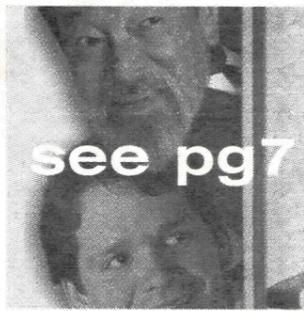


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With one, maybe two open seats, it's not too early to begin looking at next year's City Council races. BY GEORGE HOWLAND JR.

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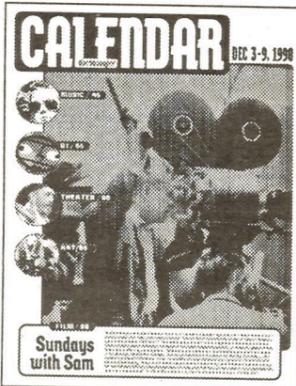
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ck



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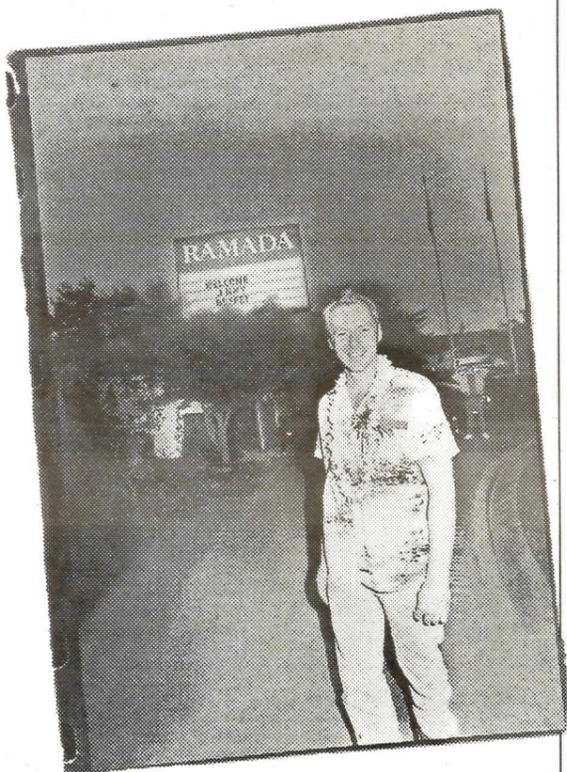
PARROT HEADS



IN PARADISE

Grass Skirts, Inflatable Parrots, and Booze, Booze, Booze: A Legion of Jimmy Buffett Fans Take an Imaginary Trip to the Tropics

THEY REALLY DON'T HAPPEN THAT OFTEN, these moments of lucidity. And they hardly ever happen when I'm one sheet shy of three sheets to the wind, shaking my ass alongside men dressed in Panama hats and grass skirts. And I would never expect a moment of pure understanding in the bar of Tacoma's Ramada Inn. But it happened. And in that moment, I understood one facet of the human experience which had eluded me my entire life: I understood why people love musician Jimmy Buffett, and why they would not only follow him to the ends of the earth, but why they would dress up like a braying pack of jack-asses while doing so.



WITH MY HAWAIIAN SHIRT AND LEI, I DON'T LOOK OUT OF PLACE, BUT I FEEL LIKE I'M FROM ANOTHER PLANET.

by Wm. Steven Humphrey
photographs by Annie-Marie Musselman

It's early October, historically regarded as the sophomore season of winter, and it's still 80 goddam degrees. The Hawaiian shirt, purchased at Value Village for \$4.99, sticks to my back courtesy of a thin film of sweat dripping down my neck. I'm in the lounge of the Ramada Inn—a stone's throw from the goiter-shaped Tacoma Dome, where Jimmy Buffett will be performing in a little less than four hours—and I'm rubbing uncomfortably close to several of the 300 drunken Parrot Heads crammed into the sweltering room. These Parrot Heads—hardcore fans of Jimmy Buffett—dance and sing to each and every Buffett song pumping through the loudspeakers, waving glasses of rum and bottles of Corona with lime above their heads. Every tropical cliché is represented: coconut straw hats, floral print shirts, cargo shorts, and even plastic leis (one of which is ceremoniously plopped over my head, and sealed with a soft kiss to my cheek). Though you would be hard pressed to find such an over-the-top display of color and joy on any tropical island anywhere, the point here is not only to recreate the splendor of carnival, but to surpass it.

