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Men's Journal

SPORTS, FITNESS, ADVENTURE, IDEAS

FEBRUARY 1998

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RETURN TO Margaritaville

The Pirate Looks at 50 By Jimmy Buffett



Buffett with his fly rod and plane in the Bahamas

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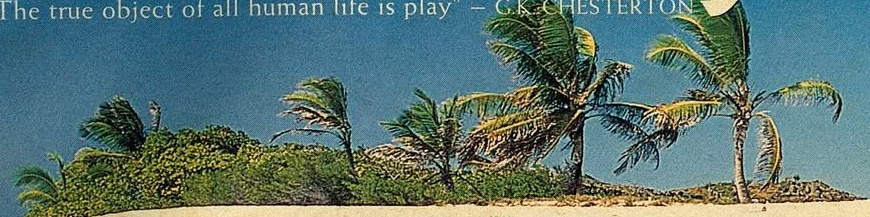
"The true object of all human life is play" – G.K. CHESTERTON



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In an excerpt adapted from his forthcoming memoir, the man who told us "If we weren't all crazy, we would all go insane" reflects on his wild life in rock-and-roll and on his future life as an adult. BY JIMMY BUFFETT

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It means you're born – on a reservation – to an alcoholic father who turns the family furniture into a front-yard bonfire. It means you become, by turns, a whiz-kid geek storyteller, a stereotypical drunken Injun, and an angry young novelist adept at playing the race card. It also means your film, *Smoke Signals,* is coming out and you're ready to become the first American Indian cultural superstar.
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Used to be, writing about sports was the dream of every boy – the best job in the world. But in these days of reporting-by-press-release, pampered, disdainful billionaire athletes, and rabid handlers, the ink-stained hordes can't seem to scrounge up a single worthwhile observation. Open a vein, indeed.
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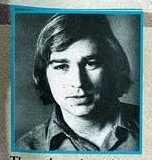
Cover photograph of Jimmy Buffett by Jean Pagliuso, shot off Harbour Island, in the Bahamas. This page: Tiny Green Cay, in the British Virgin Islands, by Jim Raycroft.



AIR BUFFETT: The pilot and the 60-foot-long, 10-seat *Hemisphere Dancer*, off Man Island, near Harbour Island in the Bahamas

BY JIMMY BUFFETT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN PAGLIUSO

A Pirate Looks At 50



The author, circa 1972

TOMORROW I TURN 50. A simple sentence but a mind-boggling thought for a war baby like me. After I came into the world in Mobile, Alabama, on Christmas Day in 1946, this is more or less how it went: I broke out of the grip of Catholicism and made it through adolescence without killing myself in a car; I flunked out of Auburn University, I learned to play the guitar, lived on the beach in Panama City, moved to New Orleans's French Quarter, finally got laid, and didn't go to Vietnam; I enrolled at the University of Southern Mississippi, started a band, got a job on Bourbon Street, graduated from college, broke up my band, and went out on the road solo; I signed a record deal with Barnaby Records, got married, moved to Nashville, bought a Mercedes, worked at *Billboard*, put out my first album (*Down to Earth*), went broke, met Jerry Jeff Walker, wrecked the Mercedes, got divorced, and moved to Key West; I sang and worked on a fishing boat, went totally crazy, did a lot of dope, met the right girl, made another record, had a hit ("Come Monday"), bought a boat, and sailed away to the Caribbean; I started another band, worked the road, had my second and last hit ("Margaritaville"), bought a house in Aspen, started spending my summers in New England, got married, broke my leg three times in one year, had a baby girl, made more records, bought a bigger boat, and sailed away to St. Barts; I got separated from the right girl, sold the boat, sold the house in Aspen, moved back to Key West, worked the road,

THIS IS WHAT HE'S LEARNED ON THE ROAD, IN THE SKY, ON THE COUCH, AND IN THE TROPICS

Adapted from *A Pirate Looks at Fifty*, to be published by Random House in June.

and made more records; I rented an apartment in Paris, learned to fly, went to therapy, quit doing dope, bought my first seaplane, flew all over the Caribbean, almost got a second divorce, moved to Malibu for more therapy, and got back with the right girl; I worked the road, moved back to Nashville, bought a summer home on Long Island, had another baby girl, and bought the perfect seaplane; I moved back to Florida, built a house on Long Island, had a baby boy, crashed the perfect seaplane in Nantucket, tried to slow down a little, woke up one morning and I was looking at 50.

