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What's sometimes lost in the tropical drink twirl of a Jimmy Buffett concert is the cognitive and romantic eye cast in the Alabama-born songwriter's Southern storytelling tradition.

In a phone interview, I told Buffett that the exquisite "Nobody Speaks to the Captain No More," from his new "Floridays" album, recalls a beautiful and novelistic pre-Margaritaville tune.

"Thank you. It's my favorite, and it's funny the way it started," Buffett said. "My friend Phil Clark, who wrote 'A Pirate Looks at Forty,' about the real person - there's 300 people who claim it was written about them - well, the real guy was killed mysteriously out in San Francisco this year. I wanted to do some kind of mention, but I didn't want to do an eulogy or 'Part 2' of 'A Pirate Looks at Forty.' My quality control won't allow me to do that.

"So I started etching out a song with that in mind," Buffett said. "I started reading this book by Gabriel Garcia Marquez called The Autumn of the Patriarch. I wound up in Belize visiting Harrison Ford, who was making a movie ('The Mosquito Coast'), and helped him with dialogue while watching him transform from Harrison into his character. Between all those situations and being in Belize, it seemed to be building up from a Marquez poem called 'Nobody Writes to the Colonel.' I took a derivation from that and went back to St. Barts, and it came out in five minutes.

"When I wrote it, I called up (good friend Dan) Fogelberg, who was vacationing in St. Barts," Buffett said. "I said, 'I got to play you something. I just wrote this song and I've never done this before with any song. I put it on a Walkman, got in my Jeep, rode to the ocean and sat there and listened to it. I tested this thing out. I realized it was getting corny and there was a lot to say. I wasn't going to hold back, but I wanted it to be like a little novel about this character.'

"So I played it for him and said, 'Either this is one of the best things I've ever written, or else I'm completely off the planet.' He said, 'You're off the planet, but this is one of the best songs you've ever written.' I love that song. People might think this more of a reflective album, and maybe it is where I've been for the last year and a half. It travels - it's a cheap vacation."

Away from the pathos of "Nobody Speaks to the Captain," the "Floridays" record also addresses the self-effacing humor of "I Love the Now," co-written by Carrie Fisher, and the satirical soul of "You'll Never Work in Dis Bidness Again," co-written by Buffett, Michael Utley, ex-Eddie Boy Band guitarist Josh Leo and Memphis bassist Willie Weeks.

"There are people who might take that song seriously," Buffett said with a laugh, "but it is a complete sort of satirical approach to modern recording techniques, from Rick James to the Funkadelics. That line has always been used; in fact, it started out to be the title of the album. But when the album got a little more settled, I had to change the title. I was told that line when I was 17 working in a bar, and about a month before we started the album by a guy who actually meant it. I couldn't believe anybody still used that line."

It's hard to believe somebody used that line on Buffett, currently one of the busiest guys in show business. He was in New York in casting meetings for his "Margaritaville" movie (scheduled to begin shooting in September in south Florida), and he might produce some songs on the Neville Brothers' upcoming album.

"The Nevilles are on the verge of signing this deal with EMI/Rounder and I spoke to Bill Graham (their manager). There's a possibility I may produce some cuts for their new record, which is exciting," Buffett said. "They need a good shot. Bill didn't know we had written these songs together - like 'Midnight Key to the City,' which the Nevilles did on 'Saturday Night Live.' (Buffett also covered Art Neville's 'Why Do You Wanna Hurt My Heart' on his 1984 'Riddles in the Sand' record.)

"And, of course, the (New Orleans) Jazz Festival was wonderful this year. It was kind of a Caribbean night. Burning Spear, King Ebenezer Obey, the Neville Brothers and us. It was hot."

Buffett is bringing some New Orleans spice along on this tour as ex-Meters bassist George Porter has replaced Timothy B. Schmit in the Coral Reefer Band. The ex-Poco, ex-Eagle's last show was the second-line strut Neville Brothers-Jimmy Buffett dance party, which also featured Steve Winwood and comedian Bill Murray, during Super Bowl week in New Orleans.

"Timothy is pursuing an acting career with everybody's good blessings, and in his place we have George Porter," Buffett said. "Willie Weeks did the album with us, but he couldn't go on the road. George is not a bad choice. I've known him for years through all my associations and working around New Orleans. He was sitting around doing some stage managing and gigging around town. What we're doing on the album fits in with what we're doing with the band.

"But he can't sing as high as Timothy, so we added Larry Lee, who is the original lead vocalist from the Ozark Mountain Daredevils," Buffett said. "And (two members of) the Memphis Horns (Wayne Jackson and Andrew Love) are coming out on tour with us." They join an accomplished and versatile band that includes ex-Little Feat conga player Sam Clayton, long-time Buffett sideman Michael Utley on keyboards and Reggie Young on guitar.

There's a stripped down and economized feel to "Floridays" that is derived from Buffett's re-introduction to Memphis soul.

"It's Fogelberg again," Buffett said. "He gave me this four-album publishing set of Stax-Volt that I don't think they ever sold. There were demos and regular releases. I put it on tape, and I was going down from Miami to Key West with my secretary and a friend. We were passing through Key Largo when I said, 'Do you realize we've sang just about every word to just about every song on this tape?'"

"That simplicity of the production and just the way these songs were written is the uniqueness of this music. Nobody thought about it back in those days. Going through Key Largo, I said I loved the horn section so much I would write a song ('Meet Me in Memphis') about a guy who's stuck down here (in Florida) and whose girl is in Memphis, just so I could use the Memphis Horns."

"I've always been a great admirer of horns, but with the last two albums being done in Nashville, we've been restricted a bit," Buffett said. "This is full tilt out there (in Memphis). This time I didn't think about whose toes I was stepping on."