With my Hawaiian shirt and lei, I don't look out of place, but I feel like I'm from another planet. Unlike everyone else in the room, I don't know the language of Buffett. Only one thing to do, if I truly want to fit in: TO THE BAR. I know the liquor needed to fit the occasion, so I order my favorite summertime drink, "The Swabbie"—a delicious combination of Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum and Seven-Up, which with a quick stir of a swizzle stick transforms into a boozy cream soda. Glug, glug, glug—and it's gone. I look around the room... hmm. Still uncomfortable. I order another. Glug, glug, and a long slurrrrrp as I suck the bottom out of the glass. That familiar warmth settles behind my eyes, and a love for all humanity exudes from my pores, mixing delicately with the sweat running down my spine. Time to look for Queen Parrot.

SON OF A SON OF A SAILOR

For those who are even further outside the Parrot Head loop than I am, Jimmy Buffett is a fairly well known country-rock singer/composer who experienced his musical heyday in the '70s with hits such as "Margaritaville," "Son of a Son of a Sailor," and "Cheeseburger in Paradise." A native of Key West, Florida, Buffett is famous for songs which reflect tropical themes, including sailing, drinking, and lonely introspection. He's credited with bringing Caribbean rhythms to Nashville, and though his actual hits are few and far between (he's only breached the Top 10 on the pop charts once), he's somehow attracted and maintained a rabid following, and has gone from a two-bit Florida smuggler/sailor to a huge concert draw, selling out every performance.

Even among musicians Buffett's acknowledged as an odd duck. He's an incredibly shrewd businessman, keeping a vise-like grip on all Jimmy Buffett merchandising, recordings, and restaurants; and though verification is hard to find, according to Parrot Head lore, he even sued a small family restaurant in Hawaii for using the name "Cheeseburger in Paradise," even though they came up with the name first. On the other hand, Buffett is also a best-selling author with seven books under his belt, and is widely known for his charitable work in preserving the Florida ecosystem, as well as creating an organization to save the manatee. Of course, none of this explains the man standing in front of me holding a drink and wearing a coconut bra—but then, the night is young.

ALL HAIL QUEEN PARROT

"Jeez, Parrot Heads sure take up a lot of space," I think as I deftly lumber through the drunken throng. I push my way toward the overhead banner in the back of the room emblazoned with the words "Parrot Heads of Puget Sound." These Puget Sound Parrot Heads are virtually indistinguishable from the others in the room, but I'm looking for one piece of apparel in particular: a big-ass parrot hat. And



then, like the beam of a lighthouse beckoning me home, I see it: towering a good foot over the crowd, it's the ceremonial headdress of the Queen Parrot.

This is a chapeau of truly baroque proportions; the base is an ordinary straw hat, encircled with faux flowers and tiny references to Buffet-mania—a surfboard key ring, a plastic cheeseburger (a nod to Buffett's "Cheeseburger in Paradise"), a tiny liquor bottle (a nod to getting loaded), and Mardi Gras necklaces (another nod to getting loaded). As we move upward from the base of the hat, there looms a giant stuffed parrot, majestically stretching toward the heavens. It too is decorated in feathered finery, adorned in Jimmy Buffet buttons and pictures and bound in streamers. At this height the oxygen grows too thin, and I am forced to turn back. However, from what I can make out, near the top is a black mask disguising the parrot's eyes (a nod to... okay, I'm stumped), and at the tippy-tip-top, a rain hat, ostensibly placed there to protect the parrot from the vagaries of Puget Sound weather.

And who better to be bedecked with such an ostentatious tribute to Jimmy Buffet than the president of the Parrot Heads of Puget Sound, the Queen Parrot herself, Sue Horsely. I introduce myself and am immediately welcomed into the group as if I had just returned from some damnable war, again showered with leis and kisses, which—believe you me—we reporters don't get all that often. Sometimes it's the smallest things that make one feel they truly belong—and in what I consider to be a stunning example of synchronicity, I notice that the Queen Parrot and I are wearing the exact same Hawaiian shirt. Not "kind of the same," but the EXACT same. For once this evening I feel at home, and breathe a rummy sigh of relief.

