

# Remembering Piano Red

## And a Long-Ago Atlanta

BY WARREN JOHNSTON

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**I**N THE LATE '50s and '60s, when I was growing up in Atlanta, it seemed that just about everybody had to know Piano Red.

After all, he'd been performing all over the South for both white and black audiences since the early 1930s, and he'd had a couple of big hits on the national charts. He had an afternoon radio show on WAOK, one of the first black stations in the country. Everybody listened because he played that new rhythm and blues — at least it was new to us.

Sure, we knew him.

Piano Red was the consummate entertainer, an institution and an R&B luminary. He was Dr. Feelgood, though except for some close associates, few whites knew his real name or much of anything about him.

We knew he was an albino African American who because of his condition had vision problems. We knew and loved his barrelhouse blues piano playing, his booming voice and his songs, which made you want to dance. We knew little else.

And, of course, Atlanta was a different place — not the progressive, all encompassing, major modern city that it is today. Back then, it was a big separate but unequal town, governed by the "polite" rules of everyone maintaining one's place — we were up here, and "they" were down there — and William "Willie" Lee Perryman, a.k.a. Piano Red and Dr. Feelgood, knew how to avoid that line, and he never stepped over it.

On any given weekend in the '50s and '60s, he'd play pop tunes until midnight on the North side of Atlanta for the white

elite gathered at the exclusive Piedmont Driving Club or at such popular restaurants as the slave-themed Aunt Fanny's Cabin or the Red Barn. Afterward, he'd go down to the south side and "Sweet"

**See PIANO RED—C6**

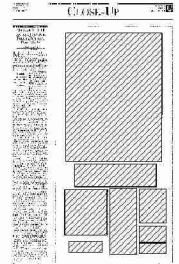
Auburn Avenue and play R&B at the Royal Peacock or another black club until 4 a.m.

I hadn't thought much about Piano Red in the 35 years since I left Atlanta, but I was reminded of him a few weeks ago by an e-mail announcing a new CD, *Piano Red: The Lost Atlanta Tapes*, which went on the national and international market last week. (He had a huge following in Europe.)

The album, which features 18 of Red's trademark songs, including eight that have never been released, was made from tapes recorded live at Atlanta's Excelsior Mill in 1984, a year before he died of cancer, on July 25, 1985, at 73.

The CD got me wondering who Red was beyond the musician I'd known. I did some research and found out a lot has been written about him.

Sundays, he'd go to church with his wife, Carrie Lou, and every day, he'd lend a helping hand to those around him in his Decatur neighborhood. He was an upholsterer until he made his mark in the 1950s with his four big hits *Rockin' With Red*, *Red's Boogie*, *The Right String (But the Wrong Yo Yo)* and *Dr. Feelgood*. They all went gold. After that, he got his income from music — and broadcasting his daily radio show from a small studio in the backyard of his house, which the station owner built for him. Because of his eyesight, Red couldn't drive, and



the backyard studio saved him from having to take cabs and buses.

When I first heard Red, he was on the radio and I was a kid running around the woods and streams in Buckhead, a sleepy, modest part of Atlanta with big yards, nice homes, a Christmas parade and one-story stores where the owners themselves worked. They knew our parents and they knew us by name, and they always made us feel welcome.

It was a time of afternoon summertime naps. That's when I would secretly listen to Red. He made me laugh, and the naptime passed quickly. I was an 8-year-old, hooked on his music and a devoted fan.

"We're going to get this one on for you, ladies and gentlemen, because I know you're gonna like it, and I want to give you exactly what you like," Red would say before introducing a song.

In the mid-1950s, Red started performing as Dr. Feelgood, and his band was called The Interns. Dr. Feelgood and The Interns dressed as doctors and nurses and performed at college parties and other functions all over the Southeast.

According to a biography published in *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, Red would pretend to guzzle beer during the Dr. Feelgood shows, promising that the drink would produce music that would make the audience feel good. Actually, he never drank or smoked cigarettes throughout his life, and he claimed that he drew his spirits from the universe.

