

Will the Real Leon Redbone please sing up?

Hovel interview: Leon Redbone
by Norm Frizzell

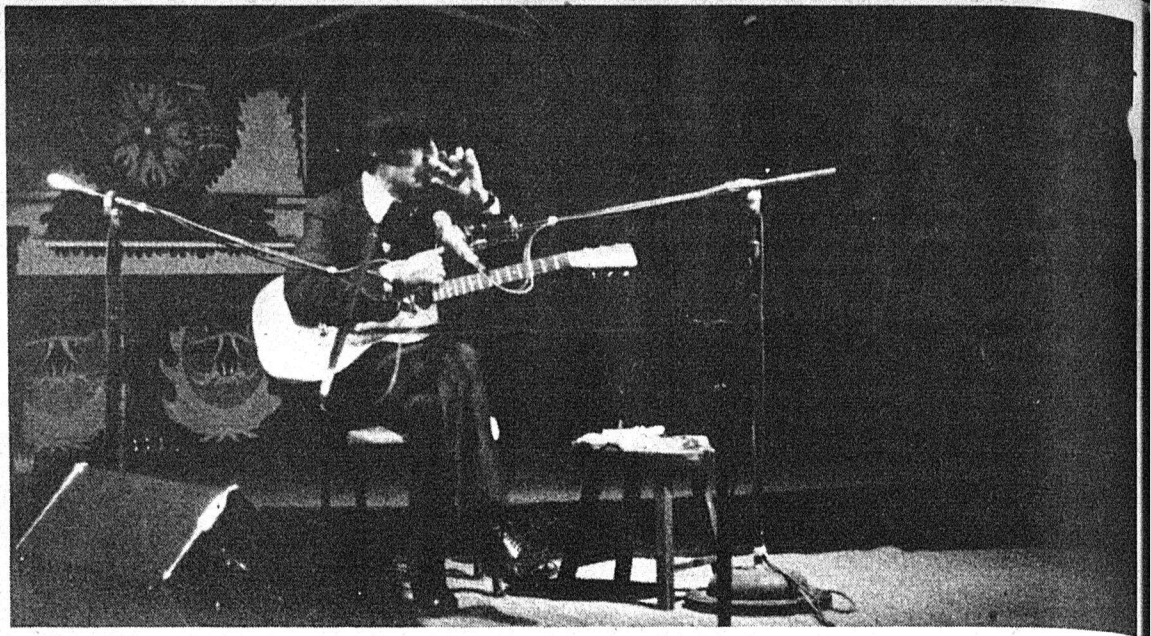
Photos by C.R. Wilson

For those of you who don't already know, Leon Redbone caused a sensation at the 1972 Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto when an unannounced Bob Dylan showed up specifically to see Mr. Redbone perform.

Bob had heard the news from people like Bonnie Raitt, John Hammond and David Bromberg. Dylan had heard lots about this unique guitar-picker and singer who knew all the obscure songs from the twenties and thirties. Leon cer-

tainly has his admirers and with their help is now receiving some much-deserved attention.

The word had spread about this man, enough to ensure two full houses at the Hovel last Thursday and Friday night. Most people came away believers; Leon Redbone is far beyond the boundaries of hype; he would still be doing the same songs in the same style, whether his audience numbered 40 or 4,000. His music covers a specific area dating from approximately 1900 to 1938. The commercial possibilities of the



Redbone chooses to sip before picking a song.

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music do not enter this man's picture; Leon plays the music he loves, with little regard for the pressures of a career in music-biz.

Redbone practises a kind of reverse-hype; he has become known as a mystery man. Nobody knows where he's from and his age has been quoted as anywhere from 30 to 62 years. He just popped up in Toronto, five years ago. Many journalists have attempted to extract such information from him, but receive instead a secretive smile, a "no comment" or a rapid change of subject. He has very little to say about himself which means he becomes all that much more interesting; interviewing him is a challenge.

In between sets Friday night, Leon talked about his music. "If you want to sum my music up in one word, that word would have to be 'romantic.' I originally started listening to people like Schumann, who was performing and writing in the romantic period of classical music. This period would roughly date from about 1810 to the death of Liszt in 1886. I feel there is a link between this music and the music I perform. On a level of expression and feeling there is a unifying tie between a Chopin piece and early blues."

Leon feels the romantic expression in music lasted until about 1938. "Things changed during and after the war. Both the people and the music they made changed. With the big bands the romantic feeling disappeared from the music."

