

**A GOOD LIFE ALL THE WAY**

**By**

**Ryan White**

*For Stella*

*Dream big.*

**Member Burnett:** How many planes do you own right now?

**Mr. Buffett:** Four. A couple of—one for business. Two for business. And the others just for kind of fun.

**Member Reid:** Do you fly all those?

**Mr. Buffett:** I fly a seaplane. I fly the jet. I fly a Pilatus. We don't have the big plane anymore. The plane that was involved in the Jamaica thing is on a static display in Orlando at our restaurant.

**Member Burnett:** My last question for you, sir, looking at your corporate chart and the success that you have had with Margaritaville, and it clearly is extensive, I think you mentioned or your attorney mentioned that you wrote the song in 1977. When you wrote that song did you have any idea what it would become?

**Mr. Buffett:** It's been a pretty good song. No, it was written in five minutes about a hot day in Austin, Texas with a margarita and with a beautiful woman. I finished it in Key West. I had no idea.

*--From the testimony of James William Buffett, chairman of the board, Margaritaville Holdings, before the Nevada State Gaming Control Board, March 7, 2012*



## Chapter 1

### Once Upon a Time in Key West

Capt. Tony's Saloon, at 428 Greene St., Key West, Fla., was once an icehouse, and then a morgue. Actually, it was an icehouse and a morgue simultaneously, because that's a smart use of resources on a little island.

By the time the *U.S.S. Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor in 1898, the building had become a telegraph station—the first to receive the news, and from there it moved to the rest of the nation. They say the tree growing up through the bar these days was the hanging tree, from which sixteen pirates and one murderous woman (in a blue dress) met their end—but they say a lot of things in the tropics. “It was the base of the mast for the DeForest Wireless Telegraph install in 1905-1906,” Monroe County historian Tom Hambright says. Capt. Tony Terracino, who died in 2008 at the age of 92, did enjoy mixing his facts and his fictions.

For a while, the building was a cigar factory. But for the most part, 428 Greene has been home to bars—a whole bunch of bars: legal and illegal, gay and not specifically, and all manner in between. Now, as it was in the beginning, Capt. Tony's is a place to cool off.

Sloppy Joe Russell opened Sloppy Joe's there in 1933. Hemingway drank there back before where Hemingway drank meant much to the bottom line. Aside from his tab, anyway. No one had thought to put him on a T-shirt. And T-shirts in general, while popular on the shrimp docks and in the bars, hadn't been turned into a business plan because there weren't enough tourists to keep a T-shirt operation in the black.

In 1937, the building's owner tried to raise Joe's rent from \$3-a-week to \$4-a-week. Disinclined to pay such an outlandish amount, he moved Sloppy Joe's a block up the street to the corner of Greene and Duval.

Anthony Terracino arrived in Key West in 1948 and for the same reason so many have landed in Key West over the years. He was running away. Specifically, he needed to put some distance between himself and the gangsters who'd left him for dead in a New Jersey dump. In 1958, he bought 428 Greene from David Wolkowsky, whose grandfather had opened a store in Key West in 1880s and begun collecting properties David would spend much of his life managing, renovating, and enjoying.

[[Insert Photo 1]]

Capt. Tony would, over the years, build a resume like a *Dos Equis* ad: saloon proprietor, bootlegger, gunrunner, raconteur, lothario. "All you need in life is a tremendous sex drive and a great ego, brains don't mean a shit," he liked to say. And so when people figured out you *could* move a lot of T-shirts, they put that slogan on Capt. Tony's T-shirts. Then they put it on posters. The beer koozies say "Oldest Bar in Florida."

Capt. Tony's was the hangout at the dawn of the seventies, one of them at least. Novelist and poet Jim Harrison was there many nights, working out alongside his friend and fellow writer Tom McGuane. They'd gone to Michigan State University together and so Harrison would hit town and crash at McGuane's place on Anne Street.

Tom Corcoran was a kid from Shaker Heights, Ohio just out of the Navy, six-feet-five, fit, fresh-faced and not as innocent as he looked working a taco cart on the street.

“What are you doing?” Harrison said to Corcoran one night on the street, giving him a good look over.

“Selling tacos,” Corcoran said.

“I can see that. Are you a poet or something?”

Corcoran said he was indeed a writer, and he eventually showed Harrison some poems and lyrics. Harrison asked Corcoran to send six of his pieces up to Michigan, where Harrison was planning on publishing a journal of poems. Corcoran never sent them. He still has them marked in a folder and kicks at the memory, but he had a taco cart in Key West at the time. He was busy.

