

# AN ARTIST'S CORNER

*featuring*

## Dion Tucker



Dion Tucker is an accomplished trombonist, composer, and music educator with an oeuvre that defies genre. Boston-born and Miami-bred, Dion moved to New York in 1998 to study at The New School under the tutelage of pioneering trombonists Benny Powell and Steve Turre, among others.

In 2001, he had the privilege of touring with the rock band Matchbox 20, and was lead trombonist in The Duke Ellington Orchestra from until 2013. Since 2007, Dion has been a member of The Harry Connick, Jr. Big Band and has had the unique opportunity to perform with Harry for President Barack Obama at the 2012 Governors Ball, as lead trombonist in the 2011 Broadway revival of "On A Clear Day," the Papal Mass for Pope Benedict at Yankee Stadium in 2008 and as the trombonist in the 2018 stage adaptation of the Academy Award winning film, "The Sting," performed at the historic Paper Mill Playhouse. More recently Dion served as the lead trombonist in Connick's original Broadway show A Celebration of Cole Porter, featuring the music of the great American composer Cole Porter.

As an educator, Dion has taught in over 20 New York City public schools through the Jazz at Lincoln Center's Jazz For Young People program and is a faculty member at Jazz House Kids, a music education program in New Jersey fronted by Christian McBride. He also served as a clinician at the Snipes Academy of Arts and Design for hundreds of elementary school students, focusing on musical styles such as New Orleans jazz and Bebop, as well as jazz legends Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington.

Throughout his career, Dion has shared the stage with many jazz, soul and gospel greats including

Ray Charles, The Count Basie Band, The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra led by Wynton Marsalis, Aretha Franklin, The Maria Schneider Orchestra, John Hendricks, The Lionel Hampton Band, Frank Foster's Loud Minority Big Band, The Mos Def Big Band at Carnegie Hall with Gil Scott-Heron, Clark Terry & the Young Titans of Jazz, Joey DeFrancesco, Catherine Russell, Christian McBride, Mike Longo, David Berger and The Sultans of Swing, The Red Bank Jazz Orchestra, The Charles Tolliver Big Band, The Rufus Reid Big Band and The Village Vanguard Orchestra which he is currently a member.

Dion's many television appearances comprise of ceremonies such as the 2013 Kennedy Center Honor Awards honoring blues great Buddy Guy and rock legends Led Zeppelin, and the 2009 Mark Twain Prize honoring Bill Cosby; day-time television programs The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Ellen DeGeneres Show, The View, LIVE with Kelly and Michael, The Today Show and Good Morning America; late-night programs such as The David Letterman Show, The Tonight Show, and The Jimmy Fallon Show; music programs American Idol, BET's 106 & Park and Australian Idol; and the 2008 NBA All-Star Game in New Orleans, where he had the pleasure of playing with piano legends Dr. John, Allen Toussaint, Art and Ivan Neville, Ellis Marsalis, and Davell Crawford. From 2016 to 2018, Dion was a band member on the Daytime Emmy Award winning talk show, HARRY, performing with Michael McDonald, Oprah Winfrey, Gladys Knight, Gloria Estefan, Sheila E., and many others.

Among his other accomplishments: Dion was the featured artist at the 2010 and 2016-2018 North Carolina Jazz Festival, performed with the Lincoln Center All-Star Band for the Tony-nominated Broadway "After Midnight," and served as composer for his band Oddlogik's album Modern Authenticity.

**Website:** [www.TheChops-Shop.com](http://www.TheChops-Shop.com)

**Instagram:** thechops.shop and dtuck917

**Facebook:** @TheChops.ShopLLC and @DionTuckerMusic

**YouTube:** [youtube.com/c/TheChopsShop](https://youtube.com/c/TheChopsShop)

**LinkedIn:** The Chops Shop LLC

*How old were you when you began playing your instrument? Did you start playing another instrument before your current one?*

*I was 10 years old when I started playing the trombone. It's my first and only instrument.*

*What equipment do you primarily use?*

*Shires Small Bore Tenor Trombone*

*Bell: S7YM8*

*Tuning Slide: SY 1.5*

*Slide: T85/95*

*Leadpipe: (T85) 1.5*

**What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?**

Some of my career highlights are getting to perform with Jazz legends such as Ray Charles, Frank Foster and Clark Terry. Another highlight that comes to mind is spending two years as the trombonist in the house band on the Emmy Award-winning daytime talk show "Harry" hosted by Harry Connick, Jr., and playing alongside him at The White House for President Barack Obama.

