

James William Buffett,
ca. 1975

JIMMY BUFFETT

HIS EXPANDING MUSICAL PALETTE AND
INDELIBLE STORYTELLING BECAME THE CORNERSTONES
OF HIS SIX-DECADE-SPANNING CAREER.

BY HOLLY GLEASON

Mother, mother ocean, I have heard your call." "Years grow shorter, not longer, the more you've been on your own." "She came down from Cincinnati, it took her three days on the train." "Stashed his trash in Ecuador, bought a good suit of clothes." "Grapefruit, bathing suit, chew a little Juicy Fruit." "I really do appreciate the fact you're sitting here." "As the son of the son of a sailor, I went out on the sea for adventure." "Tried to amend my carnivorous habits, made it nearly seventy days." "He went to Paris, looking for answers." "Headin' out to San Francisco, for the Labor Day weekend show." "Nibblin' on sponge cake, watchin' the sun bake. All of those tourists covered in oil . . ."

A great opening line does many things. Captures the imagination. Opens emotional spigots. Transcends time. Evokes memories. Invites daydreams. It's a gateway to characters, places, experiences that transport and transfix.

Long before that lost shaker of salt launched an empire, James William Buffett was a journeyman folkie/country/talking-blues proposition trying to make good on the Southern literary tradition of William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, and Mark Twain, with a little Ernest Hemingway thrown in. Born on Christmas Day, 1946, in Pascagoula, Mississippi, and raised in Mobile, Alabama,

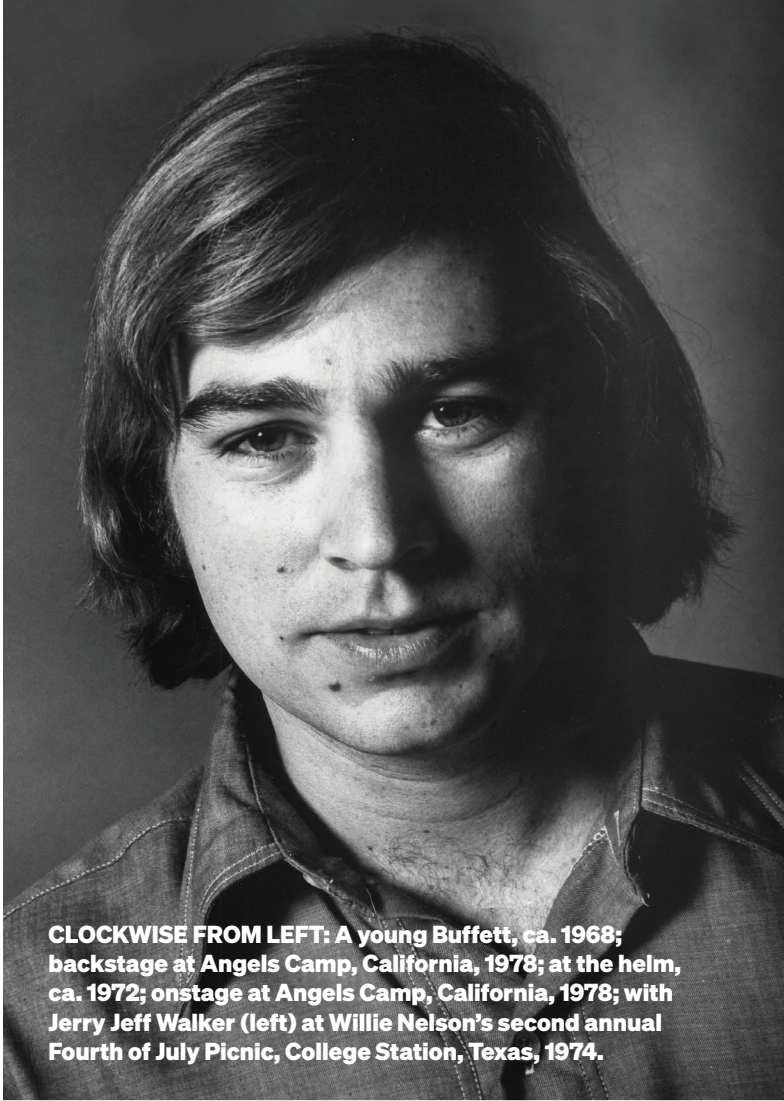
he had a family history of storytelling – and it certainly steeped his songs in porous truth, tiny details, and narrative twists.

