



From Mouseketeer to Musician
UltimateDisney.com Presents
An Interview with Don Grady



By Aaron Wallace

Don Grady made his mark as part of television history not once, but twice. His musical talent showed promise during his childhood years, but that budding career was put on a decades-long hiatus when he entered the acting realm instead. As a young adolescent in the late 1950s, he joined Walt Disney's popular "Mickey Mouse Club" variety show, launching a successful career in entertainment that would span a lifetime. Though that stint lasted only one year, he continued with regularity guest-starring roles on various TV shows that would include "The Lucy Show", an Emmy-nominated episode of "The Eleventh Hour" alongside Angela Lansbury, and a brief role on Disney's "The New Adventures of Spin & Marty."

Born an Agrati, Don changed his surname as he signed on for his second legendary role, that of Robbie Douglas in the hit sitcom "My Three Sons." Produced for more than a decade, and aired much longer than that in syndication, the series became an American favorite and brought Don his largest dose of fame yet. Following the conclusion of that show in the early 1970s, Don dabbled with acting for a little longer, but soon brought his career full-circle and returned to his original love: music. It's in this arena that he continues to be active in the entertainment industry (and back with the Mouse House, no less), where his resumé includes scores for film, DVDs, Universal Studios theme park attractions, and even original albums. His most recent release is *Disney's Princess Christmas Album*, which sees him writing and producing holiday compositions that combine classic Disney characters with Christmas celebration.

Don recently took the time to chat with UltimateDisney.com about his life, his career in acting, and the love for music that took him to where he is today.

UltimateDisney.com: It's an honor to talk to you, being a fan of "My Three Sons"...

Don Grady: ...and the "Mickey Mouse Club"...

Absolutely.

...I don't know, I met some people, we did this, they got some of the old mice together and they did this show out of Disneyland a couple of weeks ago. I did a few interviews out there for some of the Disney sites and things like that.

And you started that when you were, what, 13?

Yeah, well, I was 12 going on 13. I was 12 when I started. I actually had my 13th birthday -- we were in Tomorrowland, I mean we were in Frontierland doing a talent show. So I had become a Mouseketeer and I will never forget that birthday... Annette gave me a kiss on my forehead and I had a crush on Karen. And after the talent show, after the park was closed, they would give us the run of the park for about an hour and one of the favorite things we liked to do was go over to Tom Sawyer Island. I had never been to Disneyland. That was my first time, you know, being a Mouseketeer was being in Disneyland and so I got to go over to Tom Sawyer's Island and Cubby and Karen showed me around and showed me the ins and outs and the little secret places of Tom Sawyer's Island. That was my 13th birthday. I was 12 and 13 -- it was the last season that they filmed the show.

Well you can't ask for a much better birthday party than that.

Yes, exactly. It was one of those things you don't forget.

So are your memories of working on the show still pretty vivid, despite having been only 13 when you did it?

Oh, real vivid. I mean, I even remember -- this sounds strange -- but I even remember the smell of the mice when I first got on the set because I lived up in Northern California and I really had never been around the studio and got the job when I was living up in Northern California and so my first day. When I saw the mice, I was auditioning for Walt Disney. They had swung me down to Burbank and the mice came through the audition room to kind of -- I guess to look us over to see you. I don't know if they were giving Walt any

feedback or not, but there was the smell of makeup or powder.

I don't know if you've smelled that - the smell of pancake make-up, but it has a real distinctive studio, being-on-the-set kind of smell. I didn't know I was going to be smelling that for years after that but that was the first time. Yeah, I remember that and I remember the audition real clearly.

How did you get that audition? I mean, how do you become a Mouseketeer?

That was pretty convoluted in a way because there was an audition. They were looking for four new Mouseketeers and they were looking all over the country. I was living up in the Bay area and there was an audition at the Cow Palace.

There were 500 kids that showed up at the Cow Palace on that weekend. I think it was a Saturday and we sat in this big room the Cow Palace had there and we just waited for our number to come up and everybody who could do anything was doing something. You had about seven or eight minutes to do whatever you were gonna do and I did an imitation of Johnny Ray singing "Cry" and I did a tap dance and I played five or six different musical instruments. I don't remember how I got all that in in seven or eight minutes; if I could remember, I could probably take it to Vegas and have another career. But that was enough to get me the audition.

