



GRAYDON'S
BACK-AND
HOLLYWOOD
'S STILL GOT
HIM



STARS RISE,
STARS SET



MASTERS OF
ARTS

CULTURE

Escapism Empire

by KELLY LAFFEY

Photographed by JENNY ANDERSON AND MATTHEW MURPHY

THURSDAY, MARCH 15, 2018



Jimmy Buffett at the box office opening for *Escape to Margaritaville*

In 1977, Jimmy Buffett first told his growing legion of fans—they weren't yet referred to as Parrotheads—that changes in latitudes bring changes in attitudes.



**ON THE AVENUE
OUT AT HOME**

STYLE



SUBSCRIBE

24.5551° N (Key West). It's the same one that launched his decades-plus musical career. And he has a lot more to show for it than a brand new tattoo.

“For somebody who has a fun job, I take it very seriously,” the part-time New Yorker says of his commitment to bringing fans his signature brand of island escapism, even though it means he has less time to channel those vibes on his own. Buffett is a master raconteur; his song lyrics and Margaritaville-branded business ventures weaving total relaxation into fans’ day-to-day lives. With restaurants, resorts, a radio station and a soon-to-be-opened retirement village, the Margaritaville collection is ever expanding. And, as of Thursday, March 15, it includes a Broadway show.

Escape to Margaritaville (more than a musical, it’s a way of life) opens tonight at the Marquis Theatre.

“If you’re a fan of *Margaritaville*, you’re living it now. You know the characters that live in Margaritaville,” says Buffett. “But before, it was a song and you’d go down there mentally. Now there are people that actually live there and work in a bar. That’s an interesting thing to me, and I just love it.”



Lisa Howard, Alison Luff, Paul Alexander Nolan and Eric Petersen in *Escape to Margaritaville*

Buffett's interest in theater stems from a childhood on the Gulf Coast, where his mother would take him to shows. Part of Broadway's allure was that it runs through New York. "In my attempt to make it in that other job I have," he begins, referring, of course, to strumming his six-string, "New York was very much a conquest. Because you could go around the rest of the country and do well, but New York validates what you do as a performer." As he worked to make inroads into Manhattan's music scene, he was "always wanting to see shows," he says. "I was always entertained by musical theater."

Now, of course, New York is just another fruitcake city. (For fans of the song *Fruitcakes*, Buffett confirms that he prefers Junior Mints over a 12-pound Nestlé Crunch at the movies.) His popularity has long gone international, the Parrotheads having taken over stadium parking lots since 1985, after Coral Reefers band member Timothy Schmidt coined the term at a concert in Cincinnati.

Escape was set into motion when producer friends approached Buffett and said, "we think there is a great musical with just your songs," he recalls. They had seen his previous production, *Don't Stop the Carnival*, which he worked on 18 years ago with writer Herman Wouk, but it didn't make it to Broadway. "I learned a lot

Fins, Volcano, A Pirate Looks at Forty, Cheeseburger in Paradise, Why Don't We Get Drunk and Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes. All are Buffett staples. "I think there's something like 12 songs that I have to play [during concerts], or I get booed," laughs Buffett. "It's not my job to get tired of these songs," he continues. "I'm lucky enough to have the opportunity that people like [them] so much. They never get tired of them, so why should I?"

Escape to Margaritaville was produced with much the same carefree spirit. This will not be your typical Broadway production. It's a high-energy reprise of Buffett favorites as well as new songs he wrote, played in an inviting atmosphere that encourages sing-alongs.



Andre Ward in *Escape to Margaritaville*

Buffett first and foremost wants *Escape* to bring his visions of Margaritaville to life. Two things he insisted on were "authenticity in the writers, and a live band on stage," says Buffett. "I've seen a lot of shows, and I didn't see any way you could do *Margaritaville* without it being set on an island in a bar. [And, I knew] it should be about a singer, because I had lived that life."

rewritten for the characters was both fun and interesting,” says Buffett. A few nights ago in New York, the crowd “wasn’t full of Parrotheads,” he recalls. “But by the end of it, they were on their feet, stomping and yelling. And they all had perpetual smiles on their faces. It’s interesting to me to see these old songs have a whole new live life in the show.”

To achieve a heaven on earth (with an onion slice) level of success, Buffett tapped writers Greg Garcia of *My Name is Earl* fame, and Mike O’Malley of *Shameless* and *Survivor’s Remorse*, to write the book. “The critical thing was they were fans before they became successful comedy writers,” says Buffett. “They knew the material from heart. It wasn’t somebody doing an imitation of me.” Directing the production is Christopher Ashley, fresh off his 2017 Tony for Best Direction of a Musical with *Come from Away*. Choreography is by Tony award nominee Kelly Devine.