Between grandfather James Delaney Buffett Sr., who captained steamships in the Labrador Sea, and father James Delaney Buffett Jr., a sailor and marine engineer, the young songwriter came by his love of the water naturally. But his Jesuit education was what provided the torque and resistance to give young Buffett his Ferris Bueller-like cool as a neophyte artist.

He started out busking in New Orleans, using his journalism degree from the University of Southern Mississippi writing for *Billboard*, and making two failed albums for Barnaby Records – one in 1970 and the other "lost" – featuring "The Captain and the Kid," "In the Shelter," and "Truckstop Salvation." Banging around America's coffee-house circuit, Buffett did what great writers do: observed, absorbed, and song-sketched the off-kilter people he met.

A true child from below the Mason-Dixon line, he was drawn to the quirky, the out-of-control, the revelers, and the hombres. But his dream was in dry dock, with singles faltering and albums DOA. In Coconut Grove, for a gig at Florida's storied coffeehouse the Flick, he crashed with new pal Jerry Jeff Walker – who suggested a trip to Key West as an escape from all that wasn't working.

What was intended as a distraction was the skeleton key to Buffett's signature. All the pieces were in place



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A young Buffett, ca. 1968; backstage at Angels Camp, California, 1978; at the helm, ca. 1972; onstage at Angels Camp, California, 1978; with Jerry Jeff Walker (left) at Willie Nelson's second annual Fourth of July Picnic, College Station, Texas, 1974.



for an oeuvre Buffett called “drunk Caribbean rock & roll” on his iconic 1978 album, *You Had to Be There*, recorded at Atlanta’s Fox and Miami’s Gusman theaters. The swagger, storytelling (within and between songs), pop-cultural references, camaraderie, and heart became the cornerstones of his six-decade-spanning career.

At a time when genres were more fluid and listeners curious, Buffett’s rock/singer-songwriter/country-tinged renderings portrayed a realm of burnouts, beach bums, fringe dwellers, and know-betters. Conscious and unconscious objectors, they manifested in his songs, no doubt fertilized by Key West’s next-wave literary community of writers Jim Harrison, Tom McGuane, Hunter Thompson, Richard Brautigan, and filmmaker/sport fisherman Guy de la Valdene.

The albums *A White Sport Coat and a Pink Crustacean* (1973), *Living & Dying in ¾ Time* and *A1A* (both 1974), and *Havana Daydreamin’* (1976) distilled the sun-bleached, washed-out space where the U.S. ends and Florida falls into the Atlantic Ocean. Buffett mixed a cocktail of inno-

cence (“Pencil Thin Mustache,” “Grapefruit – Juicy Fruit”), philosophical portraits (“He Went to Paris,” “Death of an Unpopular Poet”), wistful nostalgia (“They Don’t Dance Like Carmen No More,” “Life Is Just a Tire Swing”), and louche anthems (“Why Don’t We Get Drunk,” “My Head Hurts, My Feet Stink and I Don’t Love Jesus”) that built a haven for the landlocked, especially in the Snowbelt, as an escape from Midwestern mundanity.

Ever curious, Buffett lived the life and rubbed elbows with all kinds of kinds.

He tempered dope-smuggling, deep-sea adventures like “A Pirate Looks at 40” and “Havana Daydreamin’” with his own demi-outlaw misadventures. “Peanut Butter Conspiracy” and “The Great Filling Station Hold Up” were hardly felonious – just reckless, by-the-wits, getting-by trickery.

Indeed, the man who shared songs and stages with Steve Goodman, Jesse Winchester, Willis Alan Ramsey, and Jerry Jeff Walker would ultimately field his own band of rogue musicos with the Coral Reefer Band. If