Sue is what anyone in their right mind would call a jolly sort. And I'm pretty sure it isn't because she's liquored up to the moon. She seems genuinely excited by the festivities as she organizes her flock of Parrot Heads, giving them tick-

ets, taking their money, and blithely tossing out directions to the can. Around her neck (along with leis, leis, and leis) is tied a license plate which reads "PAROTHEd," autographed by Sir Buffett himself.

After a few failed attempts to talk with Sue over the din, we excuse ourselves to a remote corner of the lounge so she can tell me how she came to occupy the lofty position of Queen Parrot Head.

IN THE BEGINNING...

Every state in our glorious union has at least one Parrot Head club. The founding father of the national Parrot Head organization is Scott Nickerson of Atlanta, who in 1989 noticed the throngs of tailgaters getting looped out of their gourds at every Jimmy Buffett concert, and decided then and there to organize this unruly mob into a force for the common good. Upon receiving the A-OK from Margaritaville Key West (Buffett's home office), Nickerson placed an ad to attract Buffett-lovers to a bi-weekly margarita happy hour at a local patio bar. As more people joined the fray, the group began participating in volunteer events for the Red Cross and Muscular Dystrophy.

The national Buffett newsletter published tales of the club's exploits, and fans across the country, starting with Dallas, New York City, Orlando, Detroit, and New Orleans, took up the holy mantle and started organizations of their own—each dedicated to the three pillars of a good Parrot Head tribe: community service, love of Jimmy Buffett's music, and last but not least... glug, glug, glug. By 1995, Parrot Heads in Paradise had grown to a worldwide membership of 15,000. Not a bad tribute to a musician with only one Top 10 hit.

WASTING AWAY IN MARGARITAVILLE?

"I've been a big Jimmy Buffett fan since 1979," Sue says as we sit in the corner lording over the Parrot rabble, sipping our tropical treats. "Every year since then I've been

to at least one concert, except last year when I missed it—but I'll make it up with two this year! Anyway, I joined up with a local club that wasn't really going anywhere. So instead of giving up the charter and letting it die, I said I would take it over, in '95. It only had five members then, and now we've got 50 members."

Though tonight's gathering may be party central, Sue is pretty damn adamant about letting me know that drinking fruity booze isn't the club's *raison d'être*. "For such a small club we've really accomplished a lot, community service-wise. We let our members choose a month of the year, and they decide what they want to do to help out the community. We went to a guy's house in Port Orchard who was dying of a brain tumor, and completely landscaped his yard. For years we've supported the Katharine Booth House [a battered women's shelter], Wolf Haven [which adopts and cares for stray wolves], Toys for Tots, and we've even adopted a road! We're all over.

"And these folks are the neatest group of people I've ever been with. There's something about community service and Jimmy Buffett that go together so well. A lot of people think that Jimmy Buffett means it's time to get drunk and puke, but we don't do that. I mean, we have our parties—and, believe me, we DO have parties—but it's like excess in control. I'm sensitive to the fact that we have recovering alcoholics in our group, and so we've really toned down the drinking." Sue shrugs. "It is the '90s after all."

Okay, I can agree with Sue's assertion that it is indeed the '90s, and it may be very possible that the Puget Sound Parrot Heads are perfect in every way. But a quick glimpse around the room casts doubt on the notion that Parrot Heads are a roaming gang of Mother Teresas who only occasionally partake in a widdle drinky-winky.

"Okay," Sue acquiesces, "there are the people who come

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because Jimmy Buffett is a party. There are those people who are like, 'We're gonna go out there, we're gonna get drunk, we're gonna get crazy, we're gonna puke our brains out, and we're gonna be hung-over for three years.' And then there are the Buffett fans who DO love Jimmy Buffett, but are looking for something more. With our group, the main attraction is meeting really incredible people. Nobody is obnoxious, nobody is out of control, and they all love doing community service work. Everybody looks for that endorphin that occurs after you make somebody else feel good, so we get the job done and head off to listen to Jimmy."

But the central question remains: why. Why, WHY of all people, Jimmy Buffett?? I mean, you don't see people going around delivering meals on wheels in the name of Ozzy Osbourne. You don't see people adopting homeless wolves, and then giving each other high-fives before saying, "Dude, ALL-RIGHT! Now let's kick back with a brew and some Night Ranger!" What is it that attracts people to this guy, who (and excuse me, but I really think I'm being generous here) is just a step away from being another novelty songwriter like Ray Stevens or Weird Al Yankovic?

