

Saltwater Classics

(#26 in a Series)

Don Musso and Super Strike Lures

by Frank Pintauro

Introduction

Don Musso's body of work straddles "The Golden Age of Surfcasting" and the "Age of Modern Plastics." Throughout that time his lures have caught more bass and blues than we could ever imagine, and his innovative designs have spawned a whole

new generation of makers. This staying power has quite simply made him this generation's "Stan Gibbs." It is time for him to take his place as one of the great saltwater lure makers of all time. Last August we finally got a chance to sit down with Don, and what follows is an edited version of that interview.

Frank Pintauro: So, Don, can you give us some background?

Don Musso: I was born in March of 1935 in Richmond Hill, New York. Lived on 133rd and Jerome Avenue right off 101st Avenue.

FP: How did you get into fishing?

DM: Well, my aunts had a place upstate in Jewett, New York. Also had one in Hunter. When I was six years old I would fish in a stream no bigger than five feet wide with a stick and pinhook and catch little minnows from morning to night. When I got a little older, I would fish for trout and small-mouth bass up in Prattsville, New York.

FP: How did you get into fishing for striped bass?

DM: I was in the service in 1957, and I used to fish for large-mouth bass in the Potomac in Virginia. I would make up these little spoons of aluminum; and one evening I got a hit, and it felt different from a large-mouth bass...it was a small striper. I found out later that stripers up to 25 pounds would come in and spawn up there. The fellas used sardines for bait to catch them. At that time my wife was a hostess at a local restaurant, and a customer there by the name of George Jedry knew I loved fishing. So he brought us his fishing album to see, and it was filled with 40 and 50-pound bass caught up in Cape Cod. The album was filled with Field and Stream awards he had won. I was just hooked after that.

FP: What did you do when you got out of the service?



A sampling of the limited Edition of 66 Musso Wadds currently in production.

DM: The job I had before I went into the service was not open when I came back home, so I went to work for a guy named Harry De Jagger who had started his own carpenter business while I was gone.

FP: His name sounds familiar.

DM: Harry used to own a tackle shop up the Hudson. Johnny Kronuch, Sr. used to sweep the floors for him in exchange for hooks. They became good friends and eventually opened up a shop out in Montauk where they supplied all the boats with bait. They were located by the trains. The hurricane of 1938 wiped the shop out; so they both moved to Florida and got into the gas station business, but that didn't work out. They came back to New York, and Kronuch opened up the shop that exists now — Johnny's; and Harry went into the awning business.

FP: What influenced you to start getting into plug making?

DM: Really... just fellas I was fishing with. I would hand-carve my own plugs, and guys would encourage me to go into business. In 1960 a couple of guys introduced me to Dan Pichney. We hit it off as far as friends and fished together for years. In 1966 Dan bought a wood lathe and encouraged me to buy one so we could start making plugs together. From that time on, that's what we did.



Musso show display case featuring his darters and needlefish in a variety of colors and sizes.



Incredibly rare hand carved Don Musso wooden swimmer made in 1961 before the early plastic Rebel swimmers.

FP: Tell me about the wide darter and how the design came about?

DM: Dan knew Jack Frech, the Professor, and he showed me one of his darters. The Professor's darter was wide. The front top didn't curve but was straight back like Gibbs original darters were....very slope-like. The links were epoxyed. Dan wanted to start making them, but I didn't like the plug because the hooks kept hanging up; so Dan left the design up to me. The Professor weighted his

darter 3/4 of the way back but had the hooks far forward to compensate for the weight in the back. I didn't like that; so when Dan received an order for darters and wanted them with the links in, I made them for that order but didn't drill any holes so that Dan could drill his own holes in them for links. At that time I made a couple dozen for myself with through wire and swivels. I did not put weights in, and that turned out to be the key to the wide darter. I started fishing it at Montauk and was



Danny and Donny in a late 1960's shot loaded down with bass up to 25 lbs.



*The largest of the Danny/Donny CONRADs.
It swam deep and sharpies loved to notch the head and tie an eel skin over them.*

The scallop pattern on these darters is unique to Donny and the rarest of all his colors. There are only two "red/white" patterns known.



Don Musso with a load of bass and blues after a hard night of fishing at the outer Cape.

catching fish on it. The plug went very deep and had a big sweep...it was a tremendous working plug. When I saw Dan at Montauk, I told him we had a new layout for the darters and that was the beginning of the wide 3 oz. darter!

