

## Live review: Leon Redbone @ Swallow Hill

*Leon Redbone's classic wit propelled his Swallow Hill set on Saturday*

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*For the complete blog, click here:*

<http://blogs.denverpost.com/reverb/2010/05/11/live-review-leon-redbone-swallow-hill/>

Leon Redbone's career has been shrouded in deliberate mystery since he first came on the music scene. From rumors suggesting he was Andy Kaufman or Frank Zappa to no one really knowing where he came from, Redbone has been able to attract a cult following of no specific demographic. So when Daniels Hall at Swallow Hill hosted an evening with the enigma himself, it was bound to be a crowd and show unlike any other.

When Redbone stepped carefully onto the warmly lit stage and settled into his chair with his sunglasses and wide Panama hat, I was transported to another time. Though I was in the back row of the sold-out show, it felt as close as a living room, with Redbone's smile beaming back as strongly as his voice did when he began singing his classic tunes.

As is his routine, he peppered the show with vaudevillian comedy, calling every song a "sing-along number" and renaming the key of B flat "the people's key." He engaged in banter with his pianist, who set up his punch lines in a theatrically- projected voice and with a classic sense of timing.

Redbone's glowing rumble of a voice was enchanting, and I found myself absolutely charmed by his performance. He didn't hurry



through a thing, taking his time to create familiar jokes and poke fun at his own music (he seemed genuinely amused when the songs he thought people would know did not spark audience participation).

When he raised his hat with his cane in farewell and walked off stage for the last time, I felt a little forlorn for the good old days; for soda shops and record players, for people singing along to "Polly Wolly Doodle" and "Shine on Harvest Moon," and for a pace that doesn't end with a bang, but with a tip of the cap and the hope to meet again.

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## Enigmatic folk-jazz icon brings eclectic performance

Leon Redbone, a master guitarist who's been at it for 40 years, offers a distinctive style and an easy going live show

Sarah McNaughton | Scene reporter

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From Lady Gaga's outlandish bubble costume to Justice's massive wall of amplifiers, the exaggerated antics of musicians and their concerts can be just as enjoyable and thrilling as the music itself.

But sometimes there's nothing better than a man and his guitar.

Folk-jazz icon Leon Redbone is coming to the John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts next Wednesday and will be bringing his relaxed signature style along with him. Jim Della Croce, Redbone's publicist, said audiences can look forward to all of Redbone's usual charm, including his unique getup.

"Panama hat, dark glasses, moustache, Gibson guitar, 200-watt light bulb and lamp, man at a piano and some of the finest music man has ever written and performed," Croce said.

Many musicians would have run out of steam or retired after nearly 40 years of performing and recording, but Redbone never stops. He has 15 albums and has performed songs for various television shows and ads, including Budweiser's "This Bud's For You" and the PBS kids show "Between the Lions." A ballet called "Paper Tiger" was also set to 11 of Redbone's songs in 1996.

Redbone was the voice of the insightful, Panama-hat-wearing snowman in the 2003 movie "Elf" and sang one of the most charming renditions of "Baby, It's Cold Outside" with She & Him singer Zoëy Deschanel for the film's closing credits. And now he's on tour again.

"Leon keeps a steady pace without burning out. Bob Dylan does the never-ending tour and Leon is somewhere in between," Croce said.

Surprisingly little is actually known about Redbone other than how prolific and talented he is. Even at the beginning of his career in the early 1970s, Redbone was extremely protective of his privacy.

His career took off in 1971 after Bob Dylan heard Redbone's unique baritone covering blues, jazz and ragtime songs from the 1920s and '30s at the Mariposa Folk Festival in Ontario.

"Bob Dylan noticed Leon early on and the rest is history," Croce said.

In keeping with his enigmatic persona, Redbone has claimed he was born in 1670 and 1929 and used to lead Blind Blake, a 1920s blues and ragtime guitarist, around New Orleans. No one knows what Redbone's real name is, his age or where he came from, but it's all irrelevant when he starts singing.