HERE'S THE PLAN: We'll have Christmas at home in Key West. Then, to celebrate my half-century mark, I will fly my Grumman Albatross seaplane to the Cayman Islands with my son, Cameron Marley; it will be our first father-and-son trip. My wife, Jane, and our daughter Sarah Delaney will be flown down the next day in my CitationJet to meet us in San José, Costa Rica.

In preparation for our adventure and for my fiftieth birthday, I went back to the cedar-lined steamer trunk in my basement in Long Island, where I store a considerable collection of notebooks, cocktail napkins, mildewed memo pads, and sparsely filled binders. These are the stories that have made up my songs and my life, and I go back to them from time to time for ideas. What I know for sure is that there are a lot of smart middle-aged people but not many wise ones. That comes with "time on the water," as fishermen say. We all could use a few more minutes out there.

There are a lot of smart middle-aged people but not many wise ones. That comes with "time on the water."

I COME FROM a moderately dysfunctional background that was topped off by 12 years of parochial education. Nobody ever taught me about sex or anything relating to it. I learned from locker-room bullshit and *Playboy*. That is not the kind of gear you want stuffed into your emotional backpack as you venture into the valley of marriage, but it was all I had.

Jane Buffett and I have had a wild and wonderful relationship from the day we met at the Chart Room Bar in Key West in 1973. But her backpack was just as useless as mine, and we found ourselves in trouble. I went, with her and without her, to several therapists over the years — which for a southern male is like having root canal and an IRS audit in the same afternoon. But I fooled them, and myself; I acted my way through the ordeal.

One morning after Jane and I broke up for the second time, I was bobbing on a longboard in the Pacific, south of Laguna Beach, when I got my wake-up call. When I'm surfing, the only thing on my mind is the ocean, but that morning, my meditative state was broken by a buoy near the Dana Point Shipyard. In between clangs of the bell, I heard a little voice talking to me. It said, "You haven't given this your best shot." It was the truth and I knew it. I called Jane and told her I wanted to give our marriage one last, honest chance.

I wound up at the Santa Monica office of Paul Tobias. Paul was unlike any therapist I had talked to. He's a pilot and a fly-fisherman, so I trusted him. More importantly, he knew my act and called me on it every time. One day, I was trying to justify some kind of pretzel logic, still clinging to the notion that I didn't need much help, when Paul interrupted me and said, "Jimmy, your life is not a performance. Your performance is a part of your life." I rambled on some more and then it happened — DING, DING, DING. From the well of my soul that voice finally screamed, "Get it, asshole!"

Call it a breakthrough, a revelation, or whatever, but that day changed my life and I am pretty sure saved my marriage.

I LEFT NASHVILLE in a hurry in the fall of 1971. My first marriage was basically over after two years, my career was going nowhere, and I was freezing to death. Jerry Jeff Walker, whom I profiled for *Billboard*, had passed through town from Miami a few months earlier and had crashed at my house. We'd stayed up all night drinking and talking, and when he'd left the next morning, he'd given me an open invitation to come and visit him. I didn't wait long to take him up on it. I lined up a Monday-night gig at a club called the Flick, caught a 727 to Miami, and didn't look back.

Jerry Jeff picked me up at the airport, and we drove around in a burgundy 1947 Packard he called the *Flyin' Lady*. The air smelled of garlic and salt water, with an occasional whiff of orange blossoms and frangipani. When I left Nashville that morning, it was 31 degrees and raining. Now, four hours later, I was sitting under a cluster of royal palms with the breeze coming off Biscayne Bay, rustling the branches. I was barefoot in shorts and a T-shirt, eating lobster salad and drinking ice-cold beer. I would not be returning. I'm not from the hills of Tennessee; I'm from the bayous of the Gulf Coast, and my tropical soul had finally come home.

When I strolled into the Flick around noon on Monday to announce my arrival, the owner was mulling over a delivery of produce with a Cuban wholesaler. I eased up next to them and rested my guitar on the floor. The owner glanced over the rim of his glasses and stared at me as if I had come from another planet. "Auditions for Hootenanny Night are tomorrow at seven," he monotoned. "Leave your name on the list at the receptionist stand."

