

Aug. 28, 2005----

A new neighborhood dawned on Oct. 2, 1984. The Cubs were opening the National League Championship Series against the San Diego Padres. Jimmy Buffett flew in to Chicago to sing the national anthem in honor of his friend, Steve Goodman. * Goodman was a popular Chicago singer-songwriter who had died of complications from leukemia just four days before his beloved Cubs clinched the Eastern Division title.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky as Buffett walked to home plate. The Cubs went on to win 13-0. * Magic was in the air. * Until 1984, Wrigley Field nightlife consisted of a few seedy bars such as Ray's Bleachers, the Sports Corner and the Cubby Bear. Stages was making the transition from a gay dance club into Metro. The appearance of a magical court jester like Buffett became the metaphor for what is now Wrigleyville -- Chicago's 21st-century answer to Bourbon Street. * The magic returns next weekend when Buffett headlines two sold-out appearances at Wrigley Field. These are encore vintage ballpark shows, following a successful Sept. 10, 2004, concert at Fenway Park in Boston.

At that show, in an onstage skit, Buffett and his Jolly Mon character helped knock out "The Curse of the Bambino" and the Red Sox's 86-year championship drought. Buffett has his work cut out for him to break the Cubs' 96-year championship drought. But in a conversation earlier this month from his Nantucket, Mass., home, he pondered, "There's still a mathematical possibility of the wild card, so who knows?"

Buffett remembers taking his '84 Wrigley Field debut seriously. He went to bed early the night before and practiced the song so much in his hotel room, he disturbed the gentleman across the hall.

"Singing the anthem that day may be my greatest baseball memory," Buffett said. "I was being good because the only other time I sang it, I partied the night before in Gainesville. I sang at the University of Florida-Southern California football game. I was so hung over. It was a stadium of 78,000 people and the audio delay was on. I was confused and sweating, and the whole band was out there in these wool uniforms. I kept waiting for the delay. It was the longest national anthem in history. I remember I was singing, 'By the twilight's last gleaming,' and one of the drummers in the Gator marching band was saying, 'Come on, just finish the motherf----- song, it's hot in these mother-f----- uniforms!' He's yelling at me while I'm finishing."

But Buffett's history with the Cubs goes back even further -- to the summer of 1973, when Goodman took him to his first Cubs game.

Goodman was appearing at the Earl of Old Town, and Buffett was in Richard

Harding's starting rotation at the Quiet Knight on Belmont Avenue, just a few blocks south of Wrigley Field. The two singer-songwriters sat in the right-field bleachers to watch Willie Mays on his last legs with the New York Mets.

Buffett and Goodman went on to co-write songs such as "Door Number Three" and "Frank and Lola." Goodman contributed exquisite acoustic guitar on Buffett's earliest albums, and Buffett recorded Goodman's "Banana Republics," "This Hotel Room" and others.

Buffett connected with Goodman through their shared sense of humor and love of baseball. They were folk music's version of the Gas House Gang. "When I saw him perform, it struck a chord with me that not only was he a better guitar player than I was, but he was a solo act with a sense of humor," Buffett explained. "Singer-songwriter Gamble Rogers was another guy back in those days we both loved. A lot of times you see people who are funny onstage and don't care to be funny offstage. It's part of their act. Stevie was funny on or off the stage. And he's the first one who took me to a Cubs game."

In August 1999, Buffett played a benefit concert for Cubs Care, the charitable arm of the Cubs organization, at the House of Blues. "And remember," said Buffett, a part-time resident of South Florida, "I caught all that flak for being a Cubs fan when they played the Florida Marlins in the ill-fated 2003 NLCS."

Under the guidance of Cubs president Andy MacPhail, a Buffett fan, the team cut a deal in order to stage these Buffett concerts: The Cubs agreed to play one less night game in 2006, stage no concerts in 2006, and Buffett and the Cubs will donate \$150,000 to schools in the Lake View neighborhood. The Cubs also set a limit of 39,500 tickets for each concert. Tickets were \$90 and \$130.

