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People

1946-2023

Jimmy Buffett

'If there's a heaven for me, I'm sure it has a beach attached'

His Wild, Joyful Life

Friends and family remember the beloved 'Margaritaville' legend



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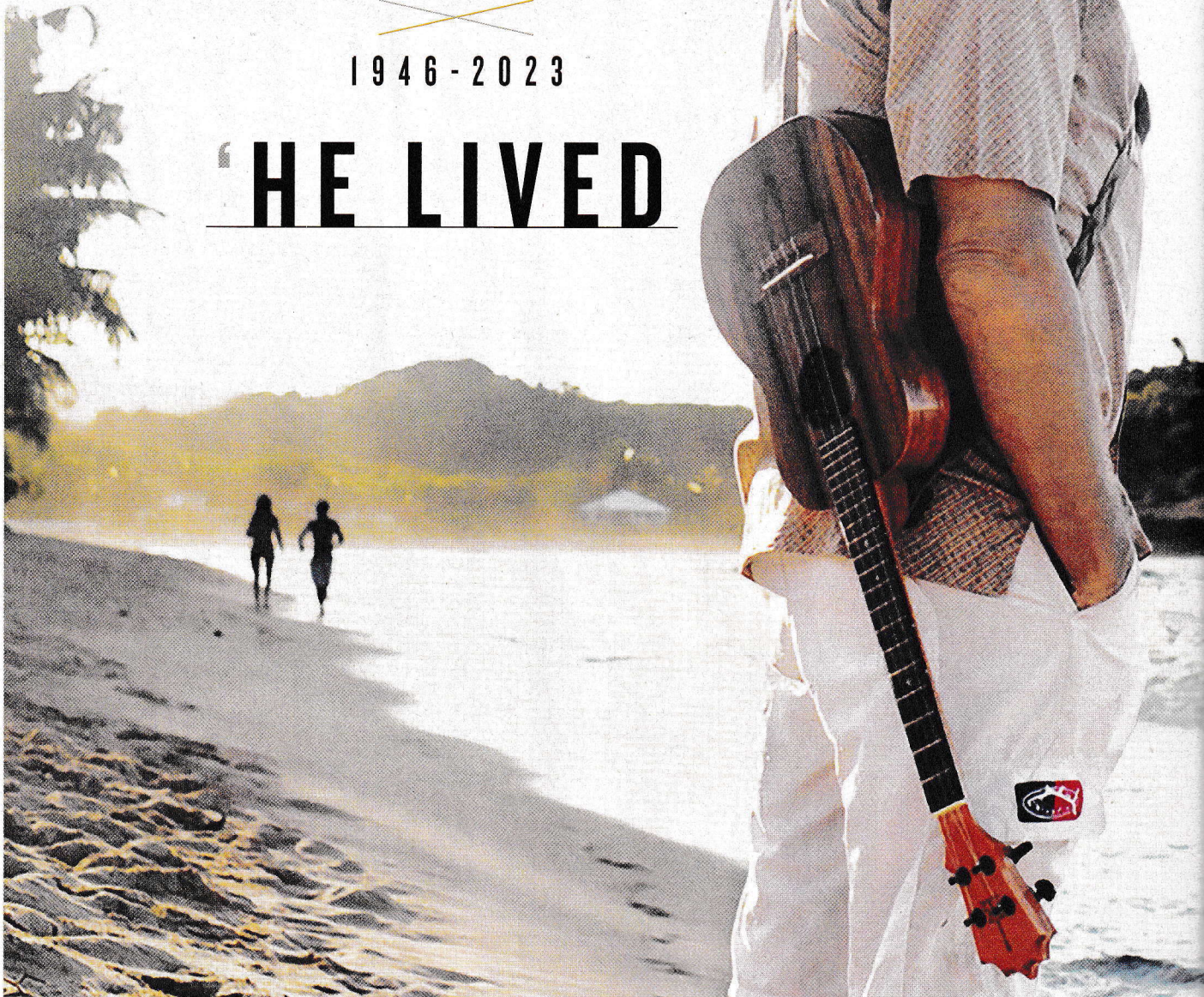
THE MOGUL FOUND PEACE IN LIFE'S
SIMPLE PLEASURES THROUGHOUT HIS
MORE-THAN-50-YEAR MUSIC CAREER—AND IN A CANCER
DIAGNOSIS IN HIS FINAL YEARS