Looking past the three-piece suits, trademark hat and glasses and thick moustache, Redbone is a master acoustic guitarist who has stunned the likes of Bonnie Raitt and John Prine with his skill. Many have said his talent with his guitar and piano makes everything look easy, and that's typically what his live performances are all about — ease. A mixture of dry comedy, wit, and a wide variety of songs — from pop to vaudeville to southern blues — is what any audience member can expect at Redbone's show. There's no set list of songs, but one is guaranteed to come away entertained, despite the fact that Redbone does not consider himself to be an entertainer.

"Anything goes with Mr. Redbone, and nothing is ever carved in stone," Croce said.

But it's likely that longtime Redbone fans will get a chance to hear his deep-voiced renditions of "Sweet Sue," "Alabama Jubilee," "Ain't Misbehavin'" or "Diddy Wah Diddy" before the evening is over.

The rest is unknown about the man of mystery, but the uncertainty may be the best part about Redbone and his performances.

"The man can do anything he puts his mind to ... although I've never seen him belly dance," Croce joked.

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## Redbone entertains at The Canyon

May 8, 2008 :: Cary Ginell :: CONCERT REVIEW

For more than three decades, Leon Redbone has been one of the concert scene's most unlikely successes. Redbone has made a career out of reviving songs from jazz, blues and pop history. At his recent appearance at The Canyon in Agoura Hills, Redbone played a dozen tunes for a few hundred reverential fans, accompanied only by talented stride pianist Paul Asaro.

Redbone has always been a mystery man. Nobody really knows much about him; his background and even his real name have been deliberately obscured. After his successful appearances on "Saturday Night Live" and "The Tonight Show" in the 1970s, it was rumored his real name was Dickran Gobalian and he emigrated from the island of Cyprus to Toronto, where he started his career in the mid-1960s.

Over the years, other rumors have floated- he was eccentric comedian Andy Kaufman in disguise, he was a disaffected proPalestinian from Lebanon and assorted other fanciful guesses.

Redbone doesn't encourage or discourage these notions; he's just there to play songs he's loved for years. Modest about his talents, he describes himself as "a vehicle- not so much for the particular kind of music I prefer, as for a mood that the music conveys."

On stage, Redbone wears a Panama hat, dark glasses and moustache, which serve to conceal his features as well as give his act a sense of authenticity. His laconic manner is engaging, but he is detached from his audience. Even when he responds to a shouted request, you never get the feeling he's really connecting with anyone. He's from another world, a musical time machine.

In a phone conversation the week before his Agoura appearance, Redbone described his career as merely an indulgence. When asked if he could be viewed as a crusader for a richer era of music, he said, "I don't really have any lofty thoughts as to what the result is going to be. I don't really have a large plan."

Redbone's goal is to re-create a mood, a simpler time when sentimentality wasn't considered hackneyed, a kinder, more honest era.

Redbone acknowledges that many of his musical references are lost on today's audiences. Flashing a laminated photo of pioneering jazz cornetist Nick LaRocca (a founding member of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band of the 1910s), Redbone knew that only a handful of people in the audience would have heard of him. But he wanted to mention LaRocca's name anyway.

Other names get sprinkled through his act, including '20s chanteuse Lee Morse, Texas songster Mance Lipscomb and crooner Gene Austin. Redbone said about Austin, "I don't think there has ever been a singer who could put a song across better than him in that light, sentimental manner that he had." Redbone made sure to sing Austin's hit "My Blue Heaven," which was recorded in 1927.

His opening number, "Sweet Mama, Papa's Getting Mad" was first recorded by minstrel star Emmett Miller in 1929. His deft guitar picking is chiefly modeled after that of Chicago's Blind Blake, but he also plays in the rhythmic style of Piedmont guitarists like Blind Boy Fuller and the Reverend Gary Davis.

Fats Waller is also a Redbone idol. With Asaro providing the patented Waller stride accompaniment on the piano, Redbone sang the rollicking "Oh, Suzannah (Dust Off that Old Pianna)" and "Ain't Misbehavin'," to the delight of the audience.

One of the most affecting moments came when he crooned Rudolf Siczynski's "Vienna, City of My Dreams," accompanied by a prerecorded zither. Redbone is to be admired for his musical eclecticism; he is one of the few performers who can still get away with singing sentimental songs without their being viewed as mawkish.

For his encore, Redbone indulged the audience's request for "Shine On, Harvest Moon," a 1908 chestnut that had everyone singing along with the chorus. When asked if there was anything in particular he'd like to see accomplished, Redbone said, "If you can get cracking on a time machine, I'd be the first one to jump in it."