**What are some of your favorite and most influential albums that you have heard?**

J.J. Johnson – The Trombone Master

Duke Ellington – And His Mother Called Him Bill

Sarah Vaughn – With Clifford Brown

John Coltrane – Blue Train

Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington: The Great Summit

**Who inspired you to play your instrument?**

Trombonist Vincent Gardner was one of the first trombonist I heard in person. He played a transcription of J.J. Johnson's solo on Misterioso from the album "The Trombone Master." I had never heard the trombone played like that before. I was pretty much hooked from that point on.

**How have your practice habits changed from when you were a beginner until now?**

I've always had good practice habits. My best friends were also musicians, so we inspired each other to practice. I went to a performing arts high school in Miami. Everyone was so talented. That was another motivator for me early on in my development as a musician. I was focused on working the hardest. My mindset has definitely developed over the years. Now I strive to work smarter.

**Do you like to sing when you practice? Why or why not?**

I actually never sang when I practiced until about a year ago. I worked with a specialist while recovering from Focal (Embouchure) Dystonia. One of the exercises she assigned to me was singing. It gave me an amazing sense of awareness of how air leaves our bodies. The function is essentially the same as

when we play the trombone. So now, if I'm warming up in my car on the way to a show, I sing in order to get my air functioning properly.

**What qualities do you think are important for being successful in life?**

*I think some of the most important qualities to be successful are:*

- 1. Patience – Be willing to take the long route to your goal. There are no shortcuts in life, so embrace the journey!*
- 2. Be humble – We all have triumphs and achievements, and they should absolutely be celebrated. But soon after, be prepared to get back to work. Know that life will always throw challenges at you so stay humble to life and all of its unique lessons.*

**How do you stay motivated? Do you have any tips to help stay motivated?**

*I stay motivated by listening to musicians whom I haven't heard that I think have a unique sound. It reminds me to always search for my own sound. I'm also blessed to be able to play with some of the finest musicians in New York City and around the country. You always want to be in the best shape possible in those situations, so that definitely keeps me motivated to practice.*

**With whom did you study?**

*My first trombone teacher was Dana Teboe. He taught private lessons at my high school New World School of the Arts in Miami, FL. Once I moved to New York City, I had several different teachers. Benny Powell was the first person I studied with while attending The New School University. I also spent a year studying with Steve Turre. I've also had the privilege of studying with Robert Trowers, Chris Washburn, as well as Derrick and Vincent Gardner.*

**Who are some of your musical heroes?**

*A few of my musical heroes would have to be Benny Powell, Clark Terry, Frank Foster and Vincent Gardner.*

**Discuss your early musical experiences. Why did you pursue music?**

*I began to pursue music around the age of 10. The Jazz Band at the middle school I was going to attend the following year came to my elementary school and performed. I really enjoyed the sound of the band, even at such an early age. I noticed that everyone was working together as a group to create this awesome sound. So, when it came time for me to pick an arts elective, I chose band—and well, the rest is history.*

**How much do you practice on a typical day?**

*I practice between 2-3 hours a day, every day. I limit my practice to one hour if I have a performance that day.*

**Do you have a website? If so, what is the address?**

*[www.TheChops-Shop.com](http://www.TheChops-Shop.com)*

**What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?**

*The way you can go about improving your rhythm is to always stay connected to the overall rhythm that is present in whatever piece you're playing. It's important to know how your part fits within the time. Take a step outside of your particular part and pay close attention to how your rhythm flows with the rest of the band.*

**What is your favorite place that you have traveled to?**

*My favorite place that I have traveled to is Johannesburg, South Africa. It was an experience that still sticks with me to this day. I also love traveling to Japan. The Japanese have a deep appreciation for jazz and for the musicians that create the music.*

**How do you suggest balancing life with music?**

*Balancing life and music can be difficult. As musicians we dedicate our lives to our craft and when we have the opportunity to perform with people, we take it without thinking twice. It's important to remember that it's the other aspects of life (family, friends, nature) that inspire us and give us something to play about. Life is what's conveyed through music. If we don't live it, our level of expression will be limited.*



**Please give some tips for freelancing.**

*Some tips regarding freelancing would be to prepare yourself for as many different situations and work environments as possible. When you are new to any music scene it's going to take time for people to get to know you and what you have to offer. Be open to doing rehearsals, jam sessions, and just getting together and practicing with other musicians. Start building long-lasting, genuine relationships with them. This will help you get recommended to musicians outside of your network.*

**Is anyone else in your family a musician?**

*I'm the only musician in my family. Everyone in my family loves music, but no one plays. I've often wondered what it would be like to have a sibling or parent that played music.*

**What are some of your favorite places that you have performed?**

*The Sydney Opera House, The Palladium in London, and Yankee Stadium. But I think my favorite place to perform is the Apollo Theater in New York City. There is so much history in that room. So many legends have blessed that stage. I feel the energy every time I have the opportunity to play there.*