By **RACHEL DESANTIS**

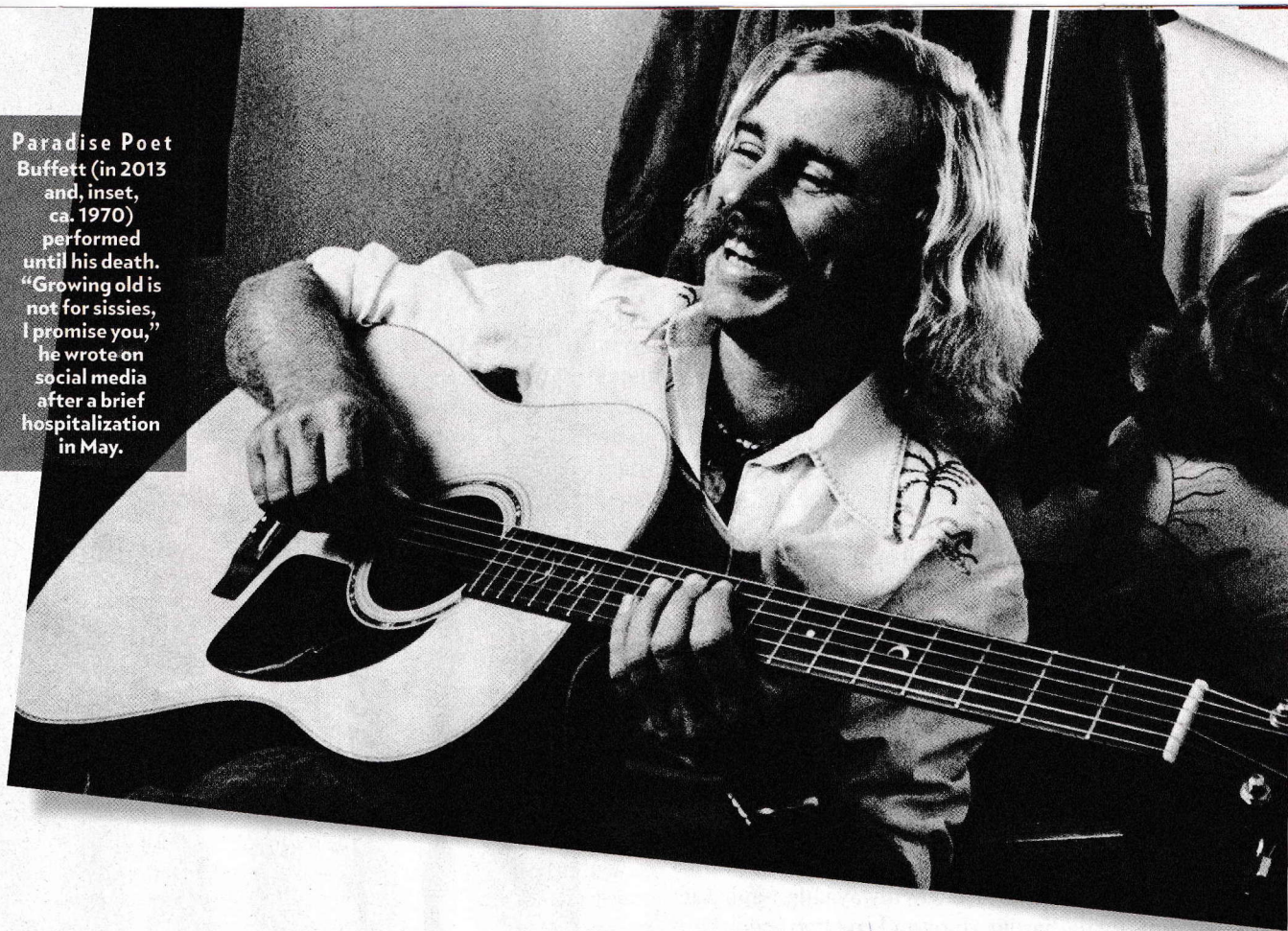
JIMMY BUFFETT

1946-2023

'HE LIVED



Paradise Poet Buffett (in 2013 and, inset, ca. 1970) performed until his death. "Growing old is not for sissies, I promise you," he wrote on social media after a brief hospitalization in May.