# Redbone careful to preserve the mystery

Like his oddly faded memories of Toronto, the bluesman has never been quite what he seems

June 13, 2007 :: GREG QUILL :: ENTERTAINMENT COLUMNIST

Leon Redbone can't remember the last time he was in Toronto.

Can't remember much about Toronto at all, he says over the phone from his home in rural Pennsylvania.

And that's odd, considering he lived here during the 1960s and early '70s, and got his musical start playing Toronto folk clubs such as the long gone Riverboat in Yorkville.

He was a regular musical companion in those years of Toronto roots legends David Wilcox, a very young Colin Linden and Ken and Chris Whiteley, appearing with the brothers on *Saturday Night Live* more than once.

"Haven't seen them in years ... how are they?" inquires the laconic crooner and guitar virtuoso whose specialty is, and apparently always has been, vintage American ragtime music and upscale Tin Pan Alley blues of the 1920s and '30s.

He's playing Massey Hall tonight in a two-hander with French-American singer and songwriter Madeleine Peyroux. Though Redbone may feign only a passing acquaintance with this city, Torontonians love him as a returning prodigal son.

In the heady days of his ascension to a level of international pop stardom that has sustained him for the past three decades, Redbone was described by *Rolling Stone* as "so authentic you can hear the surface noise," despite the confounding lack of evidence of source material or the existence of real-life musical mentors.

In addition to the elegant goatee, the ever-present white fedora or Panama (depending on the season), the impenetrable shades and the sartorial trimmings of a well-heeled, between-the-wars Southern gentleman of leisure, the Redbone schtick relies on bemused detachment, a soupçon of ennui and a rather well-worn mystery.

"Authenticity comes naturally to me," explains the artist once known as Dickran Gobalian, who, former *Star* columnist George Gameter revealed back in the 1980s, came to Canada from Cyprus in the mid-1960s and reinvented himself under the guidelines of Ontario's Change of Name Act.

"Very little of my life goes into my music," he explains. "I've never considered myself the proper focus of attention. I'm just a vehicle ... not so much for the particular kind of music I prefer, music from an earlier time, as for a mood that music conveys.

"I don't rehearse. There's nothing studied in what I do. I operate on a completely haphazard level ... I never know what the next song is going to be. One idea suggests another."

With 15 albums to his credit – the first, *On the Track*, was released in 1975, the most recent, the 1992 Paris concert recording *Live at the Olympia*, exactly 30 years later – Redbone has maintained his cool mystique and hip, timeless appeal apparently without effort. His duet with Zooey Deschanel on the seasonal standard "Baby It's Cold Outside" helped make the 2003 *Elf* movie soundtrack a cult hit. Something of an eccentric himself, Redbone refuses to fly, preferring to drive himself to gigs.

"I carry around many unusual items and devices," he says. "They make life difficult for airport security personnel and flying impossible for me. I am a mechanical person by nature. I function well in a mechanical world. I like building things. I like mosaic work, but I'm so distracted lately, I can barely get any time for it."

Distracted by the demands of his career, new music?

A long, bored sigh ...

"By life in general," Redbone says.



## **Leon Redbone Live - October 26, 1992: The Olympia Theater, Paris France**

### **Redbone Faithfully Keeps Alive Early 20th Century Popular Music**

February 28, 2006 :: El Bicho :: ALBUM REVIEW

People might not know the name, but everyone knows Leon Redbone. The immediately recognizable, trademark baritone that croons and warbles with touches of Fats Waller and Bing Crosby is as much a signature as his iconic look of white hat, full moustache and dark sunglasses.

Unfortunately, too many only know him as the guy who sang the theme song to Mr. Belvedere, and that's their loss because Redbone is the living embodiment of a museum exhibit, faithfully keeping alive early 20th century popular music, especially ragtime and blues.

During this concert in Paris, he was on tour in support of "Up A Lazy River," which came out the same year. He performs four tracks from the album with a trio of outstanding performers, New Orleans cornetist Scott Black, pianist David Boeddinghaus, and the brilliant guitarist Frank Vignola.