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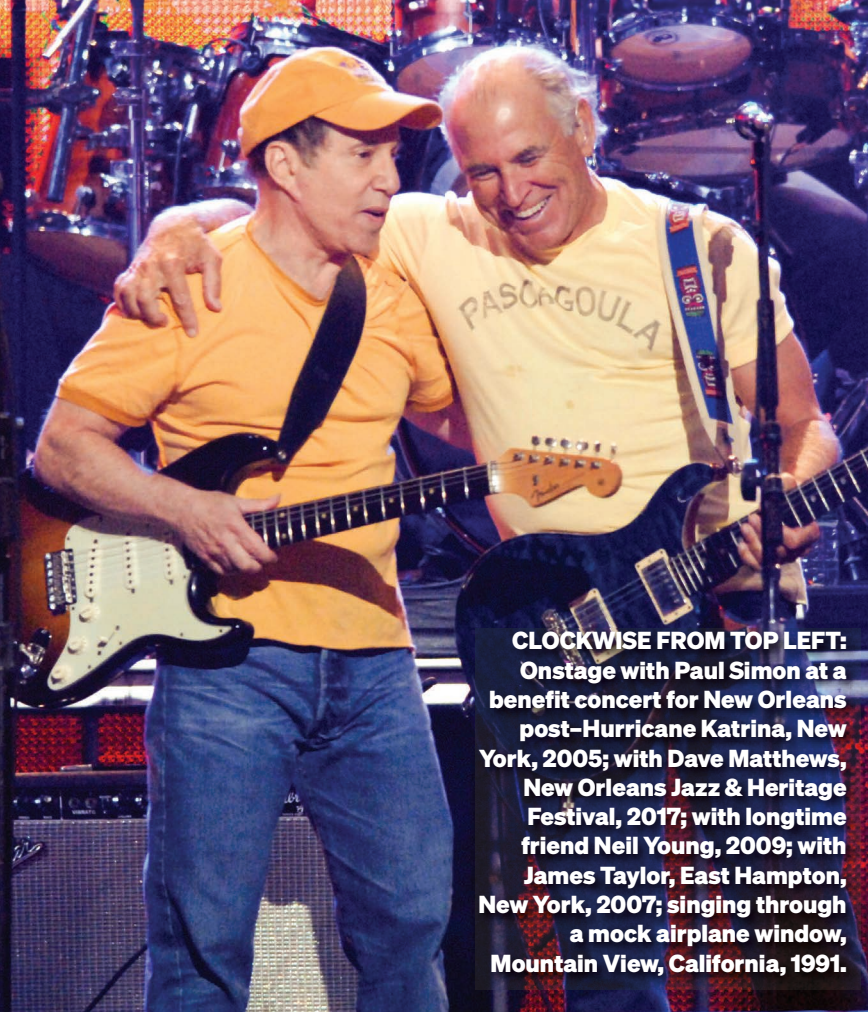
**THERE WAS ALWAYS, ALWAYS FUN.
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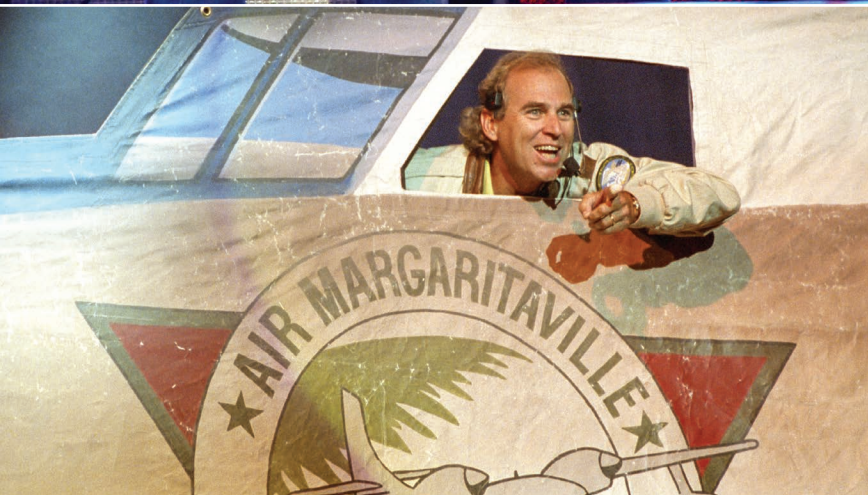


Performing at the Bridge
School Benefit, Mountain
View, California, 2009





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Onstage with Paul Simon at a benefit concert for New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina, New York, 2005; with Dave Matthews, New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 2017; with longtime friend Neil Young, 2009; with James Taylor, East Hampton, New York, 2007; singing through a mock airplane window, Mountain View, California, 1991.



Tom Petty had his Heartbreakers, the Reefers were a stout group that included Mac McAnally, Josh Leo, Timothy B. Schmitt, Tim Kregel, Sam Clayton, Michael Utley, and Will Kimbrough.

