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Coney Island is my favorite place in New York.

It is a wonder wheel world.

I've been there several times and I have stirring memories of the port of crazy hope. I've seen the Mermaid Parade, I caught the inaugural season of the Brooklyn Cyclones minor league baseball team, and I heard an ex-girlfriend who had relocated to Brooklyn say she would have married me.

You see strange mirrors at Coney Island.

One time I was at my friend Jill Richmond's (former member of the Aquanettas, the greatest New York City surf-rock band) wedding in Hoboken, N.J. and took the train from New Jersey to Coney Island. I recommend that journey for anyone who wants to get a quick feel of New York.

Singer-songwriter Garland Jeffreys was born in 1943 in the Coney Island neighborhood.

He is more identified with Coney Island than any musician I know (i.e. Lou Reed's "Coney Island Baby," "Coney Island" by "Death Cab for Cutie" and the Ramones' awesome "Oh Oh I Love Her So").

The leadoff anthem on his Jeffrey's new "The King of In Between" CD (appropriately enough on Luna Park Records, another nod to Coney Island) is "Coney Island Winter" where Jeffreys counts off the "22 stops" to the city. I always wondered about that.

Jeffreys is part Puerto Rican and mulatto. His roots reflect the sparks on the sand of Coney Island. His distinct sound incorporates jazz, doo-wop, soul and reggae. Jeffreys was one of the first Americans to travel to Jamaica and record in Kingston. His music is far more edgy than the snoozefest of Paul Simon.

"My grandfather was Shorty Boland," Jeffreys said last week in a thoughtful conversation from his Manhattan home to promote his appearance tonight at FitzGerald's in Berwyn---his first Chicago area gig in 30 years. "He was a character, a bit of a gangster. He ran poker games and dice games to all the waiters at lunch tiime at Lundy's (brothers) Restaurant very close to Coney Island and Brighton Beach. My uncles worked in that restaurant. We'd hang out by the piers and sometimes fish off the piers. As an eight and nine year old I worked on the boats in the summer. I'd go out deep sea fishing and clean the fish and water down the deck. I learned how to filet fish. We were raised Catholic so I'd bring home fish for Friday. That's not bad for a nine year old kid to learn that kind of thing.

"These were great adventures."

The last time I visited Coney Island was in the summer of 2007. It was supposed to be the last time I would visit Ruby's Bar & Grill, which opened in 1934. It was the last vintage tavern on the boardwalk. The old jukebox played Tito Puente mambos and raunchy Ronnie Hawkins. Who do you love?

The back bar was a circus of kitsch with tickets to the Stauch Baths and a photograph of Bob Hope and Jackie Gleason in blond wigs and drag. The comics' walk on the wild side was a surprise birthday present to owner Ruby Jacobs, who adored Marilyn Monroe.

Ruby's was slated to fall victim to redevelopment at Coney Island that include a year-round amusement park, hotel and time-share units. But it survived.

"There are things about Coney Island today that disturb me," Jeffreys said. "The feeling. It's still there but it's gone. It's very much a real estate story. They've already torn down things and are building big condos. They have the beach to sell and the beach is still very nice. It's not the Hamptons but it has something the Hamptons doesn't have. You don't have to be exclusive to be at the beach, like at the Hamptons. Coney Island, you get on the train, you're there.

"The ghetto of Coney Island is not taken care of. It's in shambles. There's murder. There's crime. Three blocks away from Nathan's (hot dog stand) is the ghetto. I went to Lincoln High in this area. From that point of view it's a sad situation. It can never be the same. I do rejoice in going there and when I am there I do have fun. But I don't compare it to what it was like when I was getting my ticket to go into Steeplechase park and the midget hits you on the ass and you walk in. That doesn't exist."

The past is never present.

Jeffreys continued, "Coney Island was a haven. It was a secret place. It was exciting. It doesn't have any of that. Although I imagine young young kids must feel something about it. I remember my kid (his daughter Savannah Rae, 15) and I and a bunch of her girlfriends went to Coney Island for her birthday. We had a birthday party near the Cyclone. They had a ball and went on the Cyclone and a couple of other scary rides. I forgot the name of the ride but I wouldn't go on it. I did go on the Cyclone with my kid. This must have been four years ago. I sat in the first car which I used to do. Let me tell you, I got shaken up. I got off that ride and I was a wreck. I was in the first car, showing off.

"And I haven't been on it since."

Savannah Rae has taken to her own version of Coney Island.

She enjoys going to the amusement park in the dead of winter.

"We went to the aquarium," Jeffreys said. "I took her on the merry go round. This particular day we went on the beach. It was New Year's Eve. It was freezing outside. The Polar Bear Club had just jumped in the water. The next thing you know she's standing in the middle of the Polar Bear Club. She wound up with that experience. I worked at Coney Island. I was a stock boy, you know those chalk dolls you can win? My job was to make sure there were enough on the weekends. On a rare occasion they would give me the microphone in the summer. I'd get up there with, 'I'll guess your name, I'll guess your age. Step up!' A couple of times I got people there, but I wasn't an

expert at keeping on the hook.