The Navy sent Corcoran to Key West, in 1968. Not long after he left the service in 1969, he headed north to Montreal for a few days, and then south until he ran out of money around Ft. Lauderdale. He got a job digging ditches and slept on the floor of an ex-girlfriend’s apartment. He’d hoped for more than the floor, but ditch diggers can’t be choosers. As soon as he got his first paycheck, he dropped the shovel and pointed himself further south to where U.S. 1 runs out near the ocean. It was winter 1969. It was cold as hell in Ohio when he walked into Capt. Tony’s Saloon. “And I thought, *Shit, this is exactly what I need,*” Corcoran says.

He eventually landed in a second-floor apartment in a former cigar factory that’s now the Simonton Court Hotel. He kicked around and weighed his options for a couple of weeks before he called Boston and told his girlfriend Judy she should quit her perfectly good job in at an advertising agency and join him on an island closer to Cuba than Miami. And she did just that. Before long, she was working at Capt. Tony’s and Tom had the taco cart and Harrison had a little piece of a novel.

“When the blond one whose name was Judy bent over the cooler to get our beer we were cleanly mooned,” Harrison wrote in 1973’s *A Good Day to Die*. “Polka-dot panties. But I knew she was hopeless because she lived with a rather affable freak who sold tacos from a pushcart.”

Harrison’s narrator was sitting at the bar in Capt. Tony’s, and that was Judy and Tom and that is how the southernmost city in the continental United States collected people to play together and inspire one another in the shadow of Hemingway’s mythology.

Most of the crowd was literary; some were painters or potters. But there weren’t a lot of people, period, and no musicians to speak of. Sometimes Jerry Jeff Walker, who was living on Summerland Key, would roar into town drunk at the wheel of a red Corvette convertible he bought with “Mr. Bojangles” money—maybe most of the “Mr. Bojangles” money at that point. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band had only recently made it a top-ten hit.

Short on pocket change, Jerry Jeff would play the song for cash in the bar to people who probably didn’t even know he’d written it. “And he’d sit there and sing it and I’d go, ‘Mother of God, I’m sitting here listening to Jerry Jeff Walker sing ‘Mr. Bojangles,’” Corcoran says. “So I introduced myself. And of course everyone liked to hang around with Judy.” (See also: panties, polka-dot.)

Sometime around the spring of 1970, and allegedly at the request of sheriff Bobby Brown, Walker relocated near Miami, to the bohemian enclave of Coconut Grove. Teresa Clark—a bartender at Sloppy Joe’s everyone called Murphy—joined him. Corcoran visited once. He remembers a lot of sangria and a terrible hangover.

Up in America, the story was unease. Peace and love were history. The headlines read Vietnam—and then into Cambodia we went. Charles Manson and his family went on trial. Four were killed and nine wounded at Kent State. The Beatles broke up.

Down in the tropics, the living was easy—a good time for all the right people who had found the right place at the right time. In Key West, there were sentences to craft, and brush strokes to perfect. There were tarpon and bonefish to hunt. The drugs were plentiful and the sex wouldn't kill you. America's malaise hadn't made it to the end of U.S. 1 and neither had the tourists. Much to the dismay of civic leaders.

On May 7, 1971 the *Key West Citizen* relayed the news from the Monroe County Advertising Commission's meeting in Marathon at the King's Villa and Restaurant: "The commission has contracted for a billboard at Disney World which will be located between the exhibition gate and main gate ... This brings the total of Monroe County advertising billboards throughout the state to 40."

The cost of the billboards was \$140-per-month, 12-month lease with an option to renew. In February 1971, peak season, Homestead, Florida had registered 7,204 visitors heading south toward the Overseas Highway. The Florida Keys needed to bump that number. They were running out of viable—or at least legal—business options.

Not a week after that story, the front page of the *Citizen* announced cuts to city services in the name of austerity. For ninety days, the only purchases Key West could make would be emergency purchases.

Not that civic austerity was much of concern in the Old Anchor Inn (a.k.a. The Snake Pit). Nor in Captain Tony's, or Crazy Ophelia's Café, or Howie's Lounge or anywhere else where the locals, scraping by anyway, could always scrape together enough for the emergency purchase of another round.

Tom and Judy got married and moved to Grinnell Street. They had a son, Sebastian. Tom went to work bartending at the Chart Room, where the sheriff who ran Jerry Jeff to Coconut

Grove would drink alongside treasure hunters who hung out with dope smugglers who knew the shrimpers who didn't kick the shit out of the artists.