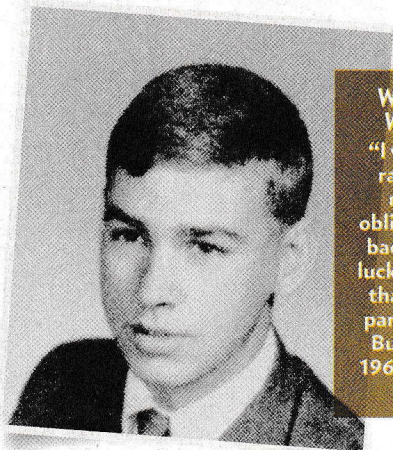


HIS LIFE LIKE A SONG

Jimmy Buffett never lost his capacity for joy, even amid a yearslong cancer journey. Last October the musician turned mogul was fishing in the Bahamas when he and longtime friend Carl Hiaasen came upon a large lemon shark. The sudden arrival of a powerful predator might have spooked some, but not Buffett. "The shark was really close, but Jimmy was so excited," author Hiaasen recalls. "He had a drone up because he wanted a video. He wanted to put it onstage during his next tour when he performed 'Fins.'" On that same trip Buffett also made waves on an electric surfboard, zooming away from Hiaasen with the giddiness of a child. "He was supposed to take it easy, although he didn't know what that meant," says Hiaasen. "He just got up and disappeared, and after five minutes he came back, hopped off and was as happy as can be. There was no way to slow him down."

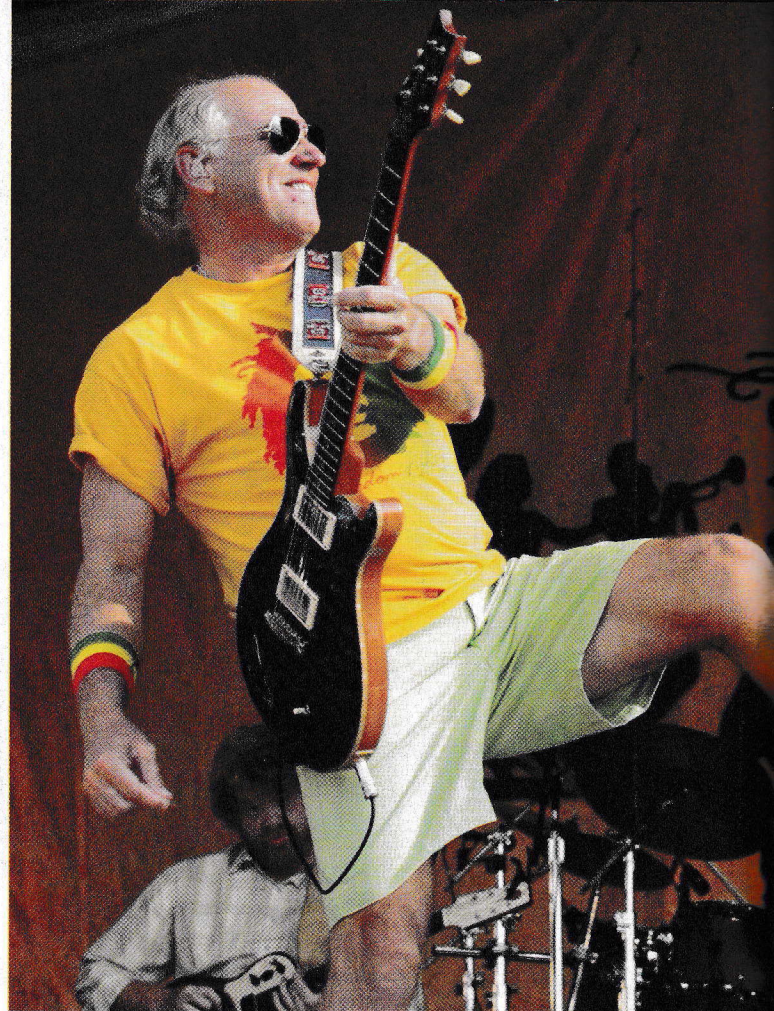
Hits like "Margaritaville" cemented Buffett as the poster child for the easy, breezy, laid-back island lifestyle. And the singer maintained his





