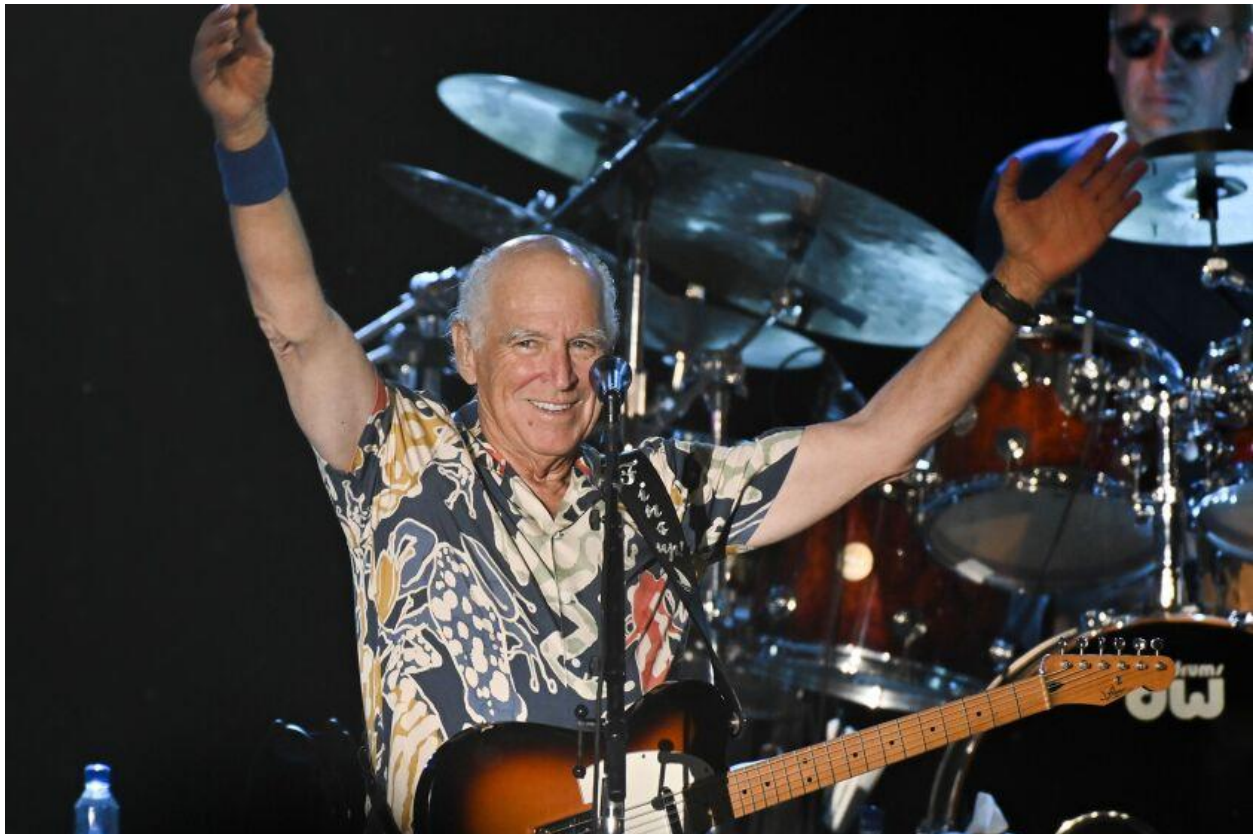


Chicago Sun Times

Thank you, Jimmy Buffett, for humanizing our flaws while strummin' your six string in 'Margaritaville'

By David McGrath Sept 11, 2023, 7:15pm EDT



Jimmy Buffett thanks the capacity crowd at the Coffee Butler Amphitheater on Feb. 9 during a string of four shows in Key West, Florida. Rob O'Neal/The Key West Citizen via AP

“A popular belief is that altered cognitive processing, whether from sleep, insanity, or alcohol use, sparks creativity among artists, composers, writers, and problem-solvers.” — Psychology Today, April 12, 2012.

I loved Jimmy Buffett’s hit song “Margaritaville.”

Of course, it’s because I was a drinker. And I assume that many of the 20 million Americans who have bought the record since it was first recorded in 1977, making it a multi-platinum mega-hit, were also drinkers.

In fact, the National Institutes of Health states that 30 million Americans have AUD, or Alcohol Use Disorder; so, my assumption can’t be far off.

Singer and songwriter Jimmy “Bubba” Buffett died Sept. 1 at 76 of Merkel-cell skin cancer.

We loved the artist, and we loved his iconic song, because it made drinkers feel like heroes.

I don't mean hero in the sense of Superman or Sully Sullenberger or Babe Ruth. Instead, Buffett romanticized people with AUD as *tragic* heroes, examples of which might be Macbeth or Kurt Cobain or the character Rick Blaine portrayed by Humphrey Bogart in "Casablanca." Yes, they experienced failure, or tragic downfalls. But they were spectacularly cool, lyrical and admired in the process.

Likewise, "Margaritaville," the song which made Buffett a billionaire, is the story of the unfulfilled, aimless existence of a failed musician in the Florida Keys, who has nothing concrete to show for his life except a new tattoo.

But the heroic elements, which Buffett ingeniously accentuated with his voice, melody and tone, mainly derive from the poignant details enumerated in the song, including lost love ("some people say there's a woman to blame"); the hero's noble acceptance of blame ("my own damn fault"); his insouciance and humor in the face of the pain ("brand new tattoo"); and his bravery in withstanding the depression, and soldiering ahead with the help of the "frozen concoction that helps him hang on."

Buffett hit upon a winning formula that combines Earnest Hemingway's "grace under pressure" philosophy, with the "blackout drunk" mission statement of college fraternities nationwide, turning it into a half-billion-dollar conglomerate of music, books, hotels, t-shirts and tequila.

I don't mean to imply that Jimmy Buffett was an enabler. On the contrary, he was more like a therapist, bringing together thousands of drinkers to sing, celebrate and relieve the loneliness, wistfulness and sadness symptomatic of AUD. His concerts qualified as some of the largest outdoor AA meetings ever assembled, absent the abstinence.

Nor is Buffett's story of success a unique phenomenon. Psychologists have acknowledged a potential association between creativity and moderate alcohol use. Some famous works of art by the likes of Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Vincent van Gogh, and Tennessee Williams, among others, were purportedly conceived with the help of boozy concoctions, frozen or otherwise. Which may also apply to "Margaritaville," which Buffett confirmed as being mostly autobiographical, though he severely curtailed his drinking in the latter half of his life.

Buffett was a gifted artist and a skilled musician, who tapped into the "morning after" syndrome of pain, regret and longing, familiar to everyone who's ever been hungover, and I should know. Thank you, "Son of a Son of a Sailor," and farewell.

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