

Ladies and Gentlemen...



Mr. Leon Redbone

By Phil Hood

RESTLESS. THAT'S how this crowd seems tonight. No wonder. It's Friday night in the main show-room of Caesar's Palace at Lake Tahoe, Nevada. And though the opening act is Leon Redbone, the less-than-capacity crowd is probably here for headliner George Carlin. They want to have a few drinks, a few laughs, and then go lose some money. Those of them who aren't familiar with Leon are in for a treat. Redbone's collection of blues, and Prohibition era jazz tunes, plus his outrageous mock bluesman character, will break the ice quicker than a Cuisinart.

Precisely at eight o'clock the hall darkens and a disembodied voice announces, "Mr. Leon Redbone". This calls forth a modest round of applause, as Leon, in a trademark white suit and hat, sits down on a stool, makes vaguely senile-sounding noises into the mike, and begins fiddling with a digital tuner located beside him.

When he opens his mouth and begins singing, a strange sensation floats around the room. Half the audience is with him and the other half seems intrigued that a major hotel would hire a Tin Pan Alley renegade to entertain them in a venue usually reserved for the likes of Melissa Manchester, Crystal Gayle, and Barry Manilow. But within minutes he has overcome the nervous laughter and is beginning to generate

serious applause with his music, and healthy guffaws with his gags. He projects singing-bird shadows on the curtain to operatic accompaniment, pulls out a Polaroid camera to snap the crowd, and punctuates "Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight" with a mini-fireworks display. In a voice as dry as a straight gin martini, he introduces the song, "Big-Time Woman From Way Out West" by saying, "Here is a melody written by a man who has been dead for many years." That portion of the crowd that came specifically to hear him begins calling for their favorite tunes: "Lulu's Back In Town," "Walkin' Stick" and others.

Due to the fact that it is the first show of a two-show night, the set is only 30 minutes long; too short to really get the audience 100% involved in the music. But, though hampered by sound problems and some uncharacteristically flubbed notes (caused by an injured right-hand index finger) the gags, the songs, and his unique charac-

ter — half Delta bluesman, half speak-easy entertainer — from which he never departs, has them laughing and grinning.

The Redbone shtick has varied little over the years. The jokes, the outfits, and the musical menu haven't changed much since he first burst on the scene. But, with his droll humor he has perhaps done more to popularize the music he loves, by composers like Fats Waller, Jimmie Rodgers, and Irving Berlin, than all the festivals, record re-issues, and Broadway revivals combined. And it has made him a popular performer, with numerous TV appearances and even soft drink commercials on his resume.

The mechanical aspects of his music rarely vary, either. He keeps the arrangements simple, usually relying on his fingerpicked guitar for rhythm, backed by a tuba and perhaps a trumpet and clarinet. He has used a single cut-away Gibson CF100 for several years, with a Barcus-Berry transducer mounted inside. He uses Martin Marquis medium-gauge strings, which he says do a good job of staying in tune. Medium-gauge strings are partially necessitated by his tuning, which is standard, but a whole step lower than normal.

Redbone exhibits little use for such technical details in person, and gives the impression he would be much

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL HAGGARD

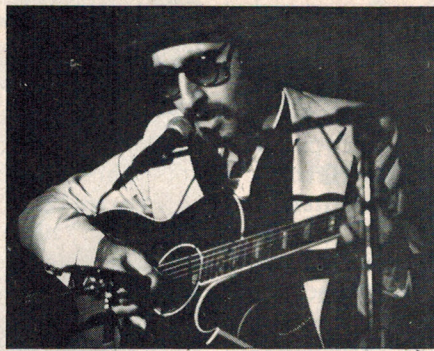
LEON REDBONE

happier if he never had to deal with amplifiers, PA systems and all the other equipment that can come between an acoustic musician and his audience. And he avoids having the artist label pinned on him, saying instead that he is "an entertainer." Despite this claim he is a talented musician, a good finger-picker who sweet talks every tune into becoming his own. His spare arrangements highlight the inherent style of the music, and provide a perfect backing for his voice [see the transcription of "Ain't Misbehavin'" on page 40].

We talked to Leon on the day following this show to learn more about his playing techniques and his unique musical sensibility.

DID YOU DO anything unusual to prepare for this show [at Caesar's Lake Tahoe, a Nevada casino] or alter the show to play this particular ball?

No, I didn't really do anything different, except that the tunes I played here were somewhat uptempo. Because of the short show (30 minutes) you can't do anything slow — there's no buildup so you have to play the faster tunes. I did not do the lullabies . . . there are not too many situations



PAUL NANTIN

Leon plays a Gibson CF100 cutaway.

where those songs work unless you have a very quiet audience. Usually in a place where people aren't drinking.

