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Was Jimmy Buffett the greatest enigma in modern music?

Despite only having a handful of songs to appear on the Top 40 charts, he played to adoring fans who packed arenas and amphitheaters for decades. His "Parrot Head" followers anxiously waited for each album he delivered.

Was his music country or folk? Since no one could decide, a new genre was created — trop rock.

While most musicians depend on record sales and concert tickets to survive, Buffett became one of the richest entertainers in America thanks to his "Margaritaville" stamp on restaurants, bars, casinos, media channels, clothing, novels and even "lifestyle" resorts like the one under construction in Orange Beach.

Although he admitted he only knew a few chords on the guitar, his imaginative lyrics produced songs his supporters know by heart. He was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in the Musical Excellence category.

With his untimely death in 2023, most people would assume Buffett's fans would hang up their grass shirts, fold away their floral shirts and finish one last margarita before saying farewell.

Instead, his Coral Reefer Band continues to perform, and his fans still flock together to remember him. Both of these things happen this week, with the 33rd annual Meeting of the Minds (MOTM) convention in Baldwin County.

BAMA BREEZE

Parrot Heads in Paradise is the official Buffett fan club. They have almost 200 sanctioned clubs and more than 20,000 members worldwide.

The three co-chairs of MOTM — Peter Ferralli, Suzanne Calhoun and Colleen Fuchs — recently spoke with Lagniappe about Buffett's legacy and why so many people will be gathering to celebrate their love of music, community and giving back this week.

"He built an amazing following and lifestyle. He built a camaraderie among people unparalleled for any mission," Calhoun said. "We have 186 clubs in four countries. This is a big family reunion as well as a convention."

The initial six MOTMs took place in New Orleans. It eventually spent many years in Key West, Florida. However, the cost of hosting on the southern tip of the U.S. became an issue.

"We did our research, and Gulf Shores was an area that Jimmy spent a lot of time in. It is representative of his lifestyle," Ferralli said. "Moving here was a great choice. We have a lot of support from the city, the convention center and the people of Alabama."

The group said the biggest change this year from years past is the introduction of single-day passes and event passes. They can be purchased starting Thursday at the registration table at The Hangout.

"We are first, all huge Jimmy Buffett fans, and fans of his music, but it goes so much deeper than that," Fuchs said. "MOTM is a family reunion. It's about connection, community and celebrating the shared spirit of Jimmy Buffett and what he inspired in all of us."

Also taking place on Friday is the "Keep the Party Going" concert featuring the Coral Reefer Band at The Wharf Amphitheater starting at 7:30 p.m. Most of Buffett's former musicians are scheduled to appear, including Mobile's own Will Kimbrough.

"Jimmy Buffett's spirit lives on in our laid-back coastal Alabama communities he loved," Michelle Russ, vice president of sales at Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Tourism, said. "Jimmy embodied authenticity and philanthropy, and the Meeting of the Minds is a great tribute to his work."

Russ said 5,947 room nights and \$3.22 million in economic impact for Gulf Shores and Orange Beach were directly attributed to MOTM in 2024. The co-chairs said about 2,500 people attended the convention that year.

PARTY WITH A PURPOSE

Some people may think MOTM is just a chance to put on tropical beach attire and drink rum cocktails. However, making an impact on communities is a mission Buffett himself supported.

"We donate to local charities by having raffles and auctions," Calhoun said. "We also do scholarships for members' children."

"We donate to the Bras Across the Causeway program, which supports breast cancer patients. We'll have an event at LuLu's and then go to the Flora-Bama to put up decorated bras."

The "Skip, Sip and Party" event at LuLu's will include a 5K run and a second-line tribute to Buffett on Saturday. The gathering at the Flora-



Bama is set for Sunday.

There were two blood donation opportunities last year. Approximately 130 pints that were collected all stayed in Baldwin County. This year, the blood drive will be at The Hangout.

In 2024 alone, the Parrot Heads in Paradise raised \$21,405 to support breast cancer patients and donated thousands more to local and national causes. One of the special charities they support is Singing for Change.

"Jimmy and Judith Ranger Smith started this to help communities that had programs that need assistance," Calhoun said. "Part of his concert tickets donated a percentage. We will give \$2 from our convention fees [from each ticket] to the program."

Other entities that will benefit from the MOTM gathering are the Gulf Coast Zoo, Christian Service Center in Gulf Shores, Special Operations Warrior Foundation and the South Baldwin Community Theatre.

On the agenda is a special Coral Reefer show featuring Peter, Jim and Brendan Mayer at the South Baldwin Community Theatre on Thursday at 3 p.m. Proceeds will benefit the Lone Palm Foundation, which is the charitable arm of Parrot Heads in Paradise.

"One of the cool things of being with our clubs is that we do 'Party with a Purpose,'" Calhoun said. "Since 2002, we've donated \$65 million to local charities and contributed 5,500,000 community service hours."

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Buffett's impact continues to resonate along the northern Gulf Coast. The Son of a Sailor Fest recently brought a large crowd to Mobile for a second year. The gathering helps to benefit marine research and education initiatives of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab Foundation.