Spring gave way to summer. Hurricane season arrived and, before it came to an end, was joined by election season. Key West needed to pick a mayor. The sewer system was one big issue. The Conch Train, the rattling choo-choo—a “tourist toy,” as Shel Silverstein would later describe it—that roams the streets of Key West guiding visitors through island lore, was another. Should the city buy the tour company? Shouldn't the city fix any number of other problems first? Like maybe the streets the Conch Train runs on? Didn't matter in the end. The city couldn't get the \$300,000 in financing, anyway. The Conch Train wasn't an emergency.

Charles “Sonny” McCoy won the election. The Chamber of Commerce's cruise ship committee launched a fundraising drive to pay for entertainment at Mallory Square when the *MS Seaward* would arrive. “Hippies are not welcome in Mexico now,” an Associated Press story in the *Citizen* announced. At the Sands Restaurant and Cocktail Lounge, “the one and only” Billy Nine Fingers was playing ragtime, pop and classics. Over at the American Legion on Stock Island, Decca Recording artists Bill and Betty Howard offered country music, “the Nashville Sound,” an ad promised. Life on the little island was weird and wild.

Then one day Jerry Jeff and Murphy rode back into town aboard the *Flying Lady*—Jerry Jeff's 1947 Packard—and they brought a friend, another singer who'd thought he'd had a gig at The Flick, a famous Coral Gables folk club. When he got to the club, the club told him he was a week early. With time to kill, Jerry Jeff and Murphy brought him straight to Corcoran and the Chart Room, with its low capacity, dark wood, scuffed floors, thumbtacked navigational charts and Mos Eisley charm.

“And of course the story goes they stopped at every bar down the keys,” Corcoran says. “They didn’t. They couldn’t have made it.”

Maybe yes, maybe no, but they did charge into the Chart Room and Jerry Jeff did announce their arrival in a style befitting the local custom: “We need a drink!” he boomed. Off in the corner, a washboard player scrubbed along to an autoharp. Vic Latham, who’d been sitting at the bar, rose to greet Jerry Jeff. They knew each other from New Orleans in sixties. It was Latham, in fact, who bailed Jerry Jeff from jail the night he wrote “Mr. Bojangles.”

Latham had been good for a couch and a little pocket change when he found a musician in need. Thanks to New Orleans, Latham knew the third member of the travelling party, too.

Jerry Jeff shook hands with Corcoran, who gave Murphy a hug and was then introduced to the new guy, Jimmy Something. Jerry Jeff mumbled (or slurred) the last name unrecognizable.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Corcoran said. “Whatcha drinking?”

“Heineken,” Jimmy Something said.

“First one’s free,” Corcoran said.

Someone mentioned Jimmy was a singer, too. From Nashville. They drank some more. Did his busted marriage come up? Who remembers? There was more drinking. The edges blurred into lights and laughter. Night grabbed hold of the island. Jimmy Something found a warm welcome.

“I think he must have hooked up with some chick,” Corcoran says.

He did.

“I woke up, and I didn’t know where I was,” Buffett said forty-four years later, looking out from a stage on a beach on the other side of the island. “And that was Ok, because there was a

young lady who said, ‘That’s Ok. Let’s go ride the Conch Train.’ So we got a jug of wine and sat on the back of the Conch Train—facing backwards.”

Kierkegaard said something about life being understood backwards, but lived forwards. What Buffett saw from a miniature train moving in one direction, in a seat facing the other, was exactly only what he needed.

Nashville had turned cold and grey. The weather sucked, too. He hadn’t conquered “Music City.” “Music City” barely noticed he was there. And the marriage he’d brought to town from Mobile had busted up.

Key West felt like a dream born of favorite books and old television shows, of family history come to life along rutted roads in town with a budget deficit and a surplus of charm. He’d gone searching for elsewhere and found it at the last American exit. Key West looked like a good place to lick some wounds and catch his breath.

Bouncing along on the back of the Conch Train with a jug of wine and a new friend, Buffett saw a future where “the smilin’ eyes match the smilin’ faces.” He saw ... a song—unlike any he’d written. He scribbled it down: “I Have Found Me a Home.”

He’d quickly meet McGuane, who’d introduce him to everyone, including Harrison. He’d perfect his “‘bar singer goes wild on the rebound’ routine”—as Buffett phrased it in a remembrance of Harrison after he died in March 2016. “Many generations of misfits have claimed Key West as their town,” Buffett continued, “but I would have to argue that, in the early 70s, it truly was our town.”

But only he would figure out how to package and sell it.