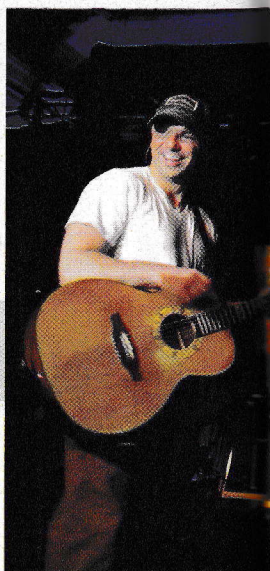
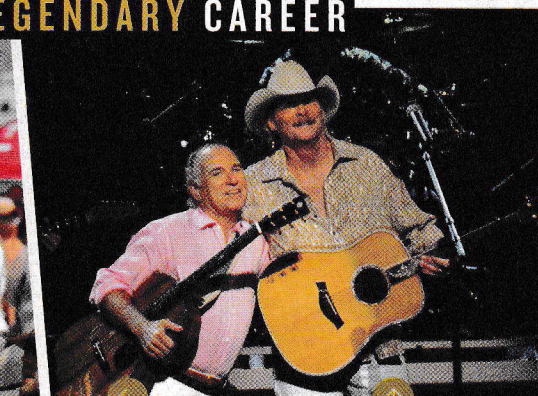
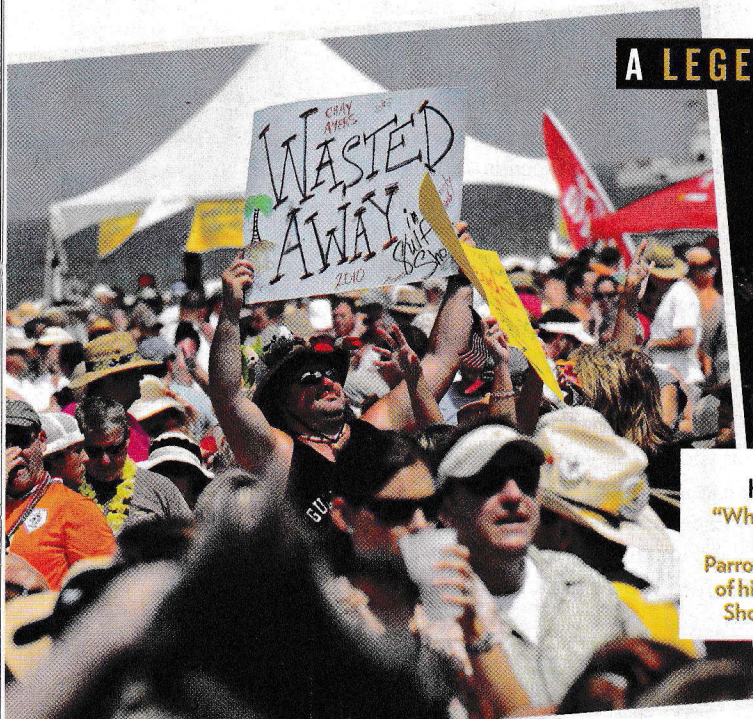
Words of Wisdom
 "I was always raised with noblesse oblige—to give back if you're lucky enough—thanks to my parents," said Buffett (in a 1965 yearbook photo).

signature zest for life until he died of Merkel cell carcinoma on Sept. 1, four years after he was diagnosed with the aggressive form of skin cancer. Just weeks before his death the 76-year-old Buffett made a surprise appearance at a waterfront café in Rhode Island, where he sang six songs and told the venue's owner he felt "effing incredible," according to local paper *The Providence Journal*. The musician's sense of humor also remained intact, says his sister Laurie Buffett McGuane, who joked and laughed with Buffett over childhood memories in his final days. "He was always high-spirited, fun-loving, hardworking and creative," adds Laurie's husband, writer Tom McGuane, a friend of Buffett's for more than 50 years. "It is remarkable to be able to say that he remained the same during the last month of his life." In a statement announcing Buffett's death, his family—including wife Jane, 72, and their adult children, daughters Savannah and Sarah Delaney and son Cameron—said "he lived his life like a song till the very last breath and will be missed beyond measure by so many."