The last time I saw Red, I was in my 20s and enjoying the fast pace of the booming city. The woods, big yards, nice houses and family stores gave way to high-rise offices, hotels and apartments and sprawling shopping malls. It was a heady time, when fortunes were made just by selling the family farm. Credit cards, 125-percent

financing and fat mortgages were coming into vogue, and we were spending money long before we earned it.

That's when Underground Atlanta opened. The store fronts, cobblestone streets and gas lights in a five-block area of downtown had been bridged over in 1910, sealed off and mostly forgotten until the area was declared a historic district and cleaned up in 1969. Stores, bars and restaurants opened, and according to Ron Hudspeth, a former columnist for the *Atlanta Journal*, "in its heyday, which lasted only a few short years in the early 1970s, it outstripped New Orleans' French Quarter and Chicago's Rush Street for fun and class."

In 1969, Red landed a 10-year gig as the house musician at Muhlenbrink's Saloon in Underground, where he was a big favorite with celebrities. Hudspeth notes: "One night, the entire cast of *The Waltons* showed up at Muhlenbrink's. On the heels of John Boy and Co., came Greg Allman, sipping Chivas Regal mixed with Coca-Cola, accompanied by Cher. Exit Allman and enter The Rolling Stones, big fans of Piano Red, who annually did a European tour" with them.

On Friday evenings after work in our downtown offices, a group of about 20 of us would get together for happy hour at Muhlenbrink's. We'd take over one of the many large tables of the cavernous saloon. There was another group from an engineering firm that routinely sat at a nearby table. Happy hour started at 5:30 and went until 7. For the first 30 minutes, 8-ounce draft beer in Styrofoam cups was 5 cents. We established a weekly competition, a race with the neighboring tables to see who could reach the 16-foot ceiling first with a tower of the empty beer cups. The goal was to make it by 6, when the beer went to a dime.

At 6:30, beer went to a quarter, and a second tower of cups would be nearing the ceiling. At 7, the price was a dollar, and we were done. That's when we'd start listening to Red, and a few hundred beers did not dim our

appreciation.

It was a raucous place, filled with loud, celebratory 20-year-olds, many of whom could have cared less about Red and his music, but that didn't bother him. He had cut his teeth in boisterous barrooms and at noisy parties in the '30s. That's where developed his playing and singing style. His voice could be heard over the din, and many of his songs end with a shout. That got the crowd's attention.

Despite his noisy surroundings,

Piano Red always maintained his cool.

"I'm feeling good tonight. I don't know how you're feelin', but you're gonna be feeling good when you leave. Let's have a good time tonight," Red would say, night after night.

Although in 1979 his wife of 38 years died, and he lost his nightly gig at Muhlenbrink's when the bar closed, Red kept the music going. In the early '80s, during one of his last European tours, he played at an inauguration party for German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and in 1983, William Lee Perryman was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame.

"The music spirit is moving," he would say. "All you got to do is have a good time, cause you're in the right house for that tonight."

Over the more than 50 years that he performed in Atlanta, the city grew

dramatically, and it changed. It went from a divided town to a thriving, racially balanced metropolis poised for the 21st century. And Piano Red played through it all.

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The new CD is from the Excelsior Mill, where he appeared four nights a week from 1981 until he couldn't play anymore. It captures Red as he was in a live performance. The recording is clean, he's still in fine form and the crowd loves him. If you've never heard of him, the album is an excellent introduction. If you know him, the CD will bring back memories.

Either way, as Piano Red would say, it's going to make you feel good.

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Piano Red often ended his songs with a shout, especially when crowds were raucous. At left, in a photo courtesy of the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, Piano Red in his Dr. Feelgood persona, with his band The Interns. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE TONY PARIS ARCHIVE



**Piano Red** was a regular at Muhlenbrink's Saloon, one of the hot spots in Atlanta's Underground. ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER PHOTOGRAPH