

The careers of performers who reside in the limelight are usually short-lived and over-exposed. So it's refreshing to encounter Leon Redbone, who has for decades remained so musically resonant and personally elusive.

Though his iconic guise of white fedora, jacket and sunglasses has been thoroughly satirized (anybody remember the "Leon Redbone workout" Far Side cartoon?), it's easy to overlook what a genuinely gifted artist he remains -- a role he inevitably tries to downplay.

"In some ways I've always been complacent in my approach to music," Redbone says. "So in some ways maybe I'm the pure definition of consistent."

At the core of his initial calling was the desire to simply honor songs from the past -- a waltz with bygone days that established him as sole curator of the museum of 20th century music. Over the course of his 30+ year, 15+ album career, the bard has continued his love affair with tunes from the turn-of-the-century (as in the second-to-last century), flapper-era radio ditties, Depression-spawned ragtime and World War II folk-jazz.

"I'm just an entertainer, and I use music as a medium for entertaining," he says in his trademark rumbling voice. "But I'm not really an entertainer either, because to be an entertainer it implies you have a great desire to want to entertain."

Redbone's career first gained momentum in the early '70s when Bob Dylan sought him out at the Mariposa Folk Festival. In a Rolling Stone interview, Dylan mentioned that if he ever started a label, Redbone would be the first artist he wanted to record.

Most folks were introduced to the man during his network debut on Saturday Night Live in 1976, where he showcased his indelible version of "Walkin' Stick." In a year typified by amplified arena rock, Redbone's intimate, low-key delivery proved to be a jolting antonym. Since then he's played numerous talk shows, functioning as a favorite guest of Johnny Carson.

The opportunities for this unlikely figure to impose himself on pop culture have been plentiful. Last year he appeared as a wise, animated snowman opposite Will Ferrell in the \$173 million-grossing comedy *Elf*. His duet with star Zooey Deschanel on the seasonal standard "Baby, It's Cold Outside" served as the picture's theme song.

Over the years, Redbone has also provided TV title tunes to *Mr. Belvedere* and *Harry and the Hendersons*, and had a memorable guest role as a quixotic, guitar-wielding guardian to the character Corky on ABC's critically acclaimed series *Life Goes On*.

Redbone popularized the homespun beer jingle "This Bud's for You" and was the "Getting to know you" voice on a series of Chevrolet advertisements. His work has even been adapted to the theatrical stage. New York choreographer Eliot Feld recently created the ballets *Mr. XYZ* (featuring Mikhail Baryshnikov) and *Paper Tiger*, which were woven around Redbone's signature songs.

"I think of these things as obstacles rather than opportunities," he confesses. "Because if they were opportunities it means I actually took the business of doing them seriously. To take myself too seriously is the gentle kiss of death."

As with many artists, these extracurricular activities are just window dressing compared to his main focus: performing live. Typically traveling as duo (w/ acoustic piano), Redbone's musical repertoire can hover between Dylan's "Living the Blues," Jelly Roll Morton's "I Hate a Man Like You," Eddy Arnold's "Bouquet of Roses" and the childhood folk favorite "Polly Wolly Doodle." Known more for covering other artists' songs, the musician admits he comes up with a few tunes of his own every decade, but counters with a grin, "I think that they're all mine to begin with."

If there is one common element to Redbone's diverse music it's his mastery of his acoustic guitar. It is easy to get lost in his stage exploits (which often gravitate between vaudeville and performance art) and overlook what a truly fine player he is -- fingerpicking with a ragtime bounce or jumping between chords with the grace of a hurdler. (Maybe the analogy should be with the grace of a card shark, because he makes it look so effortless it can often be deceiving.)

Describing his playing, the guitarist says, "I am totally absorbed in the business of learning, but I don't want to be an apprentice to the business of learning. I simply want to absorb everything I can and not be compartmentalized in my approach. ... I have no great desire to delve into the intricacies of the correct harmony or to notate everything. It doesn't interest me. I only know what sounds good to me."

Critics have certainly been divided when discussing his career -- which is not a surprising reaction considering the elusive Redbone has always been more comfortable as an "everyman's performer."

"I think with the first few records, some had dubbed what I did as camp. Of course, these were insensitive people who didn't understand the 'depth of my artistic passion,'" Redbone says, sarcasm in tow. "But nobody's saying that lately. It does seem more 'real' now, which is bizarre because it is even further removed from the source."

He may not think of himself as an accomplished musician, but musicians certainly do. He may not cater to categorization, but his audiences pigeonhole him firmly in the category of "great." And while he claims to have no desire to entertain, it is inevitable that when exposed to Leon Redbone there is no other option than being wholly entertained.

-- Jon Niccum