In the decades following his breakthrough success with 1977's "Margaritaville," Buffett continued to release albums (*Equal Strain on All Parts*, his 32nd, was slated for later this year). In recent years he notched No. 1 country songs celebrating

A LEGENDARY CAREER



His Devotees
 "What's most important is to please the Parrotheads," Buffett said of his fans (here, in Gulf Shores, Ala., in 2010).

A Timeless Collab
 "RIP my friend," Jackson (with Buffett in 2003) wrote of his "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere" duet partner.

Rocking Out
 “I know so many people that hate their jobs, and I love my job,” said Buffett (in 2006). “It gets more exciting every day.”



the simple things in life with pal Alan Jackson (“It’s Five O’Clock Somewhere”) and Zac Brown Band (“Knee Deep”). But it was his business acumen that made Buffett, as Hiaasen describes him, “larger-than-life.” After decades in music Buffett became a billionaire by building his biggest hit into a lucrative empire of Margaritaville-themed restaurants, merchandise and more that catered to his devoted legion of “Parrothead” fans. Among them? Country star Kenny Chesney, who praised the late Buffett as having “taught a lot of people about the poetry in just living.”

Buffett was inspired to expand into the restaurant business after he noticed that the now-defunct chain Chi-Chi’s had copyrighted “Margaritaville” and a woman in Hawaii had done the same to “Cheeseburger in Paradise.” “I was being ripped off everywhere because I wasn’t paying attention,” he told *The Washington Post* in 1998. “There was a demand there, and everyone was exploiting it but me! So I started taking care of business.” Still, he didn’t overthink his growing fortune. “I wish I could say that some secret plan for world domination was devised years ago, but I don’t have a clue as to why,

when or how all this happened,” he told *People* in 1994. “I’m not going to dissect it. It’d ruin all the fun of being in the middle of it.”

Though he’s all but synonymous with the Florida Keys, Buffett was born some 1,000 miles away

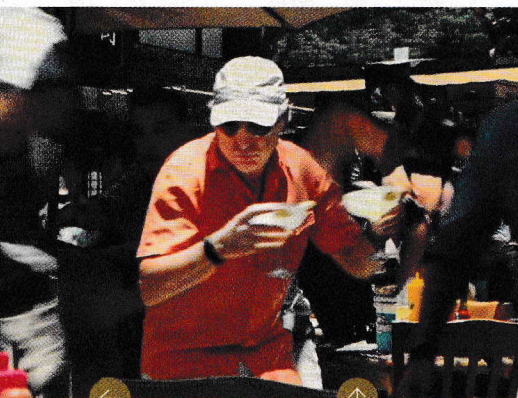
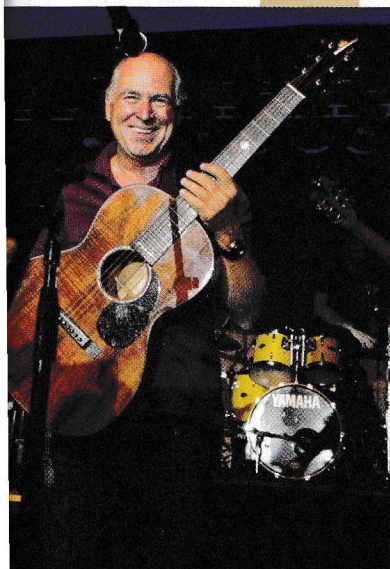
in Pascagoula, Miss., on Christmas Day 1946. His dad, James, and mom, Mary, later moved the family to Mobile, Ala., where they both worked in the shipyard. While James had hoped

his son would become a Navy officer, the young Buffett was more inspired by his mother, who instilled in him a love of music thanks to her time with the local theater, and his grandfather, who’d regale him with “tales from the high seas and far-off worlds that ignited my imagination,” Buffett wrote in his 1998 memoir *A Pirate Looks at Fifty*.