"I'm not here for Hootenanny Night," I said. "I'm Jimmy Buffett. I spoke to you a couple of weeks ago from Nashville. I open tonight." He put down his clipboard, looked at me sternly, and walked to the back of the club. When he returned he said, "Bullet, you open in two weeks. See you then."

"It's *Buffett*," I replied, "with two *T*s."

He ignored me and picked up a melon. "These aren't ripe," he said to the Cuban. "Goddamnit, how many times do I have to tell you, I want *ripe* melons!"

I picked up my guitar and headed for the door. "See you in two weeks, Bullet."

I timidly announced the news of my "mistake" to Jerry Jeff and his girlfriend, Murphy, and she said, "Hell, Jerry Jeff, let's go to Key West." An hour later, we were tooling down U.S. 1 toward the literal "end of the road" that I would call home for the next 20 years.

The first stop was Mallory dock for the sunset. This was before Key West had ever seen a cruise ship, and actual hippies danced to conga drums without looking to be paid. The sun went down, but we partied on. Tom Corcoran, now a good friend, handed me my first beer in Key West at the Chart Room. Jerry Jeff and Murphy held court. To the patrons of this now-famous bar, they were like entertaining royalty and I was Jimmy, the barfly prince. Nobody could remember my last name.

I FELL IN LOVE with flying boats the first time I boarded one, at Chalk's terminal on Watson Island in Miami, and flew to Bimini for the afternoon. There is nothing like flying to the islands in a seaplane, then landing on a stretch of ocean alongside some speck of land that has probably seen as many flags as the U.N. Plaza has. And there always seems to be a bar and a grilled lobster or a plate of cracked conch waiting. Like [*Cont. on 47*]

JIMMY BUFFETT *is the author of four books, including* Tales From Margaritaville.



PARROTHEADS WERE HERE. The "plate spinner," armed with fly rod and cell phones, at Uncle Ralph's Corner on Harbour Island

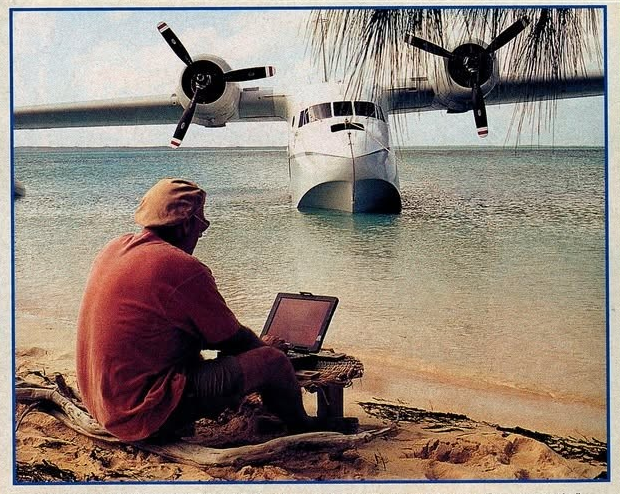
The not-so-bare necessities of low-latitude seaplane travel

Blame It On The Boy Scouts

TRIPS ARE NOT TRIPS TO ME; they have to be expeditions. I blame this on Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, in which I learned to be prepared. Because I now own a Grumman Albatross, the largest seaplane Grumman has ever built, being prepared has taken on a new set of parameters. *The Hemisphere Dancer* – 60 feet long with an 80-foot wingspan – can hold enough fuel to stay airborne for 17 hours and still carry 10 passengers and a couple tons of gear; it has *expedition* written all over it. (Upon my purchase of this aircraft, my lovely wife was heard to say "I don't even want to discuss it.") There is only one thing for a red-blooded Boy Scout to do with such a plane, and that is to try to fill it up. Here's how I do it.

■ **Portable generator** Before you get into the cockpit of a plane, you must understand that there is a chance you may have to abandon ship and live like Robinson Crusoe for a while. Generators allow you to do that – and more. My friend Michael Nesmith once broke down somewhere in the middle of the desert while he was racing in the Baja, California, road rally. Locals directed him to a fishing village on the coast, where, according to them, an old gringo could help him with his repairs. Upon arriving at this village, he found the gringo, who invited him to have a drink. From a storage locker, the man produced a small generator, a five-gallon container of gas, a Sears Die-Hard battery, an old Waring blender, a bottle of tequila, a box of Holland House margarita mix, a record player, and a worn-out copy of *Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes*. Then he took everything out to the beach. As a crowd gathered, ice arrived from a fishing boat, and the old gringo fired up the generator. The music came on, the battery began to charge, the blender whirred, and the party started. It lasted well into the night, until all the gas in the can had been used up.