And those ripples extended over the years. Dave Matthews; James Taylor; Alan Jackson; J.D. Souther; Crosby, Stills and Nash; Jack Johnson; Kenny Chesney; Caroline Jones; and George Strait were all part of his world of parasol drinks, schooners, Caribbean sunsets, stacks of books, surfers on the coasts, and adventurers sharing their tales.

The sandy-haired musician was generous with his listeners, taking them to a long list of destinations: Trinidad. Tampico. Nassau. Mozambique. Miami Beach. Tijuana. China. Ecuador. The Coast of Marseilles. Livingston, Montana. All the island Saints in the Caribbean. He also introduced cadres of colorful characters: the Mango Man, Billy Voltaire, tourists Frank and Lola, winos, Elvis imitators, a woman going crazy on Caroline Street, sailor's sons, contraband runners, cowboys and

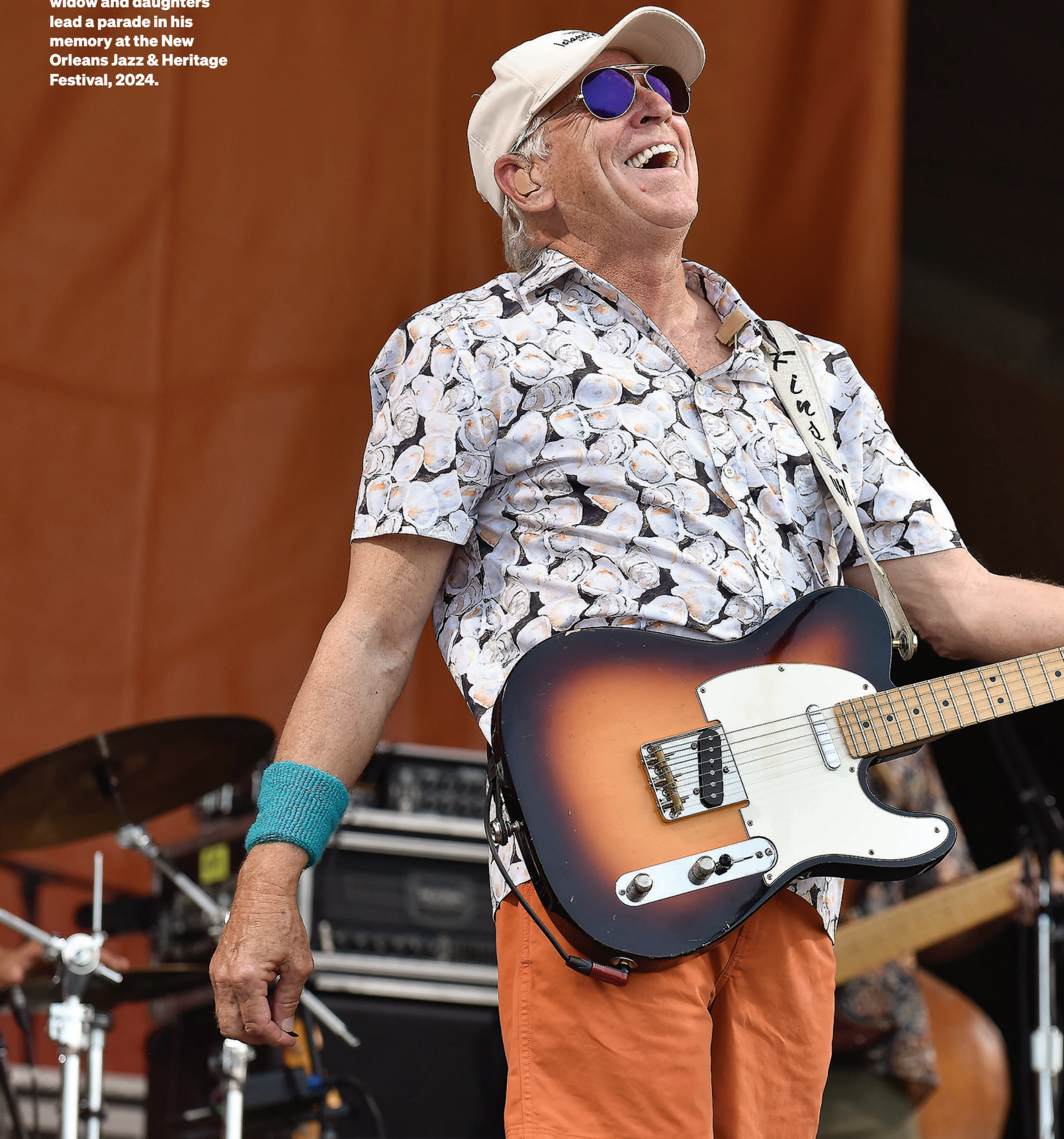
hustlers, and old cultural touchstones – Ricky Ricardo, Carmen Miranda, and Andy Devine.