The rest of the set list is comprised of his usual mix of traditional songs arranged by Redbone like "Polly Wolly Doodle" and "Sweet Mama, Papa's Gettin' Mad" and covers by well-known artists, such as Waller's "Ain't Misbehavin' (I'm Savin' My Love For You)", and Irving Berlin's "Marie". They play a mixture of tempos, ranging from slow waltzes, "Think Of Me Thinking Of You", to jaunty toe-tappers, "Waitin' On You."

What is shocking is that four songs are Redbone originals. They are completely authentic and never stray into parody. "Goodbye Charlie Blues" oozes Mississippi Delta and I was surprised not to read C. Patton R. Johnson listed as the song's author. Redbone plays with the vocals, making his voice slightly incoherent as the narrator proclaims his love for whiskey. It's subtle, but a perfect artistic choice.

The audience is respectful, but their enthusiasm and appreciation grow louder with each song. They respond with polite applause to the opening line, "A French café" from "Play Gypsy Play", a song that has Vignola playing outstanding Django Reinhardt flourishes. The crowd claps along to the playful instrumental, "The Whistling Colonel", which showcases Redbone's marvelous whistling skills that even a bird would envy. They even get into the act shouting response with the band during "Gotta Shake That Thing".

The oddest moment of the set is a song called, "Csdaras," a recording of a Hungarian soprano. The audience is laughing, so there had to be some visuals attached to it, but it doesn't translate to CD.

As Leon Redbone keeps the flame alive of a bygone era, he provides an important history lesson of early 20th century popular music that is a pleasure to experience. Live - October 26, 1992 collects 71 minutes of his artistry and is a perfect place to start learning about him and the music he plays.



# The Leon Redbone Suite for Guitar and Genius in B-Flat

February 20, 2003 :: Jeff Fitzgerald, Genius :: ALBUM REVIEW

## Part I: Prelude

If anyone ever decides to get together a Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse for the Current State of American Pop Culture, I get dibs on Pestilence. Or possibly Death, depending on which one is likeliest to get more leg. And I invite Leon Redbone to saddle up next to me as we cut a bloody swath through the barren and useless hinterlands of creatively bankrupt reality TV, soulless and bland corporate top 40 music, hyper-accelerated fads that—thanks to the Internet—burn through their useful life in mere fractions of the time it used to take us to tire of our most surface of distractions, and synthetic blackness about as urban as a Honda Civic full of lilywhite middle-class wannabes blasting gansta rap at full volume and chattering cartoonish slang at one another like modern minstrel-show endmen with no sense of irony. I've already got a black Panama hat with Leon's name on it. The hour is near at hand.

Which is to say.

In another day and age, Leon Redbone would be a wandering troubadour carrying the songs of a distant age to new and wanting ears. And I would be a hard-drinking Ring Lardner-esque humorist looking at the world with a jaundiced eye (before they had drops to cure that malady). Together, we would travel the countryside having all sorts of adventures and using our super powers to fight crime. Actress Thora Birch would be a saucy, tart-tongued Vassar undergrad-turned-cheesecake model traveling with us in search of the man who gave her father a tragic pink belly one fateful night in Poughkeepsie. And at the end of every episode, we would learn an important lesson about friendship and the power of music to salve the human condition.

Two paragraphs in, and I've yet to get to the damned point.

If there has been a more unique performer in the past fifty years than Leon Redbone, then this article is not about them. Redbone's unmistakable voice has resonated across the purview of American culture like some dusky echo of the past, culling in our unconscious a memory of forgotten songs from an era half-remembered even by those still living who experienced it. His gentle, genuine appreciation for both the material and the listener resonates with an authenticity lacking in even the best-costumed revivalists. It is that validity that has both allowed him to build a long and successful career as a recording and touring artist, and hawk both good beer (Budweiser', which currently comprises a significant portion of my bodily fluids) and decent laundry detergent (All®, which I use to launder all of my parakeet's pirate outfits).

Be that as it may.

Redbone's personal history is deliberately vague. The Internet Movie Database lists his date of birth as October 29, 1929; but then, IMDB also describes Britney Spears as an actress, so there goes a measure of its credibility. He may or may not have been born in New York City, and virtually nothing is known of him till he shows up at the Mariposa Folk Festival where he is discovered by La Salle, who was looking for a new trade route to Toronto. So what we don't know about the intervening years, I'll use my dramatic license (Virginia Department of Literary Devices Permit No. 149863) to fill in.