It is this pre-war period

Leon concentrates on; constantly researching and perfecting. Asked whether he felt there were areas in which he lacked, he replied:

"I'm not satisfied with my on-stage performance."

"You mean you have your off nights?"

"Every night is an off night."

"In what way?"

"I tend to lose contact with what I'm doing on stage. Sometimes I get bored and things become sloppy."

This seems strange coming from a man who has been described as being near-perfect in every aspect of his presentation. A quote from Rolling Stone: "It's been said that when Leon plays, you can almost hear the surface noise. He's that convincing. I don't think Leon is putting one over on everybody."

Leon is not the type that sits on his laurels; if he never played another set in his life he would still be talked about in musicians' circles for years to come. It was musicians like Bromberg and Elliot who first recognized his talents and it was through word of mouth, not record industry press releases, that people like Dylan heard of this Redbone cat. It was only in this past year that Warner Brothers finally got him to do an album: LEON REDBONE: Warner Bros.

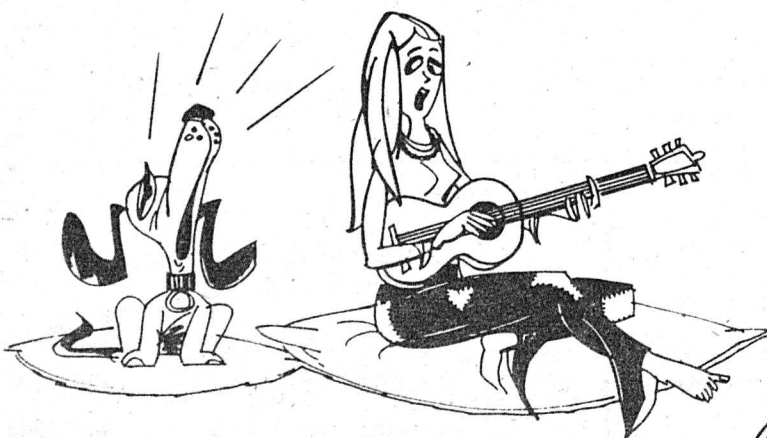
A recording contract is not the ultimate goal for Leon. He is not concerned about having his talents preserved for history. For him, recording is a totally different space than performing. The songs and the feeling change once he gets in a studio.

An obvious solution - record a live album:

"No, I'll never do that. A live album would still be missing something."

What that something is, is hard to pin down. It could be the visual side of a Redbone performance. Looking like a cross between Frank Zappa and Groucho Marx, Leon mounts the stage with walking cane and his proverbial glass of Georgian Brandy (from the Russian steppes of Georgia: his favorite spirit), a cigar, and an old acoustic Martin guitar. He straps a harmonica in its holder and proceeds to pick out an obscure blues number. Leon can sing the blues like very few white folks can. B.B. King once said that many times he couldn't tell if it was a white dude or a black one playing blues guitar but when it came time for them to sing, he could usually pick the white dude out right away. It all has to do with enunciation; you sing (if you're singing naturally, which is what blues is all about) the same way you talk. The white guy will usually pronounce each word distinctly, whereas the black singer will slur many words and twist others around in much the same way as his conversational speech. Leon not only sings like an old blues man, but he talks like one too, and it doesn't seem contrived.

Besides the authenticity of his singing and playing, Leon has a number of little tricks and gadgets that keep himself and the audience entertained between numbers. One of them is a tiny roulette wheel on which he takes verbal bets from the audience. After watching the tiny ball roll into place he'll announce in Groucho fashion "31. Too bad, you lose." He also has a flashlight that he shines upon the audience periodically like a cop in lover's lane. On Thursday night he whipped out a fashionable red handkerchief and after wiping off the neck of his guitar, proceeded to pick a ditty with the handkerchief over his left hand. This dexterous feat prompted a sharp-witted member of the audience to comment, "Is that what they call ragtime?" All these special nuances of a Redbone performance would probably go unnoticed on a live recording. If you missed him at the Hovel you can be comforted by the fact that Thursday's performance was recorded for the Acme Sausage program. Check with CKUA radio for the air date. For Pete's sake, though, next time he's around get off your posterior and see him. For those of you who were fortunate enough to see him, he'll be worth catching again. He's in the process right now of perfecting some European songs from a period of his interest. Next time he may introduce some gypsy-like number in Portuguese. It would not be beyond this man's talents.



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