Sue is quiet while she considers this, then turns away from the crowd of partyers behind her and speaks in a soft, almost fragile voice. "I don't know, it might sound funny, but Jimmy Buffett's music has really pulled me through a lot of crisis in my life. I remember after I had gotten divorced, a lot of bad things started happening. Then one day I heard his song 'Come Monday'—and I did-

n't even know who sang it. But the song meant something to me, because it goes, 'Come Monday, it'll be all right....' Like there was something better around the corner...."

Sue shrugs and looks over the crowd, then looks back at me.

"I mean, okay, he's not the best of

You ARE in the tropics, you're in Tahiti on the beach with a margarita, having a good day—in your mind."

Then, laughing, she motions at her outfit. "I mean, I don't normally dress up like this. See, it's all about cutting loose and letting go, even if it's just for one day. Of



"...WE WORK HARD FOR IT, MAN. WE DO A HELL OF A LOT OF COMMUNITY SERVICE. SO WE'RE NOT JUST DRUNK AND STUPID PEOPLE, WE'RE ACTUALLY PEOPLE WHO CARE — AS WELL AS BEING DRUNK AND STUPID."

singers, and he's not great-looking or anything, but he just has a way with words and a way of putting things that is so phenomenal. And it speaks to me. That's the only way I can explain it. He takes you places. Everybody wants to get away. Even though you're stuck here in the rainy Northwest, you pop in a Buffett tape and everything changes.

course it's not for everybody... but it's this way for me."

IN THE BELLY OF THE PARROT

Glancing down at her watch, Sue leaps up and says brightly, "Whoops! I'm late for my Corona party!" Like most concerts, the Jimmy Buffett show is sponsored by alco-

hol advertising—in this case, Corona beer—and Sue's been invited to their private party. But before leaving, she quickly introduces me to a few other Puget Sound Parrot Heads, who are more than willing to become my Buffett buddy for the night. And then, supporting her towering parrot hat with one hand and carrying a drink in the other, Sue whooshes off to meet the Corona elite, disappearing into the sodden throng. I turn around just in time to hear...

"He's a reporter?? Hey!! He's REPORTING on us, man! HELL!!! YEAH!"

I still don't know who said it. All I know is I'm surrounded by lushy beach bums and bumettes dressed to the tropical nines. Taking a deep breath, I ask, "Okay. Who's got some good anecdotes from a typical Parrot Head party?" A grizzled guy dressed as a pirate looks at me with bleary-eyed excitement. "Anecdotes? Ha! See that guy over there?" he says, sloshing a beer on my shoes and in the direction of a balding man 20 yards west. "That's Steve! He'll tell ya some party stories, man! Go ask Steve!" And, suddenly, as if caught in a rip tide, I'm swept across the room by the bums until I'm face-to-face with Steve. "Hey, Steve!" one of them yells, "This guy is a reporter! Tell him a funny story!" Steve looks at me and from two inches away screams at what must be the top of his lungs, "A STORY?? WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW??"

"Well (ahem)," I stammer, "I'm... uh... doing a story on the Parrot Heads? And they, uh, said you were the guy to talk to for..."

"FOR THE BULLSHIT?? BECAUSE I'M THE BULLSHIT MAN?? BABY, I AM THE BULLSHIT KING! HAA! HAA!"

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WHO? ME? NAAAAAAH, I'M JUST FOOLIN' YA! I'M JUST A HUMBLE, QUIET, MEEK AND MILD..."

Suddenly a girl in a bikini top passes by, and Steve spins around like Linda Blair's head...

"WHOOAAA! HEY GIRL!! WHERE YOU GOING?? YOU GOING TO PARTY?? TO PAR-TAY?? HA! HA! HAAAAAAA!!!"