"We had been talking to the Cubs for a long time about doing this," Buffett said. "There are a lot of baseball nuts in our band and our crew, and we go to games as we travel everywhere. We kept an eye on the September 2003 Springsteen show at Fenway, and I wanted to make sure everything went well. Plus, Boston was one of the first big markets to break for me.

"These old ballparks are like cathedrals in America. We don't have big old Gothic cathedrals like they do in Europe. But we got baseball parks."

On Nov. 8, Buffett will release a DVD of that show, "Jimmy Buffett Live at Fenway Park." "It couldn't have been a better show in terms of weather and crowds," said Buffett, who even had his name spelled out on the Green Monster's hand-operated scoreboard. "I don't think there was one arrest. And everybody in the neighborhood made a ton of money."

Elevated Concerts (formerly Clear Channel in Chicago) is producing the concert with the Cubs. Under Major League Baseball's revenue-sharing plan, every dollar

the Cubs earn on game days, 34 cents must be shared with other teams. The Cubs don't split concert revenues.

MacPhail and John McDonough, the Cubs' senior vice president of marketing and broadcasting, attended the Fenway concert. The stage was set up in center field, as it will be at Wrigley. This means that Buffett will bring more hits to center field than Corey Patterson.

Buffett and his band will face home plate. "They were concerned about the field, so I walked them around and showed them how we did it with synthetic floors, a k a Terraplas," Buffett said. "You know Chicago. I hoped it would happen, but I knew it could be a neighborhood thing. Or a political thing. But it all settled up."

Buffett even tailored his Boston set to include Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," a seventh-inning stretch tradition at Fenway. (A reggae version of Goodman's "Go Cubs Go" would fit the bill at Wrigley!) Buffett has spent a month writing the Wrigley Field show with his keyboardist-musical director Michael Utley, a major baseball fan.

"In some ways Jimmy reminds me of Harry Caray -- bigger than life, live it up, the meter's running," McDonough said. "He's very self-deprecating." Jay Blunk, the Cubs' advertising and promotions director, added, "One time Jimmy said to me, 'I'm a lot like the Cubs. I don't have any hit records, you don't have any championships -- but we're packed wherever we go.'"

MacPhail is taking a wait-and-see approach about other possible concert headliners at Wrigley Field. The Rolling Stones opened their new tour at Fenway Park last week. "The answer will be based largely on what everybody's experience is -- inside and outside the ballpark over the course of Labor Day weekend," he said.

Buffett's baseball ties even stretch into Hollywood. He had a bit role in the 1994 film "Cobb," which starred Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Wuhl. Portions of the movie were filmed at historic Rickwood Field in Birmingham, Ala.

"I play the rude, racist fan with no arms that Ty Cobb beat the crap out of," Buffett said. "Tommy Lee is a method actor, so he got into that role, going into the stands with baseball cleats. He grabbed me and shook me like a rag doll. I couldn't do anything -- I had no arms. I needed a stunt double. It was a good acting job because I was scared to death."

Buffett scaled back his touring schedule this summer to produce "Hoot," the movie adaptation of Carl Hiaasen's children's best seller. The mystery-adventure centers on a Montana boy who moves to Florida and discovers a disturbing threat to a population of endangered owls. The film stars Luke Wilson and Chicago's Eric Phillips, who is making his film debut. Utley is writing original music for the score.

The film also marks Buffett's debut as a movie producer. "We finish filming on Sept. 3," he said -- that's the day before Buffett's first Wrigley show.

"Hoot," due for a spring 2006 release, was filmed throughout Broward County in southeast Florida as well as the Gulf Coast island of Boca Grande. "Knock on wood, we're ahead of the weather in the dog days of summer in Florida," Buffett said. Now if he can only do something about that damn goat in Chicago.