Musically, Buffett's palette was always expanding. From vintage crooners, boogie-woogie, and honky-tonk gospel to calypso, samba, rumba, reggae, and waltzes, his "Gulf & Western" music contained multitudes. A voracious reader and listener, the sponge-like creative crafted albums as adventurous as they were delightful.

And then, there was that lost shaker of salt. "Margaritaville" was a middling hit when first released. No one saw the hangover-killing solution for the juggernaut it really was. Starting with a throbbing head in an Austin bar, it zeitgeisted the process of falling apart for all those seventies southern California rock fans cheering the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, Jackson Browne, Warren Zevon, and Dan Fogelberg.

Suddenly, those novels in song were like a fun-seeking missile targeting hipster cool. "Fins" celebrated waitresses sharked by middle-aged tourists. "Volcano" made light of tropical eruptions. "Cheeseburger in

Back in New Orleans, 2022. INSET: Buffett's widow and daughters lead a parade in his memory at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 2024.



Paradise” flipped vegetarianism with a red meat lust. “The Weather Is Here, Wish You Were Beautiful” told of escaping to a state well beyond conversation. There was always, always fun, even amid tender love songs – “Come Monday,” “Son of a Son of a Sailor,” “Mañana.” No matter how dire, lost, or found, Buffett knew how to create exuberance.

He surged, swam, flew planes (and occasionally crashed them), sailed countless boats, loved deeply, drank literally and figuratively, raised children, went

fishing, read books, got lost, kept in touch, had crazy dreams. It all went into his songs and, by extension, a whole range of other channels – Broadway plays such as *Don't Stop the Carnival* and *Escape to Margaritaville*; *New York Times* bestsellers *Where Is Joe Merchant*, *A Salty Piece of Land*, *Tales From Margaritaville*, and *A Pirate Looks at 50*; margarita machines, cruise ships, restaurants, resorts, and retirement communities. All were infused with his irresistible *joie de vivre*.

And whether writing, opening doors for acts like



Evangeline, Todd Snider, and Marshall Chapman with his Margaritaville Records imprint; or Nadirah Shakoor, Jack Tempchin, Mac McAnally, Asleep at the Wheel, and others on his Mailboat Records; or holding live shows that covered thirty-two studio albums for his legions of adoring fans – the Parrotheads – Buffett reminded people that life could be sweet, rich, and downright hilarious depending on your point of view.

Looking through Buffett-colored lenses, people could see the best in the maligned, the heroic in the

unremarkable, the warmth for those he treasured, as well as the hypocrisy and bloat in fat cats, boss hogs, and other judgmental wankers. It was a gift he shared freely. He gave people permission to slow down, look up at the stars, exhale, and consider the lives around you.

He kept writing and recording, because that's what writers do. On July 2, 2023, only months before he died from Merkel cell skin carcinoma (a skin cancer that most never realized was terminal), he turned up at a Rhode Island café aptly named Sunset Cove. Like all the best baseball movies, he was a nine-song walk-on during Mac McAnally's set.

Equal Strain on All Parts, his final project, arrived on November 3, 2023, shortly after his passing. With appearances from the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, Angeliqe Kidjo, Emmylou Harris, and Paul McCartney, the decidedly buoyant album offered hope no matter what lay ahead.

Buffett's freewheeling charisma, expansive storytelling, and huge body of work made him exceptionally singular. He was ironic about fame – "I Heard I Was in Town," "It's Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet." But he was unwavering about living wide open and sharing the bonhomie and philosophy with all who listened.

So many of his elegiac lines have soundtracked lives, trainwrecks, and "hold my beer" moments. Still, "Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes" delivers perhaps his truest compass. In that warm sea-salt and suede tenor, Buffett sang: "Yesterday's over my shoulder, so I can't look back for too long / There's just too much to see waiting in front of me / and I know I just can't go wrong."