



PHOTO COURTESY OF TERENCE DUGAS

Terrence Dugas: Making music and bringing joy and positivity to those around her

By Anita Oubre

Our readers may have seen this petite powerhouse at a concert at the New Orleans Jazz Museum or perhaps at the Blue Crab restaurant. Terrence Dugas is the dynamic drummer and lead vocalist for Terrence Dugas and the Fortress Band.

As a first-time concert attendee, this writer wondered which band member might be Terrence and was pleasantly surprised to learn that Terrence was, in fact, the only female in the group. She is the band's percussionist and singer, and she has the gift of drawing an audience in with great energy and enthusiasm.

When asked who she might have been named after, Terrence paused, smiled, and replied, "My mom simply liked the name."

Terrence did not grow up playing the drums, nor was she in the school band, although she did take piano lessons on and off as a youngster. She was the eldest of three children in a working-class family in the Uptown, 17th Ward neighborhood known as Pigeon Town. Terrence recalled fond memories of playing jacks, board games, and racing up and down Joliet Street with neighborhood friends.

Terrence was one of the first students to integrate at Mater Dolorosa School. As she explained, "I was just a kid, and I didn't quite understand why people, including our local grocer, were picketing. My parents were good providers, and they wanted the best for us, including an education."

As one of only a handful of young Black girls attending St. James Major High School, Terrence felt the racial tensions of the time. A guidance counselor suggested she go into cosmetology.



Performance at Venue Vapaille

"The counselor suggested that a classmate and I should attend trade school, but we refused that route. My classmate is an engineer, and I am an attorney," Terrence proudly declared.

Witnessing bullying and watching others who could not stand up for themselves steered Terrence toward a law career. She graduated from the University of New Orleans and received her Juris Doctor degree from Southern University at Baton Rouge Law School.

"It was something that was in me. I was always the person who defended people who couldn't defend themselves," said Terrence. "And I just noticed that from when I was a kid, I was always calling out what I saw that wasn't right."

Terrence moved to Baltimore for her first job out of law school. She worked as an attorney for the federal government's Social Security Administration for about a year before her yearning for home took over. A position as assistant district attorney in Houma allowed Terrence to return to Louisiana. For the past 25 years, she has dedicated her life to serving the Department of Children and Family Services. She retired in February 2026 and loves this new role.

Just how does a retired lawyer become a band leader, drummer, and entertainer? Terrence laughed at the question and replied, "My brother-in-law was learning to play the guitar, and he wanted to perform for a family reunion." When asked how he would pull it off, he explained that his brother would accompany him and use a backing track. When told it wouldn't be professional, he insisted he needed a drummer, and his decision prevailed.

Terrence learned three songs, and she took a trip to Denver to perform at the family reunion, and she still hasn't put her drumsticks down. "I didn't know a snare from a tom. I didn't know anything about drums, so I found this little place on the corner on Canal Boulevard," she said. "I got a few books and was learning rudiments, knowing that I would need to learn this quickly. The instructor told me to feel it



Fest on The Chef hosted by St Paul The Apostle Church

and play what I feel, and I am still doing that today."

The road trip to Denver was just the beginning. Soon the trio was practicing in the garage with an electric drum kit. Musician Noel Carter mentored Sean Vappie, and with Terrence sitting in on rehearsals, she became a student as well.

"I owe a huge thanks to Noel for giving me a platform and being a mentor, as well as Guitar Slim Junior and Percy Williams," Terrence recalled. "You never knew who would pop up in that garage."

The Fortress band consists of Sean Vappie on trumpet, guitar and vocals; Jerry Cambre on drums, guitar and vocals; Maximilian Valentino on bass and Louis Bloom on keyboards. "I have to give my band props," Terrence said. "They respect me as a bandleader although I have the least amount of musical and entertainment experience."

Terrence enjoys the connections that she shares with her band, and she is proud of their diversity. "Performing is a feel-good opportunity for me," she explained. "I enjoy the camaraderie that we share with our audiences, and we're proud to bring a diverse range of music to them. If I can make one person feel good from one of our performances - make them forget their troubles, that's everything to me," Terrence added.



From top to bottom: Maximillan Valentino, Sean Vappie, Terrence Dugas, and Jerry Cambre. Bourbon Orleans Hotel in the French Quarter



From left to right: Maximillan Valentino, Sean Vappie, Terrence Dugas, and Jerry Cambre. Residency at Louis Armstrong International Airport



Madame Vic's (Celebration of life for the late Scott Veazey, owner of Madame Vic's)

Although Terrence and The Fortress Band have only been performing together for three years, they have received many accolades and enjoy performing locally at events and festivals. They have made appearances on television to promote various festivals, and they recently appeared on the "Great Day Louisiana" show. They have also performed at Gentilly Fest. The band recently enjoyed a stint at the Louis Armstrong International Airport, giving travelers a taste of New Orleans music as a welcome.

Terrence spends a lot of time rehearsing and fellowshipping with the band, which she calls her "fortress." She also enjoys live shows at the Saenger Theatre and other venues in and around the city. Dancing, exploring museums, and working out at the gym she recently joined are all favorite pastimes. She also enjoys spending time socializing with friends. Currently, she and a small group of friends are learning to play the guitar together.

Reinventing herself at this stage of her life has been satisfying for Terrence. Her love of life and her ability to bring joy and positivity to those around her give her great gratification. "I love every performance; each one is unique, different, and enjoyable in its own way," said Terrence

"I love life, meeting people, and making them feel good and forget their troubles for a bit," she added.

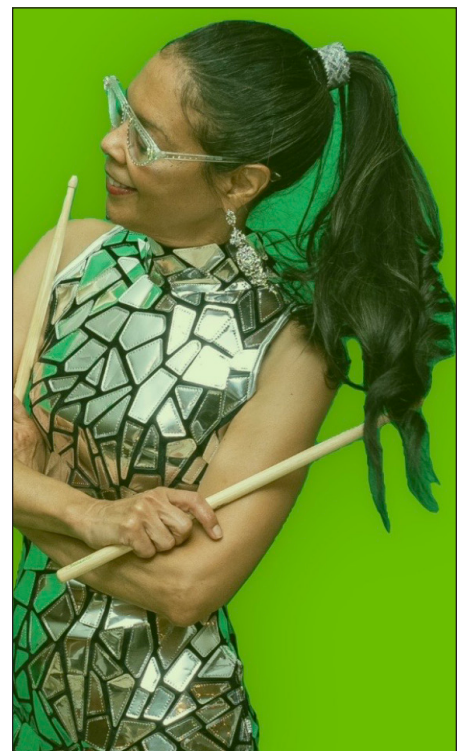
Be sure to catch Terrence and The Fortress Band this fall at The Blue Crab restaurant, at Sharon Martin's show on the 15th of every month at Café Istanbul, at Magnolia Moonlight Rodeo on the River, and at St. Paul the Apostle's Fest on Chef Highway and many more.

A calendar and more can be found on Terrence and The Fortress Band's Facebook page and other social media.

To schedule her and the band for private events, contact her at Terrencedugas@bell-south.net



Mag Fest Family Fun Day: Magnolia Community Center for adult with developmental disabilities



Nothin but fun!!!