With me, everything is up in the air until I go on stage, including the music. I should prepare, but I don't. Oh, I always have a few drinks. It's better to do things that are familiar to you because the technical variables will undoubtedly prevail. The sound is always the number one problem. It seems to be a very simple thing but it is always a problem. I'm plugged directly into the house system; perhaps an amplifier would be better. The problems are sometimes overwhelming but if the alternative is traveling with your own

equipment. . . that doesn't seem practical. I prefer to travel light.

I can't help but notice you have a Band-aid on your index finger. How has that injury affected your playing?

Yes, I conveniently sliced my finger right down the middle right before I came out here. So my playing is about 30% off. I never realized just how effective the index finger was. Now, I have to put a pick on, otherwise I'll break the cut open. So I have a pick on the cut finger and I'm trying to do what I normally would with the other two fingers.

You ordinarily use three fingers plus the thumb, on the right hand.

Yes. It is a backwards motion — which also is something I never really paid much attention to. These two (the middle and ring fingers) usually go together. The index finger usually plays a faster line. With the injury, there is a lot of compromise involved just to be able to play.

Do you ever use fingerpicks?

I never use fingerpicks. I use a thumbpick. . . not fingerpicks. And I never use a flatpick. I can't hang on to it.

Are you ever hitting more than one

continued on page 42

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Fingerpicking: Redbone Style

ACOUSTIC FINGERSTYLE accompaniment for swing tunes requires both power and control. In Fats Waller's classic "Ain't Misbehavin'" Leon Redbone is at his best. Here is a transcription of Leon's work from the *On The Track* LP (Warner Brothers BS-2888).

Included here are the basic components of Leon's arrangement: the four-bar introduction; eight bars of the verse (the second eight bars of the verse have essentially the same musical content); and the minor-key bridge. Leon works primarily in and around chord positions, and varies the exact content within the basic structure.

Since he usually performs solo or with a tuba player, Leon uses a powerful bass attack (with a thumbpick) to fill out the

texture and to keep the solid rhythmic backup going for the syncopated notes in the upper voice. One distinctive feature of the percussive Redbone bass style shows up where there are two notes per beat, or neighboring bass notes that are "ghosted" (notes either de-emphasised or strongly implied). There are also some ghost notes in the upper voice. All ghost notes are shown with an "X" in the standard notation.

If you pick up a copy of the record, you'll notice that the actual pitch of the tune in *G*. That is because Leon tunes his guitar down a whole step. Here, the music is written in *A*, to show the actual fretboard positions and corresponding notes for guitar tuned to concert pitch.

— Rick Gartner

AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'

BY FATS WALLER

Intro:

The Intro consists of four measures. The upper staff shows a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including triplets and ghost notes (marked with 'X'). The lower staff shows the corresponding guitar fingering with numbers 1-5 and 'x' for muted strings.

System A contains the first eight measures of the verse. It features a consistent rhythmic pattern with a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, triplets, and ghost notes. The guitar part uses various chord shapes and fingerings.

The second system continues the verse with similar melodic and rhythmic elements. It includes a triplet in the upper voice and various bass line patterns.

System B represents the bridge section, which is in a minor key. It features a more complex rhythmic structure with many sixteenth notes and triplets. The guitar part uses a mix of chord shapes and fingerings, including some 'x' marks for muted strings.

The final system concludes the piece with a melodic line featuring triplets and ghost notes, supported by a bass line with various chordal textures.

string with the thumb in order to get a low chord, or is it usually a single note bass line?

I do all kinds of things with the thumb. I use a large dobro pick which I cut the end of. Then I put a small flatpick. . . glue it on to the bottom of the thumbpick. Maybe 1/16" is all that sticks out. Depending on different combinations. . . the thinner the flatpick, and the more of it that is exposed, the brighter the sound you're going to get on the bass end.

You seem to mute your bass strings with the right hand to keep a clean division between the notes. How do

you do it exactly?

After every note or chord struck the hand is on the string. It hardly ever comes off the strings. I always anchor the palm right on the strings.

Do you consciously stay near the soundhole for that softer tone or do you pick different points on the strings in order to vary the sound.

I don't tend to go way back on the bridge. I use the little finger here for balance. That puts the hand near the soundhole. I use a lot of effects but its all done around the soundhole. The only time I deviate from that is when I'm doing the Eddie Lang routine.

You tune your guitar down a whole step. Does tuning down help your singing or the accompanists?

It is a little of both. The singing range is not very much of a problem - I can sing in C just as well as B. As far as playing with instruments, B is a better key for horns and reeds than C. The kind of playing I do, it is necessary to play in that C position to give me some open strings to get a fast sound.

When you play a song, are you working out of a position and sometimes adlibbing from there, or is it really structured?

It's structured only in the chord progressions — but not within the chord progressions. At this point it's all reflex. It doesn't make any difference what I hit as long as I know which is the next chord and as long as I make the complete cycle and end up on the chord I started out with it will probably work.

