

Jimmy Buffett: Oh, the Stories He Can Tell

The Songwriter-Turned-Author,
Basking Away in 'Margaritaville'

By Richard Harrington
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"If the nuns at school saw me signing like this, they'd hit me on the knuckles with a ruler," says Jimmy Buffett, scribbling his name in little more than a second.

On the other hand, the sisters at St. Ignatius in Spring Hill, Ala., probably never expected Jimmy Buffett to be at Crown Books on K Street, signing 900 copies of his new book of short stories, "Tales From Margaritaville," in less than two hours.

A successful singer-songwriter since 1977, when "Margaritaville" plunked him into America's pop consciousness, Buffett is now a successful author as well. Since its publication this fall, "Tales" has sold more than 120,000 copies and landed him on the New York Times bestseller list. That's good news for Buffett, whose albums have been absent from the charts for much of the '80s, but it's not surprising to his fervent fans, known as Parrot Heads and given to dressing up in garish Hawaiian shirts, rubber beaks and inflatable shark heads.

This particular weekday, the fans are still fervent ("my husband asked me *three* times if I was a Jimmy Buffett fan before he asked me to marry him," says one), but having come from jobs or classes, they're conservatively dressed as they snake through Crown in a quiet conga line, carrying as many as six books for Buffett to autograph.

"Believe me, when they go to the shows, they're not wearing *those* outfits," he chuckles.

If the carnival must wait until next summer—Buffett's shows at the Merriweather Post Pavilion are always sold out, whether he has a new record out or not—the fans have the double treat of a new album, "Off to See the Lizard" (Buffett has a penchant for

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Jimmy Buffett.

BY LUCIAN FERRING—THE WASHINGTON POST

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Buffett

BUFFETT, From G1

puns), and the book, which expands the locales and fleshes out the characters of his 17 previous albums. (This is not Buffett's first book—last year, Harcourt Brace published "The Jolly Moon," a children's book written in collaboration with his 10-year-old daughter Savannah Jane, and a follow-up called "The Trouble Dolls" will be published next year.)

"Tales" is part of a natural progression for Buffett, who was praised early for the narrative quality of his songs, which were closer to imaginative prose than to lyrical poetry. Eventually, he would also wed tropical languor with country funkiness into what some called the Key West Sound, or Gulf-and-western. With his sunbaked smile and genial nature, Buffett was the good-time troubadour who chronicled misadventures in paradise, taking listeners someplace they'd rather be.

His turn as author shouldn't come as too much of a surprise to the folks at the University of Southern Mississippi, where Buffett earned degrees in history and journalism in the late '60s. "I started out thinking about writing before I thought about music," he explains. "Journalism was the only curriculum that was any fun to study when I went to school. Now kids can major in aviation or cinematography, but I'm so ancient those electives were not around when I went to college.

"They wouldn't let me take music courses because I wasn't a music major," Buffett recalls. "I was singing at a pizza place in the afternoons and evenings, but they were so snooty, they wouldn't even let me audit the music courses."

This is all recounted in a rich, enveloping Alabama accent. Buffett, 43 next week, may have become the poet laureate of uncleaned beach bums, but he's never abandoned the spirit of his Gulf Coast childhood.

Songs From the Shadows

Born Christmas Day in Pascagoula, Miss., he grew up in and around Mobile. His grandfather, Captain James Delaney Buffett, immortalized in his "Son of a Son of a Sailor," had been a South Seas ship's captain and inculcated Buffett with wonderful descriptions of distant points. As Buffett writes, "I let my mind go where my feet couldn't yet carry me."

If the settings for future songs were slowly building, so too was the sense of detail that would allow Buf-



Jimmy Buffett.

BY LUCIAN PERKINS—THE WASHINGTON POST

fett to populate those songs with intriguing characters. After college and a brief, unprofitable stopover in Nashville, he ended up in New Orleans and that, he says, is where his skills of observation were honed.

"My age of innocence ended when I moved into the French Quarter," he explains. "I came from a very Catholic background, and I had been pretty sheltered. When I got to New Orleans, I can remember the sights, the smells and the kinds of people I'd never seen in the little town where I grew up."

Buffett recalls the first of the real people to make the transition into a song, "He Went to Paris." "That was Eddie Bukowski, a cleanup guy at a nightclub who'd lost an arm fighting with the Lincoln Brigade in Spain. He'd sing these old war songs and tell stories, and I loved listening because it was an extension of my grandfather telling me sea stories."

New Orleans was, and remains, "an incredible melting pot of musical talent, but as far as taking it anywhere [in the early '70s], you had to face the facts and realize you'd have to go to New York, Los Angeles or Nashville. I had an offer to go to L.A., but I only had enough gas money to go to Nashville."

Once there, Buffett never moved out of the shadows, though he did record a couple of albums for the long-defunct Barnaby label, "Down to Earth" (342 copies sold) and "High Cumberland Jubilee." Surprisingly, a number of fans brought copies, some still in cellophane, for Buffett to autograph the other day, though he doesn't even include them in his official discography.

"They're real rare," Buffett says optimistically.

The Barnaby albums elicited reviews pointing out that "they weren't country albums, that they had more 'substance,'" says Buffett. "So I was already off on my own path then."

Eventually, Buffett was off the beaten path, as well. He discovered Key West in 1972, accidentally: a booking at a Miami club fell through and, too broke to go back to Nashville, Buffett hung out on the Key with another renegade singer-songwriter, Jerry Jeff Walker.

It was love at first light.

Over the years, Buffett has celebrated Key West, with memorable characters rooted in that region's geography, both physical and spiritual. After all, this was a place where "everyone is just more than contented to be living and dying in three-quarter time." It was a seaward community of real-life smugglers and would-be pirates, busy barkeeps and restless fishermen, salt-bred carousers and curious tourists—outlaws and expatriates right out of *film noir*.

"I was looking for that kind of lifestyle," Buffett admits, "that Parisian, B-movie style, and when I first went to Key West, there were a lot more of us [participants] than there were of them [observers]. Now there's more people looking at the way we live than living the way we used to live and that's sad. It was a genuine wild town, and now they come looking for the places we used to hang out, which we wouldn't go to anymore."

Journeys and Journals

That turnaround might never have happened had Buffett's career followed the pattern of his first "official" releases in 1973 and 1974. "A White Sport Coat and a Pink Crustacean," "Living and Dying in 3/4 Time" and "A-1-A" earned him widespread critical attention but modest sales. It wasn't really until 1977's "Changes in Attitudes, Changes in Latitudes," which introduced "Margaritaville" as both a hit and a state of mind, and the follow-up, "Son of a Son of a Sailor," that Buffett became radio-friendly and

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