FP: When did you start making the wooden darters? Did you make a lot?

DM: The 3oz. darter started in 1966 when I got the wood lathe. I also made wood darters in 2 1/4 oz., 2 oz., 1 1/2 oz., and 3/4 oz. We made them until we got into the plastics around 1984. We did not make a lot per year as it was a very time consuming process, but I would guess maybe 800 to 1000 per year.

FP: Can you give me a sense of the timeline on the 3oz. Super Strike darter?

DM: The Danny/Donny darter came first, followed by my Super Strike straight body with decal eyes, followed by the recessed eyes with decals. I did that in the hope that I could keep the eyes from peeling off. The recessed painted eye came last.

FP: How did the scallop pattern come about?

DM: I started thinking of ocean waves, and I wanted to make something different besides mackerel so I came up with the scallop pattern.

FP: So is that the rarest of Musso colors?

DM: Yes, it's the rarest, and I would say mackerel would come second. Black was a good one and a great night color. Nowadays, we're finding that a lot of guys - especially in the spring - use black and orange because of the sea robins. There were a couple of 50's caught about two years ago on that color. Also there were a few different scallop colored pattern pieces to look for.

FP: How about the jointed darters? Were they special ordered?

DM: Yes, they were special. Some of Steve Campo's buddies asked me to make them so I tried it. To be truthful, I did not find they caught any better than the straight one and they were a pain in the neck to make.

FP: Tell me about the Conrad?

DM: The Conrad started with Joe Caparetta sometime around 1972. He found the plug on the beach one

night while fishing Race Pt. up in Cape Cod. He called out to see if anyone lost the lure, but nobody replied, so he attached it to his line and on his first cast caught a 50 pounder on it. After catching the fish, he put the lure in his bag so he wouldn't lose it. When he came home he gave it to Dan and told him, "This is a hot plug, start making it"....and that was the beginning of us making the Conrad. At that time before 1973, I was making the hard stuff - the darters, which had shape; the bottle plugs, that had the curves. I made most of the 5 1/4" and 8" Conrads (actually 7 1/4"). Dan turned some also, but I did all the mackerel and herring bone finish in that emerald green. If you look at the paint jobs you can tell the difference.

FP: So how long did you work with Danny?

DM: I first started making lures with Dan in 1966. Our first lure together was the Jinx. During that time I turned about 100-150 plugs and did the painting on the emerald green mackerel, powder blue marble and some white lures. We stopped making plugs together in November 1973 when I found out that he took my 6" metal lip swimmer and gave it to Lupo.

FP: You don't need to get into it if you don't want.



Tom Rinaldi with a 64-14 pound bass caught on a Musso plastic needlefish.



Don's original prototype design which is now known as the "Danny Plug"

lip swimmer and said, "When did you come up with this new style plug?" I said about a year ago. He then put it in the palm of his hand and said, "Is it about 6" long and is the lip about 2" wide?" I said "Yes." We talked about the plug and I told him that I caught a lot of fish on it last fall at the Silver Point Jetty at Atlantic Beach, and then we went back to the family.

About a year later, November 12th or 13th, 1973, I found out from Clem Perpepua while I was fishing out at Montauk that Dan gave Lupo the 6" metal lip swimmer that I designed. I knew Dan was negotiating with Lupo about the trolling plugs which I had nothing to do with as far as the design went. But that 6" metal lip swimmer was mine! When I came home I called Dan and spent three hours on the phone. That's when he told me that he did give Lupo the lure. He said to me, "You're going to screw things up with the deal, don't say anything and I will give you half of what I'm getting." So I asked him, "How come you're not putting the Conrad on the market instead of my lure?" He said, "Yours is completely different from anything else on the market." I also asked about the 3 oz. wide darter that I made and he told me they were not putting that on the market.

I only saw him two times after that. The first time I saw him was with my buddy Charlie Ruger, Dan wanted to meet us at Atlantic Beach to check out how my 6" metal lip swimmer swam. The second time was to give Dan four dozen 3 oz. Little Neck Swimmers that he was going to drop off for me at Ted's

Tackle Shop in Brooklyn. I never received a dime from Dan on the lure he put out with Lupo, but the worst part about it was that by him putting his name "DANNY" on the package it made everyone think it was really Danny who designed it and that is completely wrong. That's the part that still haunts me...hearing people call my lure the DANNY and giving him the credit for the design. After all of that, I decided to go out on my own.

