



May 16, 2012—

Richard Harding danced to all kinds of music.

The effervescent owner of the Quiet Knight music room was the first to bring Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, the Talking Heads and Jimmy Buffett to Chicago. He loved Bob Marley as much as he loved Miles Davis, all of whom performed at his beloved Quiet Knight, 953 W. Belmont.

Richard died May 12 of cancer in a suburban hospice. He was 82.

The Quiet Knight ran between 1969-1979 on the second floor of an old brick building that was a short riff from the Belmont L stop.

Los Angeles had the Troubador. Chicago had the Quiet Knight.

Richard booked Herbie Hancock, John Denver and Arlo Guthrie, while local acts like the Siegel-Schwall blues band were mainstays. Linda Ronstadt (with Don Henley on drums and Glenn Frey on rhythm guitar) headlined the Quiet Knight for five nights in the summer of 1971.

She sang “Long, Long, Time.”

Richard previously owned Poor Richard’s, 1363 N. Sedgwick, and the first Quiet Knight at 1311 N. Wells. Andy Warhol’s “Exploding Plastic Inevitable” played for a week in 1966 at Poor Richard’s with special guests The Velvet Underground (minus Lou Reed, who was in the hospital).

”Richard Harding is an era in the music world,” said Corky Siegel, who held a Tuesday night residency with the Siegel-Schwall Band between 1969-1974. “Richard was a happy guy. He worked at it. Maybe he had some depression, but he forced himself to be a happy guy — which is a lesson for all of us.”

Siegel’s first public solo date was in 1974 opening for Muddy Waters at the 400-seat Quiet Knight.

Chicago was the first big city out of the South in which Buffett worked.

“Richard came to a talent showcase in Nashville,” Buffett said on May 15. “He booked me [around 1972] based on that showcase. I had worked for some despicable club owners. He was the nicest club owner, although he still ran a tight ship. He gave me a month’s work at a time when I really needed it. I was scared of him at first. But I could tell he was a fun guy.”

Buffett opened solo acoustic for Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks, Siegel-Schwall and Neil Sedaka. Buffett also met his future friend and collaborator Steve Goodman at the Quiet Knight. They would

saunter back to the Earl of Old Town for last call and a cheeseburger since Earl Pionke had a late-night license, unlike the Quiet Knight.

Buffett wrote the 1973 hit ballad “He Went To Paris,” based on Eddie Balchowsky, the one-handed classical pianist who was also a Quiet Knight custodian, a junkie, and a student of Shambhala, based on the myth of Shangri-La. Balchowsky lost his right hand in the Spanish Civil War. He died in 1989 at age 74 after jumping or falling in front of an L train.

Quiet Knight performers Loudon Wainwright, Utah Phillips and Dion DiMucci also wrote songs about Balchowsky after performing at the club. Buffett said, “The Quiet Knight was full of characters. I’m getting goose bumps. Richard had a great deal of satisfaction in helping me become who I was.

“I never forgot him.”

In July, 2011 Buffett dedicated a ballad to Richard during his performance at Toyota Park in Bridgeview. Richard, his daughter Catherine and Steve Goodman’s mom Minnette had seats near center stage.

Siegel added: “Richard loved the music and he loved the musicians so much. He booked the most amazing acts. Carly Simon and Howlin’ Wolf. Tom Waits played there a bunch, and I’d hang out with him in the dressing room. Musicians were like family to him.”

In 1966, Arlo Guthrie bought his first car — a 1957 MGA. “My first real road trip was to Chicago, where a guy named Richard Harding had a club called Poor Richard’s,” Guthrie wrote in an email. “I immediately loved this crazy character. When my shows were over, we’d drink our way from club to club, stagger home in the wee hours of the next morning having met and played music with everyone even remotely connected to the world of Chicago folk music. Chicago became a second home. I continued to play for Richard when he opened the Quiet Knight, where I met Steve Goodman and others who would become lifelong friends. Even after I had outgrown the clubs and was performing in larger venues, I’d come and play for Richard. He was family.”



Richard was born in Chicago. His father was an electrician, which may have explained why Richard always carried several pens and sharp pencils in his shirt pocket protector. His mother was a nurse. Richard graduated from Amundsen High School where he was a star linebacker.

Like a fleeting dream, Richard vanished from the scene after he sold the Quiet Knight in 1979. He landed in Aspen, Colo., in 1980, and in 1983 I tracked him down in San Francisco where he worked in water quality control. He came back to Chicago and drove a cab. He became a regular at the Monday night poetry slam at Weeds tavern.

In 1985, he opened what was to be his final club, Da Vinci’s

Music Gallery, on the third floor of a turn-of-the-century building at 2011 W. North in then-sketchy Wicker Park. As a tribute to Richard's charms, Tom Waits flew out for opening night just to hang in the audience. Studs Terkel was there, and so was Balchowsky. Richard wore a pink flower in his gray hair. Bossa nova saxophonist Stan Getz played opening night.

This, too, was Shangri-La.

"I deal best when I'm slightly close to the edges," Richard told me a few days before he opened his club. "They're going to say I'm crazy again for going into Wicker Park." As usual, Richard was way ahead of his time.

He also told me he wanted to become an artist manager. He was 56 years old and thought he was too old to be operating a nightclub. Richard explained, "As much as I hate to negate talent and art, it's not always the most important aspect. The most important thing about managing is managing manageable people. Say you've got a flaky act that can't find themselves. The customers say the shows are supposed to start at 9 and 11 and you're ready to go at 9 and 11 and these flakes are off somewhere going through their mental processes or whatever the hell they do. Well, it doesn't reflect on the artist because everybody looks at them like God-like creatures. It's always 'What kind of dumb club is this?'

"The worst thing in the world is when a place becomes known for not starting shows on time. The greatest jazz guy I ever knew was Charles Mingus. And when I said, 'Charles, go up at 9:16,' that's when Charles Mingus started. If his sidemen weren't there, he started by himself. And they sure got there in a hurry when they started to hear him play,"

Around this time, I had a get-together at my house. Richard was one of the first to arrive.

People were standing around my old Rock-Ola jukebox loaded with Merle Haggard, Springsteen and obscure New Orleans singles from the likes of Jesse Hill. Richard walked in the room wearing a feathered cowboy hat and brown leather jacket. His white beard gave him the look of a backwoods trapper. He said his hellos because he wasn't so good at goodbyes.

And then he danced to every song on the jukebox.

Richard was survived by his former wife, Eleanor; son, John Harding, daughter, Catherine Harding and granddaughters Cristine and Sara Harding.

*Artwork courtesy of the "In memory of Richard Harding" Facebook page. Check it out.*