Buffett earned a history degree from the University of Southern Mississippi in 1969—and it was at school that a fraternity brother inspired him to take up music. “I’m really a simple Catholic altar boy who wanted to play bass in a band to meet chicks,” he told *60 Minutes* in 1997. “I didn’t want to be the frontman.” A brief stint as a Nashville-based reporter for *Billboard* magazine clued him in on the ins and outs of the music business, and in 1970 he released his debut album, *Down to Earth*. The record flopped—but following a divorce from first wife Margie Washichek and a move to Key West, Fla., Buffett finally found success in 1977 with “Margaritaville,” a hit off his album *Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes* that epitomized his trademark blend of folk, country, rock and Caribbean music. The enduring anthem, which was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2016, was written by Buffett after a morning spent nursing a hangover with Mexican food and margaritas in Austin. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think it’d do what it did,” he told *60 Minutes* of the song. In 2018 he told *Entertainment Weekly*, “I’m a stream-of-consciousness writer. You write [in] the moment, and you jot something down. ‘Margaritaville’ was written five minutes after I was having [a] margarita at a bar.... You never know what’s going to work.” The song remains Buffett’s only *Billboard* Top 10 hit, but its island vibes buoyed his legendary brand. As he summed it up to *60 Minutes*: “I sell escapism.”

[Performing] is one of the greatest joys you could ever have on planet Earth’

—JIMMY BUFFETT



Guitar Heroes
 Buffett and Chesney sang together on “Trying to Reason With Hurricane Season” at a charity event in 2011.

Scene-Stealer
 Buffett made a memorable cameo in 2015’s *Jurassic World*, in which he escaped dinos with margaritas in hand.

Business aside, Buffett remained a major concert draw, with *Forbes* estimating that the shows he played each year with his Coral Reefer Band helped the star rake in some \$570 million. “I got into this business to have a good time, and if I wasn’t still having fun, I’d get out, money or no money,” he told the *Post* in 1998. “I never expected to tour this long. People say, ‘Don’t you get tired of doing all those songs like ‘Fins’ and ‘Margaritaville’ over and over?’ And I look at them like they’re crazy. They don’t know what it’s like to get up onstage each night and have 15,000 people yelling that they love you.”

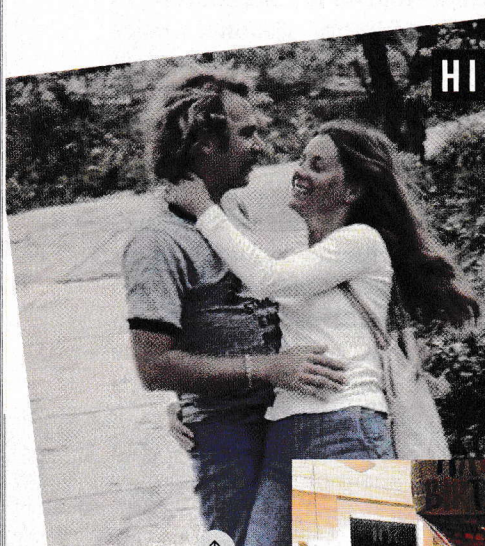


An Idlers' Idol
 “There’s more to the music than just the music,” he told *EW*. “It’s become a lifestyle. I wish I could take credit, but it’s fan-generated.”

fishing, surfing and the ocean, she also emphasized he was more than just a beach bum. “He’s a very, very diligent hard worker,” she said. “He doesn’t like to sit around. He doesn’t like to kick his feet up.” Buffett married second wife Jane in 1977 and, as she told *Time* in 1998, relished the tranquility of domesticity, where he could make his kids pancakes and drive them to school. “That’s the life he loves,” she said. In *Pirate*, Buffett praised his family and friends as “treasure more valuable than gold” and said he felt as though his