FP: That's a shame that went down like that!

DM: I agree.

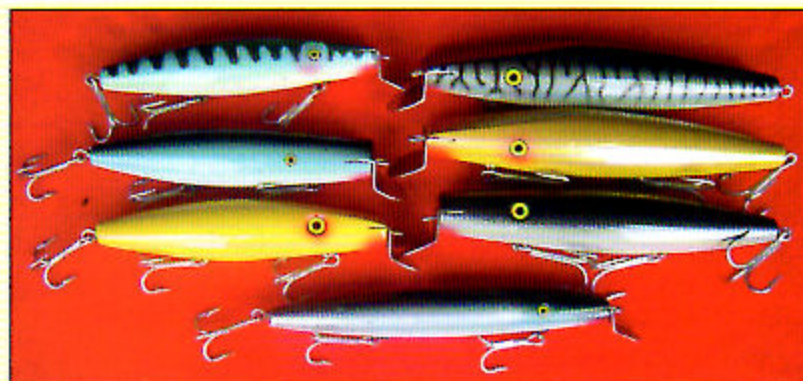
FP: Moving on....we just did an article on needlefish and its history. Your stuff figures prominently in that timeline. From your perspective, how did you see the needlefish revolution go down?

DM: In 1981 Charlie Ruger called me from Nantucket to tell me they were catching a lot of fish on 5 1/4" needlefish. He told me there were two types: one that fished deep and one that was fished on the surface. When he got back to New York, he showed it to me. I went through some old *Saltwater Magazines* from the 50s, and I found advertisements for the Boone needle. I did not like the shape or design so I came up with my own. I made my first sometime in 1981 or slightly later so Charlie could use them the following spring. In the fall of 1981 Charlie, Glenn Haussman, and I were the first ones to fish my 7 1/4" needlefish on the Cape.

DM: If you're interested I'll tell you.

FP: Tell me

DM: I was tuna fishing with Bill Horace (Fat Willie) on his boat, "The Four Daughters"...and the shape of the tuna got me to thinking about coming up with a design different than anything else. If you think about it, the tuna is tapered at both ends and what happens is the middle stays still so being shaped like a football it does not take much to push water in the front or the back...so that means you can get a lot more wiggle out of a lure design like that, plus I could use a much smaller lip. In May of 1972 Dan came over to my home with his family. (Dan's daughter just made her Confirmation) He said, "Let's go down to your workshop." He spotted my new 6" metal



Donny's metal lip swimmers were top notch bass catchers and more often the preferred lure to fish with by striper sharpies. Here is a sampling of his trollers, torpedoes and eels.



The Musso jointed darters were used during slack water. Hard to make and lacking the castability of the straight darter, they were produced for only a short time and that makes them extremely desirable to collectors.

FP: And what about the Musso Wadd?

DM: They were all 2-hooked, through-wired...There were no 3-hook Musso Wadds. I made the needle in three different sizes. The first batch we brought up to Cape Cod was the small 5 1/4" and then the 7 1/4" and I had the only two that were the 6 1/4". But they are different from the 6 1/4" made today.

FP: Tell me about the Campo Wadd story.

DM: I had filled an order for Steve for 7 1/4" needlefish, and we discussed an idea for an even bigger one, like 8 1/4". He said make them, but I was too busy at the time doing the plastic ones. I heard that Guppy went to a guy at Grumman's to make some prototypes based on my 7 1/4" needlefish. He showed me the piece, and I told him I could make them up. I changed the body slightly, and I changed the layout of the hooks and weights. I made 130 of them and Steve got 120 in different finishes. I kept ten for myself because the drilling did not go right - they were the only ones that I turned and made.

FP: I heard rumors about wood darters that you made for yourself with inlaid saw tooth metal on the lips...we allowed to talk about that?

DM: Yeah, sure. What I used to do was fish them up front at the Montauk Lighthouse. The lips were getting beat up even though the plug was made out of hard wood, so I made a little stainless lip with two little screws. But you know what, it helped a little, but it did not really

matter because when you had a fish on and the wave drove the fish and the plug into the rocks, that lip would still get bent back.

FP: What kind of wood were you using on your lures?