■ **Surfboards** I carry two: a nine-foot Stewart longboard and an eight-foot Stewart "egg" board. One of the biggest reasons I decided to buy the Albatross was that it was spacious enough to carry them. It seems like perfect Vulcan logic to be able to fly over the ocean until you find a surfing spot, land your plane on the water, and paddle on out.



THE NEW COCONUT TELEGRAPH: Yes, this e-mail junkie once wrote the song "Incommunicado."

■ **Bicycles** A few years ago, I found a pair of collapsible mountain bikes in the West Marine store in Key West. They are amazing machines that fold up into themselves, like praying Buddhist monks, and then transform into full-size bikes with the turn of a couple of bolts. I consider them to be survival gear, since they allow me to avoid taxis, in which I have spent too many frightening moments clinging to my seat belt or stomping on imaginary brakes.

■ **Guns** I have an old World War II military-issue .45 and a sawed-off "deck sweeper" shotgun. I guess they give me some kind of false sense of security that I could hold off dope dealers or pirates who might want to steal my airplane. I suppose we all want to be Indiana Jones sometimes: One man with a pistol and a whip defeats Hitler's army and saves the world. Who wouldn't want that job?

■ **Swag box** This is probably the most important piece of gear that I carry. *Swag* is a pirate term that means *treasure* or *booty*. The swag box is filled with tapes and CDs of my albums, as well as a variety of concert T-shirts. Barter in the islands is alive and well, and a "Cheeseburger in Paradise" T-shirt and a CD have an amazing effect on the amount of time one spends in customs. So if you hear "Grapefruit-Juicy Fruit" coming from the customs office on some remote isle in the Caribbean, you'll know that I have been there.

■ **Guitar** After lugging several guitars around the world, I finally settled on a tiny Martin 0-18 acoustic. It is small and light, and the mahogany neck and fret board resist the tendency to warp in muggy climates. It can be played quietly in a hotel room or loudly plugged into an amp for an impromptu performance. Music still is the only universal language, and I have found myself in too many far-off places where my guitar opened doors and ignited friendships.

■ **Amp and mike** I played the beach bars of the Virgin Islands long before I got famous – and to me, there is nothing like it. Many of these bars don't even have electricity, but in case they do, my little Trace amp and microphone provide just the right amount of P.A. to overcome the inevitable drunk at the bar who keeps shouting "That's not him, that's not him!"

■ **Fishing gear** If anything is necessary on an adventure, it is certainly fishing gear. Haven't you ever seen one of those disaster movies where people are sitting around in life rafts on the brink of starvation and dehydration, trying desperately to come up with a way to catch a fish? Besides, it's not just survival gear to me; fishing is a sincere passion. One of the great thrills and insane justifications of having this big plane is being able to see a flat from the air, land nearby, and start casting.

■ **Laptop computer** I promised myself I wouldn't be a slave to this machine, but I failed. It goes everywhere with me because it has everything in it. I often think of simpler times, when I carried a Chinese rice-paper journal with yin-yang figures woven into its cloth jacket and sketches of sampans on its pages. It served me well, but it didn't have a word processor or a language translator or a tide program for the entire Atlantic Ocean or a flight planner for the whole damn world or an Internet browser – and, by God, those things are essential to a traveler these days. – J.B.

[*Cont. from 44*] the song says, "I got a Caribbean soul I can barely control."

Over the years, I have owned nine planes and have flown to the Caribbean countless times. I cherish not only the freedom my planes give me but also the solitude and responsibility of flying alone. Of course, there is a certain element of risk involved in flying, but life does not come without risks. You learn to take them or you stay home and watch it on TV.

On September 7, 1994, I slipped out of the house on Long Island just after sunrise and made my way to the airport. *The Lady of the Waters*, my restored Grumman Widgeon flying boat, was waiting to go. In less than an hour, I landed in Nantucket's Madaket Harbor and met my fishing buddies Joe Pantorno and Tom Mleczko. We were like a bunch of kids, bubbling with excitement and rambling on about the perfect day. I set two anchors on the plane and jumped into their boat. Ten minutes later, we were catching striped bass off Eel Point and didn't stop until well after noon, when we hauled in our lines and headed back to shore. I wanted to be home for dinner.