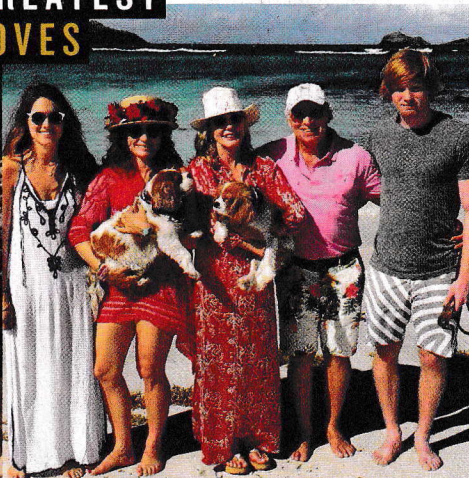
Offstage Buffett was a philanthropist and avid pilot whose midair near-death experiences twice made headlines. In 1994 he swam to safety

HIS GREATEST LOVES



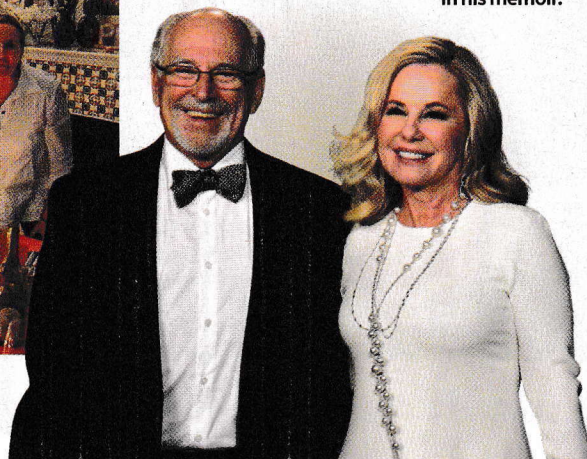
Soulmates
 Buffett and Jane (ca. 1978) married in 1977 after meeting six years earlier at a Key West bar.

Sibling Bond
 “He brought joy to so many,” says Laurie (left, with Buffett and their sister Lucy in 2017). “He was a phenomenal person.”



Devoted Dad
 Buffett (with, from left, daughters Delaney and Savannah, wife Jane and son Cameron in a 2014 Instagram) called time with his family “a treasure.”

Guiding Light
 “[Jane] has always been the voice of reason in my Peter Pan existence,” Buffett wrote of his wife (in 2018) in his memoir.