You have played the same guitar (Gibson CF100 single cutaway acoustic) for several years now. What materials or qualities do you look for in an instrument?

What I play and the way I play, it really doesn't make any difference what kind of wood the instrument is made of. The size of the guitar and the width of the neck is a consideration. I like a wide neck, wider than a standard steel string and the length of the neck may be — the longer the neck obviously the more tension I'm going to get so that would come in handy for me because I've got the strings tuned low.

Let's talk about music. There were 3 or 4 types that must have interested you and still do, vaudeville, blues, tin pan alley, Cole Porter. Are there any types of music you haven't done that you would like to try?

Those styles are basically what I do. *What else is there?*

Tango! That is something I wouldn't mind doing. I have a great passion for the tango, the dance and the music. I still spend many hours listening to recordings by Carlos Gardel, the great tango singer from Argentina (a popular star in the '20s), but that's another story. At this time I feel my basic function as a performer is to be entertaining. . . certainly not an educator.

You mentioned education. Do you ever see what you do as a means to restoring and conserving old songs.

I don't know. . . that approach has its place has its place. It's possible to do that and be entertaining. I can see

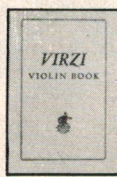
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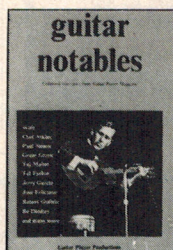
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doing that but maybe in a different environment — a documentary or something. But to go out and be entertaining and do a lecture?

What music of the '20s and '30s do you listen to these days? Which of those artists are most important to you?

Well, it's all I listen to. I don't listen to anything else except — well, let's say from the '20s and before. My favorite is (pianist) Jelly Roll Morton. There is very little, if any, compromise in his playing. It was wonderful music . . . and the harmony is just right, the melody is beautiful and he seemed to manage the musicians in such a way as to bring out their unique quality in the final product, and maintain the accuracy of his style.

There are a lot of great guitar players, too. All the obvious ones. Lonnie Johnson, Eddie Lang, Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, . . . my favorite would have to be Johnson. He made some wonderful records with Eddie Lang, plus he was a great singer, too. He had a great voice and playing ability at the same time. Which is after all what makes the difference between boring blues recordings and something worthwhile. He was a more complex

player than a lot of those people. He fit in the category of Django, Teddy Bunn, Bernard Addison. . . the blues since the '20s has become a formula and the lowest common denominator is what everybody plays.

If you take away the subtlety and complexity from the blues you're left with the simple formula. The subtle aspect of the blues is knowing how it became a musical form. The simple answer is: If you wanted to know something more about the music of 1930, you'd probably have to start listening to the music of that era, from 1910 to 1930.

You have studied all these older players. Do you read music at all?

Very poorly. In fact, I would say no. I never disciplined myself that way. It's like everything else I do — I either have to hear it or see it otherwise it doesn't translate. It's quite a drawback but I've learned to live with it. It's a drawback in the communication sense more than artistic. I don't feel that I'm deficient in that sense at all. In fact, quite the opposite. Of course, I try not to miss any opportunity to learn something new.

Are there any contemporary people you listen to?

I'm thinking, Boy George, MTV [*grins*], probably somebody, I really can't remember. I'm still discovering some recordings from the '20s and '30s. That, to me, is more exciting than turning the radio on unless it happens to be an ethnic music station of some interest.

I don't usually turn on the radio for music. I prefer the talk stations. If I want to listen to music I'll play a record or one of the many tapes I've put together over the years.

A Selected Discography Leon Redbone

Leon Redbone: *Champagne Charlie*, Warner Brothers K3165; *Double Time*, Warner Brothers B2971; *On The Track*, Warner Brothers B2888; *From Branch To Branch*, Emerald City (c/o Atlantic Records, 75 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10019) 38136; **Lonnie Johnson:** *Singin' The Blues*, MCA 2-4064; **Blind Boy Fuller:** *Blind Boy Fuller*, Blues Classics (c/o Arhoolie Records, 10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530) BSC 511; **Fats Waller:** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Victor CBL2-2965, *Fats Waller*, Victor AXM2-5518; **Jelly Roll Morton:** *Immortal Jelly Roll Morton*, Milestone MLS 2003; *Great Jazz Composers-Music of Jelly Roll Morton*, Columbia Special Products JCL-559.

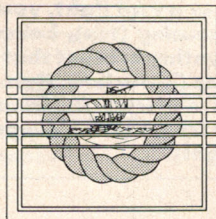
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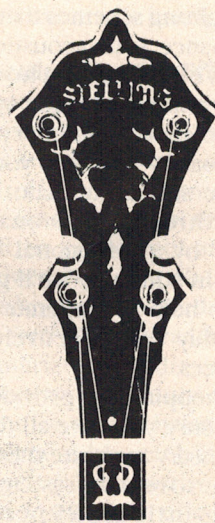
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