****DM:** There are guys that use the same wood for every plug they make and that's not right. I did a lot of research on the gravities of wood and I found it is best to use a light wood like pine for metal lips. On darters I use maple. On the bottle plugs I used bass wood. Bass wood has a habit of cracking but like Stan Gibbs before us we figured out a way to solve that problem.

FP: Does the packaging help date your stuff?

DM: To an extent. I originally called the company Sure Strike but when I brought my stuff into Johnny's, Johnny Sr. told me that name was trademarked so we changed the name to Super Strike and in doing so changed the headers also.

FP: Other than Johnny's who else were you doing business with?

DM: Well I started with Johnny's in late '73 or early '74. I was dealing with Ted's in Brooklyn, Waner's,

Beckman's, Causeway, J & J out in Patchogue, Santo's on Staten Island, some tackle shops in Glen Cove and Smithtown.

FP: I heard you're a perfectionist in your lure-making, often staying in your basement perfecting your design and had to give up a lot of fishing so you could get it right for the guys who did the fishing. Any comments about that?

DM: Well after we came out with the plastics that was probably true as our production increased dramatically. But when I first started making wood plugs I was very fortunate as things just fell into place. I made four or five plugs and I hit it right off the bat. Everything just fell into line. Now it's much tougher to come up with designs.

FP: So you did the early field testing yourself?

DM: I made the plug, I tested the plug. Watched how it swam and then the hard fishing guys ended up with them and used them. Everybody in Montauk who knows me knows I fish.

FP: So let's take a second here and try to date for collectors all the wooden lures you made.



A sampling of Donny's bottle plugs, lipless swimmers and well known Little Neck poppers.



The Musso 3oz. Darter timeline from oldest to newest.

DM: The timeline went something like this: the Danny/Donny Jinx and the Danny/Donny Darter started in 1966, the Super Strike version (Zig Zag) started in 1972 and I made four sizes with the 3oz. Wide Mouth Darter being the most popular. The Danny/Donny Troller in '70 or '71; 1973 Super Strike version Troller (Rattler). The Bottle Plug (Little Neck Swimmer) in '70/'71 and the Little Neck Popper started in '70/'71. The Torpedo Surface and Deep Swimmers in 1971, the Lipless Swimmer (Little Neck Surface Swimmer) in 1972 or '73, the Bottle Darter, the Jointed Darter and the 3

oz. Jointed Torpedo in 1977. The Eely Swimmer in 1980 and the Needlefish in 1981. Of course, many of these were produced in a variety of different sizes that collectors can look for.

FP: A lot of surf guys feel you are the best plug maker of this generation. What do you think?

DM: A lot of ideas came from Stan Gibbs made plugs. Gibbs made a darter, we made a fatter darter and I changed the weight. Gibbs made a bottle plug, I turned around and made a bottle that went deeper,

faster and caught a lot of fish. But Stan Gibbs was the innovator as far as I am concerned.

FP: What is the favorite plug you've ever done?

DM: Well, the big Wadd was the most challenging because of the difficulty of drilling it out. But I love metal lips and watching the fish come up and grab them.

FP: Biggest fish ever caught on one of your lures?

DM: Tom Rinaldi caught a 64-14 on a 6 3/8" Plastic Needlefish in the Shinnecock area. Campo caught a 59-pounder on a needle and Drowner caught a 59-pounder on a bottle.

FP: Stan Gibbs is known for the "Bottle Plug," Danny for "the Conrad," Beachmaster for the "Cowboy"what will we remember Musso for?

DM: Well, there would be two plugs....the wide-mouth 3 oz. darter and the needlefish!

FP: You know Stan Gibbs did the Bicentennial Pencil Popper and we're hearing there may be a Bob Pond Atom 40 anniversary special. Are you contemplating any specials for collectors?

DM: I'm doing wooden Wadd needlefish. I'm only making 66 signed and numbered for the public and a few others for my sons. I'll turn them out as I have the time.

FP: Don, I feel like we've only touched the tip of the iceberg. How about we get back together and cover your change over to plastics in 1984. There is a lot of ground to cover there.

DM: I'd like that. Thanks, Frank. □

(Author's note: Many thanks to Steve Musso and Bob Jones for all their help in contributing to this article. Readers wishing to contact Frank Pintauro may do so by calling 516-741-7044 or emailing masterlure@aol.com)