While Buffett was born in Pascagoula, Mississippi, he spent most of his formative years in Mobile. The Gulf Coast always remained a part of his journeys. He came back in 1998 for a benefit show in Mobile for hurricane victims. His massively successful beach concert in Gulf Shores in 2010, following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, laid the groundwork for the current Hangout Festival.

Mobile has certainly not forgotten the generosity. Back on Sept. 18, Mayor Sandy Stimpson shared this in his nightly newsletter:

"I am proud to announce the city of Mobile and members of the Buffett family have selected the sculptor who will create a lifelike statue of Jimmy Buffett on our downtown riverfront," the mayor wrote. "The 7.5-foot-tall statue will depict the iconic singer and coastal Alabama native in a classic pose, playing his guitar and gazing out over the water that inspired him during his early life and career. The sculpture is scheduled to be unveiled in September 2026 on the city's downtown waterfront outside the National Maritime Museum of the Gulf."

Stimpson said sculptor Ben Victor was selected for the project. The mayor also thanked Museum Executive Director Karen Poth for doing an exceptional job on the immersive exhibit coming to the Maritime Museum, showcasing Buffett's life and musical career. Poth spoke about the project with Lagniappe.

Q: Why do you think Buffett is still making an impact even after his death?

A: Jimmy wrote and recorded more than 50 albums in his career. There are so many wonderful songs, and many of them became the soundtrack of the summer for residents and visitors of the Gulf Coast. That will never go away. Many of the phrases in his songs have become part of our culture. (It's 5:00 somewhere!)

The main themes of the exhibition will address how the Gulf Coast, specifically Pascagoula, Mobile, NOLA and Key West, all gave Jimmy his identity and supplied endless content for his songs. But in turn, Jimmy gave the Gulf Coast our identity by bringing our laid-back, coastal lifestyle to the world through his songs.

Q: Can you discuss the city's response in the wake of the Son of a Sailor (SOS) Fest?

A: The event was very successful. I understand we had more than 2,500 people attend. In an email after the event, Patty Kiefer from Visit Mobile said, "This event is certainly part of a bigger picture in Mobile and soon the world will see how we really are 'Born to celebrate!'"

Thanks to Joseph Brennan and the SOS committee. Your insight and tenacity helped make SOS a premier event in Mobile!

I think the city is proud of this event and they intend to have it be a part of Septembers in Mobile for a long time. Next year, the plan is to open the exhibition and unveil the statue on the same weekend as the SOS Fest. With any luck, Cooper Riverside Park will be complete by then, and we can hold the entire event on the riverfront.

Q: Can you discuss the future plans for the exhibit going up at your museum and plans for the statue?

A: Both the exhibition and the statue will be unveiled in September 2026. The exhibition will be a 6,000-square-foot permanent installation in the museum filled with rare artifacts and never-before-seen footage and photos.

The "Jimmy Buffett: Son of a Son of a Sailor Experience" invites guests into Jimmy's soul. Not just the performer, but the writer, entrepreneur, adventurer and cultural architect. This isn't a museum exhibit. It's a warm breeze of memory and meaning, where every detail — from scent and sound to storytelling and design — unfolds like a lost lyric, evoking the life he lived and lives he touched.

Through intentional curation, multisensory moments and layered storytelling, the experience becomes a living tribute to the man who taught the world how to chase the sun and find joy in the journey.

THE CRAZY SISTA

Lucy Buffett has used her childhood nickname, LuLu, as the brand for her successful chain of restaurants. She was kind enough to speak to Lagniappe about her big brother.

Q: Considering the popularity of the Son of a Sailor Fest and the upcoming MOTM convention, why do you think Jimmy continues to make such a strong impact after his death?

A: I think it is a continuation of the impact he made while alive. He touched millions of people in a very deep way for 50 years. That's because he was a hard worker and enjoyed touring. His music had mythic, joyful themes and he made his fans feel like a special community who had the inside scoop on him. They are continuing to honor his legacy in the same way he taught so many of us how to enjoy life.

When you can continue singing along with him in your car or on your back deck, it feels like he is still here. And it keeps all the wonderful memories fresh and alive. I also think that Jimmy's spirit of positivity — of "Breathe In, Breathe Out, Move On" — is such a salve for everyone's grief. When you mix laughter, kindness and the water we grew up on, it sticks. That's why folks keep showing up for him and each other."

Q: Could you also share any details about the future of the exhibit going up in Mobile?

A: The Jimmy Buffett Experience at the National Maritime Museum is going to be a beautiful, interactive tribute to Jimmy's music, life and connection to the Gulf Coast. It's designed to feel alive and welcoming, just like he would have wanted. Karen Poth has put together a wonderful team, along with the city of Mobile, committed to making this exhibit truly special.

The city is also moving forward with a 7.5-foot statue on the waterfront outside the Maritime Museum, looking over where our parents worked at the shipyard and beyond to the water that inspired so many of his songs and adventures.

Q: Is there anything else he would like to add?

A: Only this: Jimmy's legacy is a living thing. It's festivals like Son of a Sailor lifting local causes, it's Parrot Heads bringing Meeting of the Minds to Gulf Shores and it's our restaurants, musicians and hometown museums telling the stories of the coast. If we keep singing, laughing and giving back, then we're doing exactly what he would have wanted. He wanted us to keep the party going — not for him but for us. He wanted us to make sure we put a little fun in our lives.