And with that, Steve, the anecdote king, disappears into the crowd. "Hmhf. Good story," I think to myself. As the crowd joins together in a lusty sing-along of Buffett's ode to finding love in the bars, "Why Don't We Get Drunk (and Screw)," I am reminded: I need another drink. On the way to refill my Swabbie, I notice my photographer is being groped by an amputee with an inflatable parrot on his shoulder (the shoulder with an arm). I pause to make sure she can free herself (she does) and continue to the bar, where I run into Marc, a Parrot Head who is more low-key than Steve—but then, at this point, Don King would've been more low-key. Marc designs web pages for an online travel company, and has been a proud Parrot Head since 1984. This will be his 11th concert.

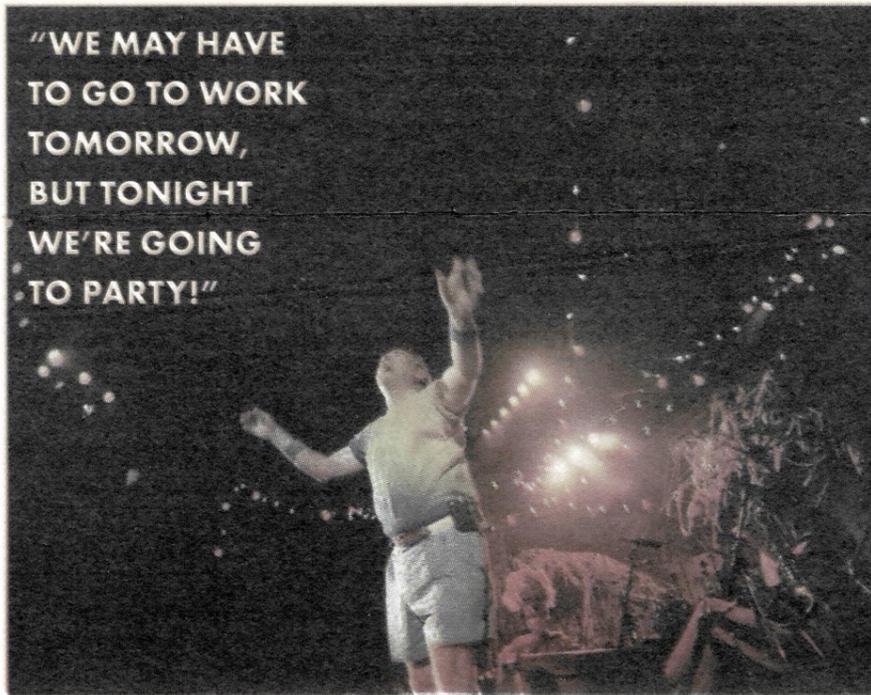
"The Parrot Heads have had a busy year, man!" he says jubilantly. "So when we go out, we party even more than we usually do. This year we're thinking about doubling up the meetings, so we can party and work, party and work, work and PARTY!"

Finally! An anecdote! "So what are Parrot Head parties like?" I ask him.

"Sometimes the parties are in a bar, but last year we had a HUGE party called 'Orcas Porkus,' out on Orcas Island, and we roasted a pig, man! We hired a steel drum band, camped overnight, and let me tell you,

it was a PARTY. But we work hard for it, man. We do a hell of a lot of community service. So we're not just drunk and stupid people, we're actually people who care—as well as being drunk and stupid."

Drunk and stupid people who care. Now there's a great bumper-sticker. It's almost



"WE MAY HAVE TO GO TO WORK TOMORROW, BUT TONIGHT WE'RE GOING TO PARTY!"

time to dash across the parking lot to the concert, so I slurp down my Swabbie and ask Marc what I can expect from tonight's performance.

"What you can expect," Marc beams, "is a guy onstage who loves what he's doing, and an audience of people who totally get into listening and participating in the songs.

The stories he tells are fun. Now, he's no Celine Dion or anything. He won't sit down and woo you with his singing voice. He's a storyteller. It's all about the palm trees and the sea, and it's about escaping. He'll surround you with the tropical attitude—if you're not there already."

MY PARADISE FOR A CHEESEBURGER

"Oh, God," I think to myself, "why didn't I eat?" It's pre-show inside the Tacoma Dome, and I'm staring dejectedly into an empty wallet. Liquor has always found a way to subvert my priorities, and look at me now: a sweaty drunk in a Hawaiian shirt

with low blood sugar, who's too stone-cold broke to buy a Dome dog. But everybody else is happy! Multiply the partyers in the Ramada Inn by 57 and you've got a pretty good idea what I'm up against. It takes a lot to stun me, but I just can't seem to figure it out. The Tacoma Dome is filled; 17,000 people are here to watch a rock show featuring a balding 50-year-old guy whose last hit record was in 1974. You do the math, because frankly, it's beyond me.