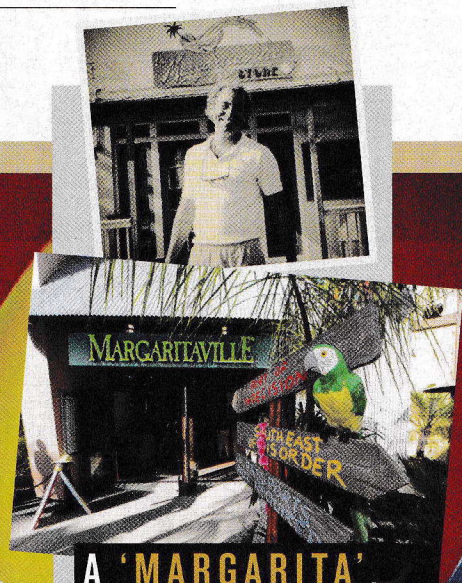
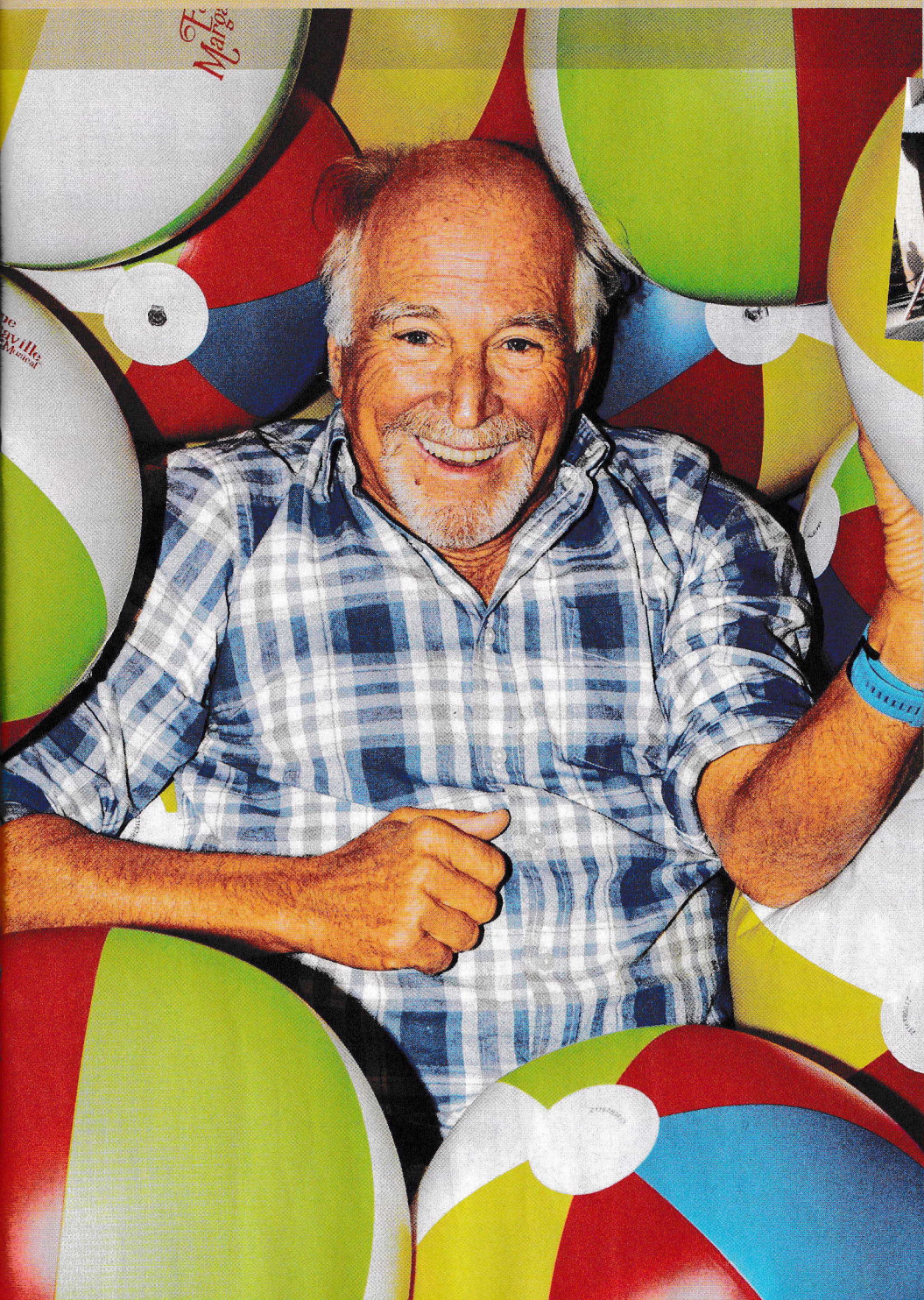
own kind of paradise was life at home. "I have been called a lot of things," he wrote, "but the thing I believe I am the most is lucky."

Even amid his health ordeal, Buffett remained grateful—and committed to his family. His sister Laurie was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer shortly after Buffett got his own diagnosis. "When Jimmy found out, he brought the whole family to be with me," says Laurie, who is now cancer-free. In his last days "we would repeat stories,

and Jimmy would laugh and nod his head to let us know that he remembered," she adds. "I have never seen Jimmy depressed, ever—not even at the end." Through it all Buffett saw the afterlife as just another adventure. "If there is a heaven for me," he wrote in his memoir, "I am sure that it has a beach attached to it."

Reporting by **LINDA MARX**
and **JEFF NELSON**

COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: AARON RICHTER/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES, KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/GETTY IMAGES



A 'MARGARITA' EMPIRE

Buffett founded the first Margaritaville restaurant in Key West in 1985, and before long business was booming, with fans flocking to live out their vacation fantasies in real life. Today Margaritaville Holdings has licensed nearly 150 restaurants, 30 resorts, cruises, apparel and more. "Listen," Buffett (who owned 28 percent of the company, according to *Forbes*) told *The Washington Post* in 1998, "I'm not about to apologize for being a good businessman. Too many people in music have ruined their lives because they weren't."