Prima received backlash for forging his ethnic origin to comic gestures while on stage.

At the end of the 1940's, Prima accepted a job playing in the Sahara hotel lounge in Las Vegas. Prima was one of the first to realize the potential of show business in Las Vegas. During this time, Las Vegas lounges were not known to be prominent but Louis and Keely Smith, who was Prima's wife at the time, were a major success when displaying their humorous harmony while on stage per-

forming throughout the 1950's.

In 1959, Prima and Smith won a Grammy Award for the "Best Performance by a Vocal Group" for "That Old Black Magic", performance. Prima and Smith eventually divorced in 1961, two years after he married singer, Gia Maione, where the two performed around the country.

During the late '60's and early '70's, the beginning of the end to Louis Prima's immaculate career had taken place, but that didn't stop him from achieving greater accomplishment's.

Prima had a connection to Missouri's own, "Walt Disney". He went on to record an album of music for Disney's "Mary Poppins" as well as a sound track, "I Want to Be Like You", for Disney's, "Jungle Book" where he was the voice for the beloved character, "King Louie".

Unfortunately, the New Orleans native was diagnosed with a benign brain tumor in 1975, and was in a coma for three years before his death.

Louis Leo Prima died August 24, 1978, at the age of 67, leaving a legacy and deep resume behind. But more importantly, he was one of the few Italians to ever play at the Apollo Theater, with over 200 recorded tracks of music.

No doubt, Louis Prima will forever be known as the "King Of Swing".



AMERICAN JAZZ MUSEUM PRESENTS EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTING ICONIC JAZZ ARTIST LOUIS PRIMA. . . Known as one of finest trumpet players of all time, for a limited time, the American Jazz Museum is hosting an exhibit surrounding the musical legacy of this swing band musician, Louis Prima. -- CALL photos by Trevor Powell



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