And these 17,000 people are hyped. Calypso music blasts through the sound system as drunk grass-skirt-wearing fans shake their bongos, and an amazing number of beach balls bounce around the auditorium at high speeds. I couldn't get an accurate count of the beach balls, but two of them rebound off my head within a 20-second period. It's like goddam Beirut in here! "Oh, God," I repeat, "why didn't I eat?"

At 8:00 p.m. sharp, a man on stilts enters the auditorium from backstage, followed by a midget, and begins shooting rolls of toilet paper over the crowd from a high-powered air gun. These two are followed by dancers in carnival-colored wigs and costumes, who are in turn followed by a marching steel drum band, who are then followed by a conga line of puppets that weave through the crowd, whipping everyone into a pre-Buffett frenzy. Onstage the curtain pulls back: here comes the man himself, Jimmy Buffett, riding in—on the hood of a pickup truck. Even in my grumpy state of food emergency, I have to admit: this guy knows how to throw a party.

It's too bad, then, that he doesn't know

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how to dress. Now, I'm all for people dressing comfortably while performing—but a yellow-and-green tie-dyed T-shirt and cargo shorts, with tiny white socks and sneakers? Please. As Buffett rifles through his hits, I'm amazed at all the songs I recognize, but even more amazed at how well he manipulates the crowd. He knows each and every nerve to touch in this auditorium teeming with the working class. "We may have to go to work tomorrow," he yells, "but tonight we're going to party!" Unlike many touring musicians, it's obvious he's done his homework about the town he's performing in, rattling off the names of nearby towns... and even pronouncing them correctly. On the huge overhead video screens, Buffett is shown visiting all the Seattle tourist hotspots: taking in the views off the Space Needle, kayaking in the Puget Sound, throwing fish at Pike Place Market. He's even shameless enough to include clips of Ken Griffey, Jr. hitting a home run and one of Detlef Schrempf's finer slam-dunks. Having successfully roused the hometown spirit, Buffett continues the show, confident they are eating right out of his hand.

Though I'm completely fascinated by this modern-day P.T. Barnum, my low blood sugar is getting the best of me, so while the band performs a limp version of "Brown-Eyed Girl" I slip away in a desperate search for an ATM. I walk around and around the labyrinth of the Tacoma Dome like a damned soul in hell, before I'm finally informed that the Dome's single cash machine is on the outside. My mood is not improved when I discover 30 people waiting in line to get cash. So I stand there, unmoving and silent, reverting to an old Star Trek trick where I "shut down all systems, except for life support." Inching ahead in line, I notice a black Tacoma Dome staff member by a nearby entrance, and muse that this kind of cornbread country-rock probably isn't his favorite concert of the year. At about that moment, a cornbread country-rock Buffett fan who had been drunkenly milling about approaches him and says something I can only hope he later regrets: "Hey, buddy!" he says as the strains of "Changes in Attitude" waft through the walls. "This ain't Motown, but this is pretty good shit, huh?"

Whoopsy!

The staff member exhales a tired sigh, looks him dead in the eye, and says, "Man, you're stereotyping me." A stunned realization slowly spreads onto Cornbread's face—and while being very dumb, he was smart enough to know when to backpedal.

"Uhhhh... no, man! I ain't stereotyping you! I just mean you like Motown, and I like Jimmy Buffett... and Van Morrison... and... and... hmmm." Cornbread realizes the hole he's dug is far too deep, and finally, wisely, cut his losses by slinking away, tail tucked firmly between his legs.

Finally arriving at the ATM, I put all systems back on line, grab my money, and dash to the nearest food vendor. Even in my weakened state, the menu isn't exactly appetizing: the hotdogs are bathing in their own waste. I can hear Jimmy singing his tummy-tempting hit, "Cheeseburger in Paradise"—but the Tacoma Dome is a loooong way from Paradise. So I buy a Gardenburger (I know... no one is more shocked than me) and devour it like a horse eats oats.

