

Aug. 9, 1992-----

SOMEWHERE OVER INDIANA --- There are thousands of stars on a summer night's flight from Indianapolis to Chicago. Jimmy Buffett was airborne after finishing the first of two sold-out shows at the Deer Creek Theatre outside Naptown.

Minutes after he delivered his appropriate final encore, "Growing Older, But Not Up," Buffett strolled by the campy, tiki-lit patio and connecting Airstream trailer, which he is using as a dressing room for this summer's tour. He climbed into a limo where warm Steak 'n' Shake hamburgers and cold shakes awaited. The limo headed to the airport as Buffett slurped on a shake and waved to fans as if he were the mayor of a small town somewhere in Indiana. It is this kind of playful twinkle that makes this star.

"It's great when people try to dissect why we are as popular as we are with all the reasons we shouldn't be," Buffett said during an on-plane conversation. (He has a pilot's license, but he wasn't piloting.) "We don't fit a mold. We haven't had a hit record. I'm 45. But we're still out there, outgrossing just about everybody."

According to Pollstar, a trade publication, Buffett was last summer's third-biggest concert draw, averaging 20,234 tickets per show. He outsold the first Lollapalooza tour and AC/DC. Only the Grateful Dead and Guns N' Roses did better.

Buffett understands the innate spirit of making music. He does not overintellectualize his craft. Little gets in the way between Buffett and his audience. "I learned a long time ago where to separate my political consciousness side that is part of being an artist, but not something you take onstage and beat people over the head with," he said. "I'm an entertainer. That's all I am. I'm not an expert in saving the rain forest or saving the manatee. I lend my help when I can (he is founder of two non-profit groups, Save the Manatee and Friends of Florida), but I don't make it a platform on which my music is surrounded. I deal in escapism. It's like the old saying, 'You can get a horse's attention a lot quicker with a carrot than with a stick.' That's my approach."

That's also the philosophy of Nashville-based Margaritaville Records, the new label that Buffett started up this spring. Distributed and marketed by MCA/Nashville, the Margaritaville label has shot out of the chute.

It already owns a gold record. Buffett's four-CD box set, "Boats, Beaches, Bars & Ballads," has sold more than 200,000 units. (For box sets, 125,000 units sold certifies gold status.) "Boats, Beaches, Bars & Ballads" is the best-selling box set in MCA history. He is chasing only Elton John, whose box set was produced by MCA/ Los Angeles.

"We've got everybody stirred up now," Buffett said.

So far, Margaritaville Records has signed two acts, both from New Orleans. The Iguanas, who mix Tex-Mex with second-line rhythms, were one of the biggest hits at last month's FitzGerald's American Music Festival. Evangeline is a harmony-heavy, all-woman Cajun-country group that is opening for Buffett this summer.

Over the years, Buffett has promised to take a summer off. He vows to make good on that threat next year. A Margaritaville Records Revue featuring the New Orleans acts, the St. Louis-based P.M. Band (which makes up the core of his Coral Reefer Band) and others could replace him.

Buffett wanted to start his own label for a long time. At first, he felt that a sense of frustration fueled his need to be independent, but more recently, there was a recurring sense of edification.

Some of that had to do with his personal life. Buffett reunited with his second wife, Jane, and they relocated to Nashville "to work out our marriage," as he put it. Then, on April 1, Jane gave birth to Sarah Delaney Buffett.

"Things just seemed to happen," Buffett said. "Traditionally, when an artist gets his own label, it is an unhappy artist who doesn't think (he) has been properly recorded or paid. So (he will) do an ego-gratifying record that costs too much money and never sells enough to recoup. I was happy. I really wanted to look for new talent. That's as much a part of it as anything, to give kids a shot who really deserve it.

"Looking back at it, I was probably the only figure who was signed out of Nashville, left (in 1972), made my whole career moves and then came back. So I had some respect and credibility."

More than one major label expressed interest in helping support Buffett's dream. Ironically, Buffett's idea struck a nerve at MCA, his label since 1978, when he left ABC Records.

"Until that point, I considered my relationship with MCA like the War of the Crusades," he said. "The Crusades were never-ending. But they sort of held up the olive branch, so I took the opportunity. They knew I could play, but they also knew I knew the business side of making music."

One of Buffett's business priorities was to maintain independence to avoid being classified as a country music label. "Nashville has a 'Hee-Haw' chamber of commerce identification, sort of the way New Orleans does with Mardi Gras and Bourbon Street," Buffett said. "There's a lot more going on in both cities than that.

Such big non-country names as Steve Forbert, John Hiatt, Leon Russell and Steve Winwood have migrated to Nashville. For Buffett, what had immediate impact was

the rapid success of two Chicagoans who had relocated there.

Josh Leo, the former guitarist for the Chicago-based Eddie Boy Band and an ex-Coral Reefer, is now vice president of A&R at RCA Records in Nashville. And Justin Niebank, a former engineer at Chicago's Streeterville Studios, produced the debut record for Evangeline and is doing likewise for the Iguanas. He was the engineer of choice at Alligator Records, with 24 blues albums between 1984 and 1989 to his credit, when he moved to Music City.

"Still, it was a crap shoot," Buffett said. "Coincidentally, Bob Mercer (the former head of EMI Records in the 1970s) was coming back from England and looking for a job in Nashville. We go way back. He was married to my first wife.

"He's my husband-in-law."

In the 1970s, Mercer signed and promoted theatrical bands such as Queen, the Sex Pistols and Pink Floyd. In the late 1980s, he went on to manage Paul McCartney. Mercer is now general manager of Margaritaville Records, while Buffett carries the lofty title of president and head of A&R. Margaritaville Records has only a three-person staff. The money for producing Margaritaville artists is subject to MCA budget approval, but MCA does not have artist approval.

Buffett wants Margaritaville acts to project personality, but foremost is the ability to perform live.

"I won't sign anybody who doesn't play live," he said. "Playing bars and playing live is where you learn to communicate. And understanding your audience as an entity is going to give you longevity. Playing live is going to teach you how to create personality in a band and how to deal with business decisions. Like it or not, in order to survive, you've got to face those dragons."

The evolutionary process of becoming an enduring entertainer has been short-circuited by an emphasis on sterile videos and the quick buck.

"When I came up, A&R meant something," Buffett said. "If a record label signed you, (it) told you from the beginning (that it would) be with you. It would be three albums down the road before (the label would) even think about letting you go. Someone was there to promote you and work with you. It truly was a development situation.

"Look at Tracy Chapman. I don't know her and I don't want to pick on her because I loved that first album. But where is she today? It's not the artist's fault. Her first year out, she's on a festival with U2 or Sting, playing to 50,000 people. The year before, she was in a coffeehouse. The old way is: A) coffeehouses, B) clubs, C) then an opening act, and D), you get to be a headliner. Now she's in a career crisis three years after her career started. There's a perfect example of nobody putting the effort in on the other side of the artist. That's part of what Margaritaville Records is about.

I did it. I made a lot of mistakes, but I learned from them. I can relay that information to people who are willing to accept it."

And as long as there are distant stars on a summer night, someone will be willing to listen.