Leon Redbone was born to a young Chippewa Indian couple, Herschel and Sadie Weintraub, sometime before this article was written. His formative years were spent in a strict Hebrew school, which was very traumatic for him as he was a Methodist. A talented and well-liked teenager, he was voted by his peers at Blind Willie Dunn Vocational School as "Most Likely to Develop A Cryptic, Anachronistic Stage Persona." He received his first guitar by mistake at the age of 13 (he had sent in 4,300 Ovaltine labels in hopes of receiving a 1941 Packard Super 8 160 convertible. The error was never rectified and to this day, he drinks Nestle's Quik in protest). By the age of 16, he was studying the instrument under the tutelage of a man who had once given guitar virtuoso Eddie Lang \$4 carfare and half a tuna sandwich.



Attending college briefly (28 minutes and 14 seconds), Redbone quickly realized that the vagabond life was the way for him. For one thing, he really enjoyed saying “vagabond,” and for another, it made it virtually impossible for him to receive junk mail. He set out on the road with nothing more than the clothes on his back, his beloved guitar, and \$32,000 in negotiable securities. By the time he was 25, he was already a quarter century old.

Perhaps the most telling incident in young Redbone's forgotten years was one moonlit night when he found himself at a dusty crossroads in Mississippi, guitar in hand. Shortly, the Devil appeared and asked him if he had come to sell his soul in exchange for the ability to play that guitar. Redbone replied that he had not, and was getting along just fine on his own. When the Prince of Lies took the rejection personally, a quick-thinking Redbone offered to trade him his Swiss Army knife in exchange for the ability to immediately discern fresh-squeezed orange juice from made-from-concentrate. Old Scratch, grateful to save face, took the deal and threw in several back issues of *Reader's Digest* and the ability to play the ocarina.

We come now to the pivotal Mariposa Folk Festival, where Redbone catches the attention of folk-music superstar (oxymoron alert!) Bob Dylan. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Dylan later said that if he was to ever start a record label, Redbone would be the first performer he would record. Warner Brothers beat him to it, releasing Redbone's *On the Track* in 1975. A spurned Dylan vowed never again to utter an intelligible word.

Soon thereafter, Redbone turned up on *Saturday Night Live*, where his unusual style blended in perfectly with the fresh and eclectic entertainment offered by *SNL* in those days before they descended into cranking out hackneyed catch-phrases and running any bit that was even slightly amusing so deep into the ground that coal miners are the last ones to get sick of them.

But I digress.

From Redbone's appearance on the national stage, he soon became a favorite on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson as well as lending his distinctive voice to everything from the aforementioned commercials to the theme song for the eighties sitcom *Mr. Belvedere*. Those who accuse him of selling out (you know who you are, Steve) plainly fail to see the genius behind such commercial ventures, building an audience for his inimitable style by taking it to the masses however he could. As an artist (?) with a peculiar and unique style myself I can appreciate his position, which is why I have been trolling for a corporate sponsorship for very nearly two years here at AAJ. And while I'm on the subject, how about the Pew Charitable Trusts or the McArthur Foundation getting off their asses and ponying up some dough so that I don't have sell consumer electronics in order to support my important and groundbreaking drinking. Or writing. Whatever.

Through ten albums in twenty-five years, Redbone has been true to his passions and resistant to the passing whims of the age. Defiantly drawing his inspiration partly from the minstrel tradition, particularly the work of the lately reconsidered Emmett Miller, Redbone managed to fly under the radar of the 90's politically correct movement who was too busy rooting out gender-biased language in Bazoooka Joe comics to notice that he was playing songs influenced by a man who performed in blackface (no, not Michael Jackson). Though Miller's contribution to American music is undeniable, particularly his impact on country music, his rather troubling career had kept him from getting the notice he deserved until artists like Redbone brought a fresh eye to his underlying genius. If you'd like to know more about Miller, read *Where Dead Voices Gather* by Nick Tosches. If you'd like to know less about Miller, forget everything you've read so far.