Back at my seat, I'm feeling better, and

don't even mind when some boor a few rows back starts spraying beer over the crowd—in fact, I'm not convinced it's not part of the show. The crowd has been mesmerized by the feel-good performance, and when Buffett sings another classic, "Fins," they are only too happy to put their hands on top of their heads (like a shark's fin, get it?) and sway left and right. Like fans of the Rocky Horror Picture Show, Parrot Heads pass down their legacy from generation to generation.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

After three hours (!) the show finally reaches its conclusion—and frankly, I'm exhausted. Apparently, however, Parrot

Heads never sleep, and I'm invited to meet them back at the Ramada Inn for a night-cap. As expected, the mood there is post-orgasmic, and definitely calmer. The gang sits around tables, slowly sipping their drinks (for a change!) and swapping highlights of the evening's performance. All agree it was terrific, and they smile at each other as if there is no place on earth they'd rather be.

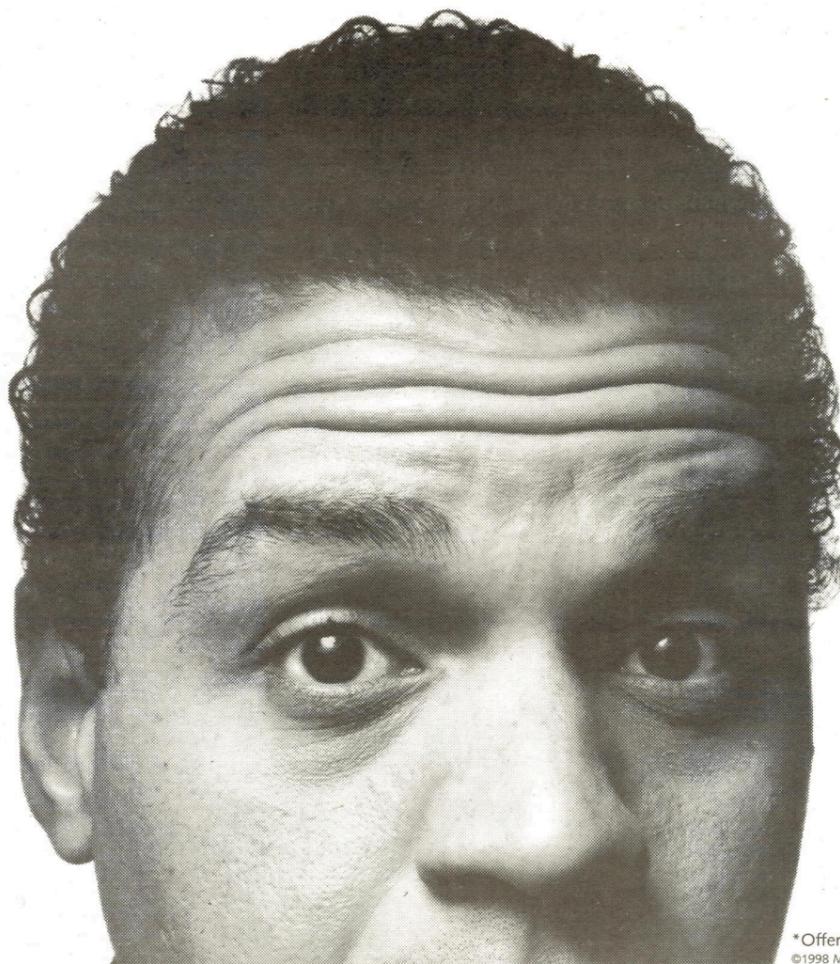
That's when I'm surprised by my moment of lucidity. A gust of warm air floats in through an open window, and I'm reminded of that trip I took to the Bahamas with the person I loved; we sat on the beach watching the palm trees sway, feeling the

warm salt air on our skin as the sun settled into the ocean. It feels as though you've suddenly been given permission to climb down off your ass for a second and take a break. It's all about the place you really want to be; and as I look around the room, I see the people who have found it. Okay, so Jimmy Buffett isn't Celine Dion. But he makes people feel like they're in a warm, safe place—and if you need to wear a coconut bra to feel that way, it's fine with me. ■

For information on joining the Parrot Heads of Puget Sound, write 5859 Pleasure Point Lane, Bellevue, WA 98006, or email Sue at calypsue@nwlinc.com.

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