**Do you have any suggestions for working on one's range?**

*When working on your range there are a few things I think are important.*

- a) Stay relaxed. Resist the temptation to tense up. The more relaxed we are, the easier the air will be able to travel freely through us.*
- b) Don't focus on what your lips are doing. Sometimes we can overthink things and focus too much on what's happening with our lips. If we let the air travel across relaxed lips, the lips will form the proper aperture for that airstream. Let the airstream teach you, not the other way around.*
- c) Don't let your aperture close off the airstream. The air needs space to travel so it can make contact with the leadpipe. The airflow is exciting the air that's already in the horn. Let your whole body be a part of the process, not just your lips.*

**What are you most proud of in your life?**

*One of the things I'm most proud of has to be overcoming my battle with Focal (Embouchure) Dystonia. I thought my career was over. I was left wondering, what now? I had to give myself an opportunity for growth and through this process, I was born again—musically. As musicians, we typically don't have to go back and re-learn the fundamentals of playing our instruments. But due to my Dystonia, I had no choice. I had to re-train my embouchure. A year later, I have made a full recovery and I'm now playing better than ever.*

**Where do you see yourself in 10 years?**

*In 10 years, I see myself doing what I love—making music, still playing and also teaching students all over the world. I aspire to help as many musicians as I can to have long and healthy playing careers. I want to coach musicians to be the very best they can be at their craft.*

**What advice would you give to someone interested in majoring in music in college?**

*Pace yourself! If you want to be a professional musician, know that it's about pacing yourself for your career and not just for the next four years of your life. Use the time you have in college to practice as much as you can. Once you're out in the real world, work, family obligations and just LIFE can occupy a lot of your time. You may never have the time and freedom that you have in college in your life again—so don't take it for granted!*

**What are you working on right now?**

*Currently I am re-evaluating my approach to playing the trombone, with a focus on only playing the way that is the most efficient. It's a great opportunity to get back to the basics and execute things I was not able to achieve before. Also, I have launched my online music coaching platform: The Chops Shop ([www.TheChops-Shop.com](http://www.TheChops-Shop.com)) along with a YouTube channel where I offer strategies and techniques for more efficient brass playing.*

**Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?**

*Be on time, know your material, respect the process and don't overthink the importance of the moment. We all want to do our best, but sometimes when we*

*try too hard, we end up hurting our mental state. Relax and try to enjoy the moment for what it is; and learn what you can from the experience.*

**Do you ever get anxious for a performance? What advice would you give for dealing with nerves?**

*I still get anxious from time to time when performing, but it usually dissipates pretty quickly once I start playing. When dealing with being nervous know that everybody has flaws. Nobody is perfect and trying to perform "to perfection" makes things that much more difficult. Perfection is subjective, so embrace the moment and stay true to yourself and to your way playing.*

**What advice can you give about mental wellness?**

*Mental wellness is everything! If your mind is not clear, it is very difficult to perform. Give yourself a moment away from thinking about the music to center your thoughts. We are all here for greater purpose, don't lose sight of that. Having the gift and opportunity to play music is a bonus.*

**Do you like to read? What are you currently reading?**

*I love reading and learning new information. I'm currently reading "Can't Hurt Me" – Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds by David Goggins*

**If you couldn't have a career in music, what would you do instead?**

*I would be a photographer. I started seriously studying photography about 7 years ago. There are so many parallels to music. It's another art form and creative outlet that I have a deep passion for. I've had the opportunity to capture candid moments and performances of numerous jazz legends and modern jazz masters.*

**How could we make music education better?**

*If we explore the influence that history and society has had on the music that we play, we can bring more depth to our performances. Understanding the circumstances under which a piece was composed can help to facilitate a deeper, emotional connection between music students and their performance of a piece of music.*



**Do you like to teach? Why or why not?**

*I love to teach! I enjoy watching my students fall in love with the process of discovering their voice through music. I am energized through my teaching. I want to inspire musicians to find their own path and reach their fullest potential in the world of music.*

**Do you have any tips on learning how to improvise?**

*When learning how to improvise, listen and imitate. Just like when you're learning a new language, you have to hear how it sounds first. From there you start to learn individual words and then begin to create phrases on your own. Apply that same idea to improvisation. Imitate what sounds good to you and then expand on those ideas to create your unique sound.*

**Do you memorize your music? Do you have any advice for young players on how to memorize?**

*Yes, I absolutely memorize music. I begin memorizing new music immediately. It helps me to have a better understanding of how my part fits within the entire piece of music. The notes on the page simply serve as a guide. The better I know the music, the less "guidance" I will require.*

**What advice can you share about physical wellness?**

*Come up with a physical fitness routine and stick to it. Physical wellness leads to mental wellness. Our whole system needs to work as efficiently as possible. How you feel will directly transfer to how you play!*