And then they got me down with another kid named Buster -- I will never forget -- he and his father flew down with me and my mother. They told me before the audition, they told us both, that only one of us was going to be picked. So when I did the audition, the piano player he sped up my tap dance really fast; I could barely keep up with it. I actually kind of had to re-choreograph myself over to where he was playing and whisper to him to slow it down and the audition didn't go very well for me. At the end, [Walt] Disney got up and he went over to Buster and his father and he complimented them and said how great he was, how great they were doing and everything, and over there from the other side of the room where he was, he just looked at my mom and me and just kind of waved and said thank you very much and walked out of the room. I really never even met him face to face.

So on the plane trip back, we were complimenting Buster -- what a great audition he gave -- and we really thought it was him who got

the job and he was even inviting us to come visit him and everything. Well as it turns out, we found out from Jack Lavin, who was one of the casting directors of the show, that they had already picked me but they needed to find out how well I could stand up with competition and how well I could take other kids and other people being given the attention. You see, because the Mouseketeers were already well-known and I was gonna be, basically, a third wheel. I was gonna be new and he wanted to know could I handle this? Disney had had some problems with some of the earlier Mouseketeers, with some of the attitudes and so forth, so this was a way of him kind of checking that out. Now some people say, well, that was kind of mean to Buster, but I think in the long run it was really a wise thing for him to do because he had protected me from being fired or from being canned at an early time on and he found out what kind of a personality I had. I wasn't happy that Buster was doing better, but I handled it. I've just never seen that kind of forethought go into hiring children.

That's a really interesting story, and it leads me to my next question, and it's the obligatory question asked of anyone who worked on a Disney project from that time: how well did you know Walt and what was interacting with him like?

Well, we didn't know him -- nobody really knew Walt that I knew of, other than maybe some of the animators that worked closely with him. He would come by and stop on the set and we would be walking down the street and he'd call us by name, but that wasn't any great credit of his because we would be wearing t-shirts with our names on it (laughs). And he would say, "Hi, Don." We saw him in the street and he was very friendly. We call him Uncle Walt - not to his face - but among ourselves we would call him Uncle Walt. But really, I mean, other than the audition and seeing him on the set and seeing him in the street, he rarely stopped to take time to talk with us that I'm aware of. Maybe with some of the other Mouseketeers there was more of a relationship there.

Do you still see anyone from the show today?

Oh yeah. I see them at these gatherings, like the 50th. It's usually the same group. It's Doreen, it's Cheryl and Sharon, and Bobby and Cubby and Karen and Lonnie and Tommy. It's kind of a handful. I met my wife, who was a Kid of the Kingdom at Disney, and I was called out there to replace Bobby. Bobby and Sharon have this dance duo that they do and they're really good at it - it's kind of this

'50s, malt shop, rock kind of stuff that they do. So there was this show that they wanted them to do, but Bobby had to go off to do "Lawrence Welk" halfway through it, so they called me up to replace him. So I went out to learn his part and in that show was my wife.

She was representing the younger Mouseketeers and I was representing the older Mouseketeers. And in this show, there was this duel between the younger mice and the older mice; that was kind of cute. But anyways, I met Ginny there and basically, Disney has been very good for me and to me. And I'm working for them now. I just finished the *Princess Christmas Album*. We wrote six original songs for the Christmas album and then I produced and arranged four or six kind of traditional songs for the princesses, so it's kind of a combination of original and traditional songs on the Christmas album.

And you were able to get the original signing voices of the princesses, is that right?

Yeah, we got the original princesses except, of course, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. You know, I don't even know if some of them are alive, but we did do a lot of auditioning to find singers that were like the original voices. We've gotten a lot of compliments on it and it seems to be doing well. I don't know about the Christmas album, it's too early to tell about that. You know, they're written really for a specific audience -- for girls and their moms that are into the princesses. Jay Landers at Walt Disney Records wanted us to write theatrical songs. He didn't want any pop tunes for the princesses. He really wanted songs that were Disney in the sense that they might come from a movie. I remember him saying, "I want you to write songs that these little girls -- 20 years later -- will be playing for their daughters and they'll remember these songs growing up with fond memories." And that was really cool to say because I have a daughter, and a son, and it put a different thought in my mind: Yes, we need to write songs that can stand 20 years, 25 years. A song that can last that long. Obviously, we can't write very trendy here, we really needed to write something right down, straight down the center.



Do you consider yourself a Disney fan?

You know, that's a -- I suppose you could say that. Let me say this, that I know more about Disney than most people my age because both my kids watch all the Disney DVDs. I actually go to my wife and daughter for Disney trivia when I'm in the middle of a song.

Being a producer, do you have a favorite classic Disney song?