"The idea is that you let them win the teddy bear. And the teddy bear cost more than the price you have to pay to play the game. That was the part of Coney Island that was a scam. But at least it was a scam where something was going. Even now I still go several times in the summer." A poetic place where summer never ends.

Jeffreys comes from a similar urban tilt-a-whirl world that informed Dion, Bruce Springsteen and the Drifters.

There is water, which is the Atlantic Ocean. There is an endless boardwalk where Latin rhythms pulsate out of silver boom boxes. And there are strands of amusement park neon flickering like candles on an eternal birthday cake. Add a bold dash of reggae and you have found Jeffreys' compelling sound.

Jeffreys makes his first Chicago concert appearance since 1981 Nov. 18 at FitzGerald's in Berwyn. He will front a four-piece New York band, and is on the road to promote "The King of In Between," his first American release in 13 years. The Nicholas Tremulis Orchestra opens.

Co-produced by Larry Campbell (Bob Dylan ex-guitarist and Levon Helm producer), "The King of In Between" is a warm but husky record that spans from Campbell's trembling Revelator guitar-drenched "In God's Waiting Room" to the reggae-tinged "Roller Coaster Town," a tribute to Jeffreys' roots in Brooklyn, N.Y.

"I have huge, huge attachments to Coney Island," he said during a long conversation from his Manhattan digs. Jeffreys, 68, grew up next door to the iconic amusement park. "It was a wonderful experience as a child going on the rides with my family. I'm getting the chills talking about it right now. It was such a feeling of liberation. That's on the intellectual side, but it was so much fun at the beach and in the water. When I would go with my Uncle Nat we would always be in a mixed-race crowd. I'd hang with them. And I've taken my daughter to those Coney Island rides now."

And that's where Jeffreys has been.

He took time off to raise his daughter, Savannah Rae, now 15. "People thought I disappeared and maybe in some ways I had," he said. "I made a living by performing in Europe. Having a kid is a first for me, as it is for my wife. I couldn't miss this opportunity. I wound up being the father maybe I didn't have. It was great to take my kid to nursery school, sing songs . . . and now she's a singer."

Jeffreys said his daughter covers original material and listens to everything from hip-hop to Marvin Gaye.

“She says she likes my music,” he said. “She’s probably humoring me.”

Savannah Rae is a generation removed from her father’s radio hits like the anthem “R.O.C.K,” “Wild In The Streets” (which could come back as an Occupy fight song), the urban ballad “I May Not Be Your Kind,” about interracial romance, and his ballsy cover of (Question Mark) and the Mysterians “96 Tears.”

Jeffreys has vivid recollections of his 1981 Park West gig where he was backed by most of Graham Parker’s Rumour. Jeffreys also appeared at the Park West in November 1979.

“The Wailers at the Uptown Theater,” Jeffreys recalled. “I met (Bob) Marley that night because Arny Granat (of Jam Productions) took me to his hotel after his show. We had met before but we made a solid connection in Chicago.” Marley died on May 11, 1981, three days after Jeffreys’ gig at the Park West.

With the crossover success of world artists like M.I.A. and Femi Kuti, did the world music scene catch up to Jeffreys?

He paused before answering.

“My education started at 4 years old, hearing music in my house in the 1940s,” he said. “We were the only family of color in our Catholic church. But there were all kinds of families. There was a Baptist church right down from my house. My grandmother was from Puerto Rico. My father’s side was mulatto from the south. My parents listened to Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, and Dinah Washington. Billie Holiday came from my uncle’s taste; he lived in the same house as me. He turned me on to Ray Charles. He was a hipster. Then my other uncle, Dave, was an opera singer. He lived on the second floor, and we always heard his voice.”

Jeffreys started finding his own voice in the dense ramble of New York City.

“(Doo-wop pioneer) Frankie Lymon was my muse, his voice and the sound of what he did,” Jeffreys explained. “I liked Sam Cooke, and Jackie Wilson was a model. I liked his physicality on stage.”

Jeffreys started writing his own songs in the mid-1960s. He discovered reggae by

accident as a member of the YMCA.

“A Jamaican guy would play the Hep Tones out of this little box,” Jeffreys said. “I heard it right away, and it was simple enough for me. That’s the way I saw it. I could put my lyrics on top and it didn’t require being a studied musician. That’s the way it’s evolved.”

Jeffreys pointed to “Love is Not a Cliche,” a Tom Waitsh/Salvation Army rhythm track off his new album where he begins singing, “ I like my folk/I like my jazz/I like my R&B/I love my rock and roll . . . ”

He said, “I do love all those styles. People think you have to be a ‘something’ fan.”

The 11-track record closes out with “In God’s Waiting Room,” featuring only Jeffreys on acoustic guitar and Campbell on the Revelator that recalls Pops Staples tremolo. In the song, Jeffreys name checks the iconic Chicago gospel-soul group singing, “The Staple Singers will be present/In my very last dream . . . ”

He laughed and said, “Death is in front of you. Fortunately, you don’t think about it 24-7. But for me, taking a moment, saying ‘Who do I want at my funeral?’ Life is not all serious. Let’s make this a good one!”

Enjoy the ride.