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## Part II: Rondo

On Sunday, February 9th, your Own Personal Genius pointed the new Geniusmobile west and headed to Charlottesville to enjoy a live performance by this month's *Genius Guide* subject, Leon Redbone. And try as I might, I just could not work the word “Genius” into that last sentence any more times. I have been studying steganography, though, insinuating gags into the HTML of this article so that our friends with the CIA can enjoy this column as well.

Pulling the piece back onto the road.



The venue, Starr Hill Brewery and Music Hall (you can see immediately what drew me out of the comfort of the Geniusdome), is a wonderful little slice of heaven for beer aficionados located in downtown Charlottesville, Virginia. After a wonderful meal of amber ale-and-honey glazed pork tenderloin over an herb risotto, and enough site-brewed amber and pale ale to make a rhinoceros call a cab, I ambled upstairs to the music hall for the show.

Once upstairs, I met the beautiful and charming Nikki, venue manager extraordinaire, to whom I am this close to proposing marriage and thi-i-is close to meaning it. She made sure I was comfy and well-beered, which is as much as I expect out of any woman in exchange for my dog-loyal devotion, and then went to attend to her duties. I put a down payment on a little villa in the mountains where we could raise our bespectacled, beer-loving kinder, then took my seat for the performance.

<snip>

I was first introduced to Leon Redbone back in the seventies, when I stayed up late to watch *Saturday Night Live*. Those were the days when *SNL* offered groundbreaking comedy as well as a stage for such unique performers as Harry Anderson (back in his far-more entertaining “Harry the Hat” days) and the Roches (who have apparently entered some sort of witness relocation program), before they discovered that someone sitting in front of their TV at 11:30 on a Saturday night would watch *anything*.

It wasn't nostalgia that brought me to Charlottesville to see Redbone, as fitting as that would seem for an artist whose stock and trade seems to be creating a sense of nostalgia for a time his listeners have never known, but in fact a 27-year long affection (minus vacations and sick days) for his music. My favorite album, *Branch to Branch*, has already been purchased twice on cassette and once on CD. I would have purchased it on reel-to-reel, just as a gag, but that option was never presented to me. And the song “Seduced,” from that album, continues to act as an instructional set to music for any woman who would seek my fondness.

Taking the stage with nothing more than his guitar and minimal accompaniment, a real cornet and synthesized (from soy proteins) piano, Redbone began the show with a chestnut from his first album, *Desert Blues (Big Chief Buffalo Nickel)*. His relaxed, almost demure stage presence was readily in evidence, as he sat to the back of the stage behind a music stand, flanked by his sidemen. Fortunately, given his unmistakable voice, genial delivery and criminally underrated musicianship, he doesn't require a flashy stage present to command an audience. Let's see what Christina Aguilera could do with a chair, a guitar, and a cornet, that wouldn't constitute an unnatural act by definition of state or local obscenity statutes.

Gliding through a few more recognizable standards such as “Sweet Sue” and one of his best-known renditions, “My Blue Heaven”, Redbone seemed as comfortable as though sitting on his front porch. Even the perfectly-executed double-time breaks came off as natural, unhurried. Between songs, his banter with his cornet player, Scott Blank, seemed more endearing than corny. Gags he's used many times before, judging from other reviews, such as taking a picture of the audience and promising to mail out copies, still played well to the receptive crowd. Even I laughed, and I'm as harsh a critic of humor as I am of pop culture. Harsher, in fact, since I actually contribute to modern humor (and for only pennies a day, you can too).

Through the course of the evening, Redbone invoked such restless spirits as Anton Karas, the unfortunately forgotten zither master (and if you ever see the words “zither” and “master” together again without mention of Karas, I'll personally buy you a pony) whose soundtrack to the 1949 masterpiece *The Third Man* continues to astound, Jelly Roll Morton, and the great American railroad work song. All delivered with the deft, expert touch of a performer who honestly cares for both the music and the audience.

At the end of the evening, as my blood alcohol content ebbed away from the “should be dead” range, Redbone's 90-minute show seemed too short. There were perhaps ten songs I could think of offhand that I would like to have heard, but I have no complaints for the songs he did perform. Though I came for other, less sentimental reasons, I left with a longing for another time. Perhaps it was the simpler era from which Redbone's songs refrain, perhaps it was just the halcyon days of my childhood in the seventies when my parents were still alive and healthy and so was *Saturday Night Live*. Either way, the evening would have been cheap at twice the price.