



# Gralen Bryant Banks Takes “The Front Porch” to the Airwaves

*By Anita Oubre*

PHOTO BY GUS BENNETT

**G**ralen Bryant Banks is a New Orleans-born and-raised actor and radio personality with such an intense love and respect for the city he grew up in that he celebrates it daily. He hosts “The Front Porch,” a radio show on the city’s only Black-owned radio station WBOK.

Gralen refers to New Orleans in the feminine. “I am her son, and I am paying homage to her. Even though she has all of these scars and blemishes, she is beautiful and deserves to be showcased and celebrated,” said Gralen.

“The Front Porch” is about all things New Orleans. Gralen says the format is like gathering on your stoop with your friends and family, where you talk about anything and everything. “We are as real as it gets. It’s not an act but authentic conversations between myself, my co-host, Kemba White Dupree, and our listeners. It is so New Orleans,” he said.

The show’s structure reminds Gralen of his time growing up in New Orleans’ 13th Ward. He was raised in a tight-knit family that loved New Orleans. He describes his father, the late James Herbert Banks III, as a stellar gentleman who spoke his truth and stood on high values. His mother, Gloria Bryant Banks, dedicated her life to social work. She was the first Black graduate student to earn an MBA degree from the Tulane School of Social Work. She served as Secretary for the Louisiana State Department of Social Services under Gov. Edwin Edwards.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GRALEN BANKS



Gralen has fond memories of his parents bringing him and his brother (former city council member) Jay H. Banks, to Saints games and concerts. “I remember one show we attended. The lineup was incredible, and we were all in the stadium singing along with James Brown, ‘I’m Black and I’m Proud,’” said Gralen. “That was the kind of parents I have.”

His grandparents lived next door, and much time was spent on the stoop listening to the grown men talk. “The men I grew up watching were family men; working-class men with obligations. They were articulate and compassionate men who lived hard and laughed harder,” reflected Gralen. “The conversations on the porch were profound. There was lots of laughter but also serious talk, and that is a direct reflection of the show I host today.”

A proud alumnus of Eleanor McMain Secondary School, Gralen went on to attend Southern University, where he majored in

English and minored in Communications. He was first approached by Paul Beaulieu, whom he affectionately refers to as The Oracle and who was retiring from his show on WBOK. He thought Gralen would be a natural fit for the job.

“I had been interviewed on the radio many times, but this was a different animal, and I was unsure,” Gralen recalled. “But being an Uptown man, I’m not afraid of anything, so I went in for a week to check it out. Paul was a great educator and broadcaster, and I had a great respect for him. He had the gift to influence people. He said I could do this job, and I gave it a shot.”

The following week, Gralen was doing a show every evening. “People had never heard of me, and there I was with one of the most coveted spots on the air with a show at that time called ‘The Grapevine,’ which was my perspective on the news,” he added.

“The Front Porch” is not hard news but more about “anything and everything New



Orleans,” as he put it. “Anything relevant to New Orleans is what we do on the show.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, Gralen got up and went to the station daily along with Drs. MarkAlain Dery and Eric D. Griggs MD. The trio brought the public the latest information as it was developing. They tried to ease the listeners' fears and took in the countless calls that came in. Gralen was even vaccinated while on the air.

These days, the show tackles everything from movies, trivia, travel, and even book reviews. Gralen is an avid reader who devours literature. “We talk about our local musicians, the festivals that are coming up, the food, the preservation of our local



treasures, the people, the neighbors, and the neighborhoods. If it is important to you, we are talking about that too,” he said.

“We welcome an exchange of ideas on the show, and all viewpoints are welcomed and encouraged,” Gralen continued. “The fun part of the show is that it is organic and not forced.” He is excited to speak to an audience that not only covers New Orleans but also includes listeners who stream in from all over

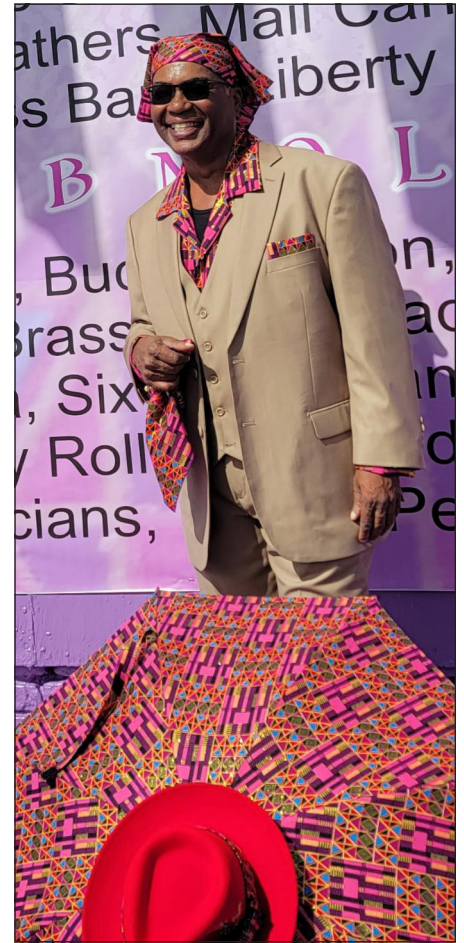
with a love for the city and all it has to offer.

When Gralen isn't on the air talking up and about the most fantastic city on the planet, he's participating in her culture. He just completed his 23rd year with The Black Men of Labor, a designated IRS 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and Department of Treasury Community Development enterprise that pays tribute to African American men in the workplace while promoting and preserving traditional jazz music.

“This tradition we are promoting is as long and old as New Orleans herself. We pay homage to our African roots and want to ensure the young people who come after us do it correctly and keep the traditional music on our streets,” said Gralen. “Our music is revered worldwide; it's our gift to the world. Being a part of Black Men of Labor goes deep, and we go all the way back. We cross the sea. We keep those few links of the chain that remain connected.”

Gralen also has 18 years invested as a Soulful Warrior, a member of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club's honor guard. Not only does he enjoy parading with the group, but more importantly, the philanthropic acts of community service.

Gralen is also a familiar face in movies and television. He has appeared in 53 films, television series, commercials, miniseries, and shorts. His acting career came about after meeting director Spike Lee at a downtown hotel. Gralen was featured in the documentary “When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts,” one of the most



influential films ever made by HBO.

Once Gralen saw how serious acting was becoming for him, he started studying with local director and acting coach, Tommye Myrick, who he says is “one of the best.” Gralen is also known for his roles in “The Banker,” “Queen & Slim,” “The Green Book,” and “Hit Man.”

Enjoying this stage in his life, Gralen takes advantage of living the culture and living life well. He enjoys sharing the culture and the vibrancy of New Orleans on his show. He also enjoys spending time with his grandchildren. “Being able to show them their path and prepare them for their journey in this beautiful city is a lovely thing.”

Gralen's show, “The Front Porch,” airs on weekdays from 9 am-12 noon over WBOK, 1230 on the AM dial. Viewers can also watch live on Facebook. For more information go to <https://wbok1230.com>