

Out of the Past: Leon Redbone, January 30 at the Capitol Theatre

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Leon Redbone sounds like a relic.

It's not just his repertoire -- mostly songs from the 1910s to the '30s -- but his attitude. Asked in a phone interview last week about the appeal of music that preceded his birth, he gave a curmudgeonly answer. As one moves back in time with music, "you realize that it's not getting any better," said Redbone, who will co-headline a show with guitar whiz Leo Kottke on Saturday at the Capitol Theatre. So he plays songs from the dawn of recorded popular music.

And his answers to questions are a drawling mix of detachment and coyness.

As anybody familiar with Redbone knows, it's not certain that the music of the early part of the 20th Century actually came before him. Wikipedia pegs his birth year as 1949, but Redbone has been strikingly successful at keeping his biographical details a mystery, at times claiming to be the child of Niccolò Paganini (dead since 1840) and Jenny Lind (1887). Other times he's said he was born on October 29, 1929. When I posed a question about music made before he was born, Redbone replied, "I'm not entirely sure that's correct."

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What's beyond doubt is that Redbone, since the mid-1970s, has somehow bridged the gap between the origins of his music and the age in which he delivers it. It would be wrong to say he performs these songs straight; there's an archness in his singing -- which sounds like it's coming out of only one side of his mouth -- but it's not condescending. There's no updating, and no sneering. It's just music he loves, presented with a casual immediacy but still authentic -- only missing the pops of aged vinyl.

Redbone's cultural ubiquity -- he was a regular musical guest on *Saturday Night Live*, did *The Muppet Show*, appeared in Budweiser commercials, was a voice in *Elf*, and has appeared in the PBS children's show *Between the Lions* -- would be unthinkable if he got his start in any decade after the 1970s.

But because he did establish himself in that relatively open period, Redbone has time on his side. As he explained in our interview, these songs work today in part *because* they're old and dusty and anachronistic.

He compared their power to the "impact of an aria" from long ago. As decades pass, Redbone said, "the music transcends the ability to understand the language." They survive on the "strength of melody, and strength of performance," rather than the lyrics.

"I like the song that basically has some kind of passion connected to it, or complete whimsy," he said. "Some weight to it."

Leon Redbone and Leo Kottke will perform on Saturday, January 30, at the Capitol Theatre (330 West Third Street in Davenport). The show starts at 8 p.m., and tickets are \$30 and \$35.50.

For more information on Redbone, visit LeonRedbone.com.