The show follows Tully Mars, a former cowboy from Montana turned island singer/songwriter that Buffett invented in his book of short stories *Tales from Margaritaville* 29 years ago but has long insisted isn’t autobiographical. Mars is enjoying the bachelor life at Margaritaville, a funky but run-down Caribbean resort, when he falls for a vacationer named Rachel. She came down from Cincinnati for a last hurrah with her engaged friend Tammy. Mars is surprised to find himself falling in love, and the musical comedy follows their adventures—where will they go after the island’s volcano blows?



Alison Luff and Paul Alexander Nolan in *Escape to Margaritaville*

“Mars has always been a planet I’ve been interested in,” says Buffett of the name. “Tully? I have no idea where I came up with that.” The name means peaceful. If the previews are any indication, the dynamic experience will not evoke outer peace. But like most of Buffett’s songs, the musical will give audience members a tequila-induced type of inner peace, the kind that makes you forget that, just a few hours ago, your workday was passing like molasses in wintertime.

Though he now refers to people like Warren Buffett (“we’re almost related”), Herman Wouk and the late Walter Cronkite as friends and mentors, there was a time where Buffett lived that “it’s 5 o’clock somewhere” life. He arrived in Nashville in 1969, releasing his first album, *Down to Earth*, to little notice in 1970. Though he was signed to a two-record deal, his label Barnaby Records famously claimed to have lost the tapes for his second album. They found and released it decades later, when Jimmy Buffett had become Jimmy Buffett.

In a move that would shape his career, Buffett soon retreated to Key West because, “I wanted to get out of the cold,” he says.

There, he achieved a modicum of success with his next two albums—this time under ABC-Dunhill, also based out of Nashville. He recorded his first chart singles, including *The Great Filling Station Holdup*, *Grapefruit-Juicy Fruit*, *Pencil Thin*

and *Pink Crustacean* earned him a roughly \$30,000 advance, he recalls. “We did the album in three days, and spent \$15,000. I paid my taxes, I paid off my student loans, and bought a little 13-foot Boston whaler that I could [use to] get off the island,” says Buffett of finally feeling like he had a toe-hold in the music industry. “From there, I always learned to treat myself well when the time was right. Rewarding yourself is not a bad thing.”

Neither is betting on yourself. Four years later, while living and working out of Key West, the song *Margaritaville* was born. It soon became Buffett’s highest charting solo single and was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2016 for its cultural and historic significance.

“I was living and working out of Key West and was on tour in Texas,” Buffett begins of his inspiration for the song. “I was having a margarita at a bar with a friend before I went back [home], and it came to me. I never thought about having to explain [the meaning behind] *Margaritaville* when I wrote it. It was just something that fit the mood in the moment, when I was inspired by a really good-tasting margarita at lunch in Austin.”

Sensing a hit, Buffett also licensed *Margaritaville*® in 1977 and with it, the beginnings of his Escapism Empire. The decision eventually gave him a license to chill, not that Buffett takes full advantage. “If you think about it, [music] is one of the few professions that you can still keep going,” he says. He’ll again leave for a [tour](#), this one titled *Son of a Son of a Sailor* in honor of the song’s 40th anniversary, just two weeks after *Escape* opens. And, “after we get this ship [*Escape to Margaritaville*] launched, the next thing for me is to go back and finish a book I’ve been working on.” He already has the character’s name—Georgia Venus.

Working on *Escape* has been a five year process, with Buffett noting that they only “froze the show [this weekend].” But that

From the beaches of Key West to Broadway, it's true that nothing remains quite the same. But, as the musical romantic comedy will prove tonight, with all of our running and all of our cunning, if we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane.

MORE FROM CULTURE



**WHERE'S YOUR
JANUARY AVENUE?**

Shhhhh, we're getting a facelift!

ON THE AVENUE



**THE KIDS ARE JUST
RIGHT**

Where to find special clothes and gifts for very special children (and for you, too!)

SHOP



WONDERFUL WORLD OF COLOR

The brand's new boutique on Madison Avenue is a kaleidoscopic shopping fantasy

by *BARBARA HODES AND NYC PRIVATE SHOPPING TOUR*

Photographed by BARBARA HODES AND MARNI

ON THE LIST

ABOUT

ADVERTISERS

CURRENT ISSUE

ISSUE ARCHIVES

CONTACT