Joe and Tom stood by as I did my preflight, gathered in the anchors, and cranked up the engines. I was taught that a water takeoff in a seaplane should be approached as though it isn't going to happen. The ocean is hardly an airstrip; waves, boats, lobster traps, debris, and idiotic Jet-Ski drivers can alter your plans at any moment.

With a light wind blowing out of the southwest, I scanned the harbor for boat traffic and locked in on an imaginary runway. As I advanced the throttles and began to take off, I spotted a boat wake just past my left wing. I didn't like it and was about to pull back on the throttles when the plane started to roll uncontrollably to the right. If I knew anything at that moment, it was that my chances of dying right then and there would be heavily increased if I hit the water upside down. Pulling the throttles back gave me a bit of control and stopped the roll. But I was going down.

The nose of the plane slammed into the water and compressed like a big accordion. *I smell gas,* I thought. *Time to get my ass out of here.*

My life didn't flash before my eyes and no ancestors called to me from some white fog on the other side of eternity. The nose of the plane just slammed into the water and compressed like a big accordion. I heard the engines stop. Although I had braced myself for the impact, my head still hit the side of the cockpit. The only good thing was that I did not lose consciousness.

I hung upside down and went quickly through my spontaneous anatomical checklist: *Five fingers on the left hand, five on the right. Okay now, I have both legs and feet, this is good. No huge pain anywhere, the water is not red from some unfelt severed artery. Hmm, the fuel pumps are still running and the mags are on. I smell gas. This is not good; time to get my ass out of here.*

I released the seat belt and fell into the murky water that was quickly filling the cockpit. I groped for the window latches, unscrewed them, and climbed onto the wing as my fishing buddies appeared in their skiff.

In the emergency room, I was the only action of the afternoon. The doctors poked around and asked a lot of questions. I was pretty scraped up, but nothing serious was wrong. They told me that I would hurt like hell for the next few days, gave me a prescription for pain pills, and sent me for precautionary X-rays. It was while lying in the semidark confines of the X-ray room that I began to come out of shock and realize what had happened. I started to shake and cry and thank God, Buddha, and Saint Christopher. I thought about my life having become much too complicated. I have often been called the "plate spinner," a reference to the performer on the *Ed Sullivan Show* who put china plates on the ends of slender poles, then ran back and forth across the stage, keeping as many plates spinning as possible.

I had basically been on the road for 25 years. If I wasn't on tour, my time away from rock-and-roll was spent on a boat or a plane, at my hunting camp in Georgia, or down island. I tried to fit at least 36 hours into every day. This approach to life served me well and at the same time almost cost me everything. Something had to change.

It was my first striped bass caught on a fly in Long Island Sound. It wasn't a keeper, but it was more beautiful than I could have possibly imagined. I gently removed the hook from its mouth, and as I watched it glide away from my hand to the security of the deeper, darker water, I thought back to the crash, when I'd scrambled *out* of the water in search of safety.

Two days later, I climbed back into my De Havilland Beaver and went flying. My first water landing was a bit shaky, but after a few more I was sharp again. I had been given another shot, and I intended to enjoy the additional time. There were places to go, things to do, songs to sing, old friends to visit, and new stories to write. I was just getting started.

FLASH-FORWARD TO MY LANDMARK BIRTHDAY: I want to stay up until my birth hour, which is just after one in the morning, to see if any bells, whistles, or internal alarm clocks sound. The only problem is that these days, I get up when I used to go to bed. I like to think of life experiences as cycles, and this surely is one. When I'm on the road, the adrenaline rush alone keeps me up until one or two, but I am home now and had to take a two-hour nap this afternoon and drink a double espresso after dinner just to stay awake.

I'm not the kind of person to spend my half-century mark in the self-help section of the bookstore, looking for answers "to questions that have bothered me so," as somebody once wrote. That's probably because by the time I reached high school, I was bombarded by my parents, teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors, all asking the same question: "What are you going to do with your life?" I had no answer back then and honestly didn't even want to think about it. The "life" they seemed to be so hellbent on preparing me for bored the living shit out of me. I was too busy figuring out ways to skip school, go diving, and get laid. My heroes were not presidents. They were pirates.

So I emerged with a healthy "lack of respect for the proper authorities." And at the age of 50, I still have it.

Q. What are you going to do with your life?

A. Try to live an interesting one.