I love (sings), "A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes," the way that it's put together and the chord voicing. I just love that. In fact, they did kind of a take on that song for the *Cinderella* DVD that's out. By the way, I do all the music for the DVD bonus materials, features... and all that stuff. I've done all the Platinum DVDs, *Beauty and the Beast* games, and *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King*, and *Cinderella*. I do a lot of that music for the DVD department.

In the 50s, after you were done with the Mickey Mouse Club, you moved on, of course, to "My Three Sons". How did you get that role?

An agent saw me. I did "Spin & Marty" after the Mouseketeers. They hired me as a bit player and an agent saw me and said, "You know, I think I can give him work." But I [had] to change my name because I was Don Agrati, my real name. Then they couldn't spell it and the ethnic wasn't happening, and I didn't look ethnic, and all this other stuff, and so he gave me the name Grady and I did a lot of work in all the dramas of the time. I did all of the Westerns that were out, I mean, I have a list of all these. And I was playing a kid

whose father was a drunk, or his mother was alone and the father had left, and so this kid was protecting the family, and the gun was bigger than I was. All these dramatic shows...

"Three Sons" came along -- I was a replacement on "Three Sons." The original Robbie on the pilot wasn't working out. I don't know why; I still never found out the reason. For one reason or another, he wasn't working out and so they called this emergency interview and I got the part. I really think the reason I got it was because I have a cleft in my chin (laughs), which was like MacMurray's. I mean, I think that's the biggest reason I got the part.

Well, you were great on it, and the show ran for 12 years -- 380 episodes -- which made it one of the longest-running family comedies of all time.

How many?

380.

380 - yeah. Ok, good.

That's an incredible feat. These days, a lot of shows don't even see their second season. What do you think it is that made "My Three Sons" so popular when it was on and to this day, that it's such a beloved show even now?

Well, you know, it was the first show that I can remember that had a motherless family in it. "Bonanza" took that formula and put it into a Western after "Three Sons." So, it was three boys and a father with no mother... Initially when we came out, we had a sloppy house, we had dogs on the table, there were clothes strewn all over the place and in the '60s that was pretty unusual to see that on TV and people related to that. They thought, "That's how my house looks." I think that obviously we all had a great relationship with each other and you can't fake a relationship for that many years. We all respected each other and people feel that. The writing was good; it was a show that had good writing and good drama; it wasn't a tongue-in-cheek kind of sitcom. It really had some depth to it because there were morals that Steven Douglas had. I'm very proud of this show.

Recently, particularly this year, there have been a lot of big screen movie adaptations of popular shows from the '50s,

'60s, and '70s. Do you think that's something that could be considered for "My Three Sons"?

Well, I know for a fact that Paramount had purchased the rights and Michael Douglas (funny that he should [do it], because you know, [it's] the Douglas family), but he was going to star in it. But I think it's still on the shelf. I don't think it happened for one reason or another, but I know that it's been considered. I don't know where it's at now. Yeah, I think it would make a good movie. I think it would be funny and it could also be poignant.

The "Mickey Mouse Club" was also revisited in the '70s and '90s. Are you okay with going back and sort of giving a new spin to things that you were involved with the original incarnations of?

Oh, am *I* okay? I think it would be great. I think they would have to have new characters, I mean, if Arnold Schwarzenegger would be... if Danny DeVito would be the father or something... I think it would be great. I'd love to see it -- you know, I'd love to do the music for it, of course.

The show's also one of the very few really popular shows that haven't been released in season sets on DVD yet. Do you know if its fans can expect that anytime soon?

You know, I don't know. I think Hallmark offered some of the shows, some of the earlier shows, and I think that Hallmark still has that offer out. And the show's not running right now. I think that Viacom, who owns the show, is holding out for too high of a price for it. That's my own take on it; I can't really say that for sure. I wish I could give you something for sure on that.

Well I think I have only one more question for you, because I know I've had you for a while now, but what projects are on your plate for the future right now? A return to acting anytime soon?

No, you know, I really am a committed composer and songwriter, so I really don't see myself going back. I mean, I might do some appearances or something like that, but my life is really so much about writing now. That's really what I'm about. I've got a score that's coming out on a film that's going to be on Discovery Science on December 8, it's called *Cracking the Ocean Code*. And *Princess*

Christmas is really the thing that's the most recent. I [also] did some of the music for the featurettes on the *Lady and the Tramp* DVD, which will be coming out.

Well, I think that about does it. Thanks for giving me your time today.

Ok, Aaron, well thanks for a good interview.

Thank you, it's been a pleasure.