

# Coral Reefer band member plays for students

By MARK GILCHRIST  
Chief Photographer

Jim Mayer, 50, sits in a late model SUV behind South Columbus High School after a performance for Williams Township students as "Uncle Jim," and he's talking with a reporter from a small community newspaper with all the passion of a man on a mission.

Between gigs for a major rock band where he rides first-class and lives lavishly, where handlers handle everything for him hand-and-foot, and where the media he speaks to often report to millions of people, he is comfortable – eager, actually – cramped in this small situation.

Mayer plays bass guitar for Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefer Band, and

with them, he performs in front of audiences who sometimes outnumber the entire Columbus County population. In stadiums filled with cheering masses, he gazes into the crowd of "Parrothead" adoring fans who would cut off their beaks if they could, just to be like him, just once. This, arguably, is the top of one's game, and he has been at the top for more than two decades.

Mayer became a Coral Reefer fairly easily. He and his brother, Peter, had a band in St. Louis with a Warner Brothers Records deal. In 1988 Buffett needed someone to produce his next album, and he contacted Elliott Scheiner, who was also the producer for Mayer's band.

"He talked with Jimmy Buffett and said 'Hey, I got these new young guys from St. Louis, Missouri and

they're really good, and I think you should try them,'" Mayer says. "Jimmy loved us, and it was one of those 'right place at the right time' things, and Jimmy was ready for a change, and so he hired us."

Getting hired is one thing, but keeping a job like that is what really takes talent, and more.

"When you get up to the level of Jimmy Buffett," Mayer says, "he can hire anyone in the world he wants. The musicians in the Coral Reefer Band are all totally overqualified – they are incredible musicians – but the reason they are there is that they have great attitudes, they are great team players and they are very low-key. Everyone in the band is very relaxed, helpful

See *Uncle Jim*, page 11-A



Jim Mayer on stage

## Uncle Jim

Continued from page 1-A

and supportive."

Over the years, Mayer saw the effect that personalities – good and bad – have on whether a person can survive life in a rock band these days.

"Anyone who comes with an attitude... they are literally gone in about week or two," Mayer says. "Jimmy's one great gift – well, he has many – is gathering good talent around him – it's almost like a family now." Mayer spends about three months each year on tour, rehearsing and in the studio, and, he says, it's like a huge vacation, flying around the U.S. and Europe, living the lavish life of a rock star.

"It's a completely different world," he says. "It's private jets, five-star hotels and resorts. Everything is taken care of. He [Buffett] takes really good care of us... so when you get on stage, you're ready to have fun.

"The best way I can describe it is... Well, the biggest difference is when you're playing a small club, you have to create the energy and push for the energy. When you're playing a big stage with Buffett, it's like riding on top of a huge wave. So what you have to do is two things: you have to relax and pay attention. Those are the two things, relax and pay attention, because it's literally like there's a wave going on, and you're just riding the wave.

"There is a major gear shift," he says, "after we've been home for a month, and suddenly we walk out on stage, it's like Wow! It's like being plugged into a thousand volts – it's really intense.

"It has turned into a wonderful life – Jimmy's incredible to work with. The band, I respect and love every one of them. It's amazing, it's literally the most fun I've ever had... It's pretty incredible, and I feel very blessed. Sometimes I can't believe it, but mainly I feel grateful – I feel very grateful. It never gets boring, but you have to get used to it so you can function in it."

The life of a rock star affords a person much time off, which many spend, well, like rock stars, in self-destructive ways. But not Mayer, who has found his passion off-tour helping children as Uncle Jim. That is what he did, at an extreme length, last week, on this project that began about a decade ago.

"To be honest, I kind of got into kid's music naturally," he says. "I think like a child, and for some reason writing kids' music is one of the easiest

things for me."

Mayer had sung for his nieces and nephews over the years, developing songs, and then he put a CD or two together. The accolades came in heavy, and then teachers began talking with him with concerns about a rise in bullying, so he developed a one-man show to help children resist being bullied and being bullies.

"I don't have any children of my own," he says. "I actually have 26 nieces and nephews, but I'm single, which works well, because my career is my full focus. I hope to have a family and kids at some point, but right now my whole focus is working with children and helping them live better lives."

Mayer has a particular challenge as Uncle Jim of not just entertaining children, but offering them help through a message of self-worth and encouragement. Not a professional child educator, he consults with several in the field in developing his stage shows, CDs, an extensive website and classroom curricula. His songs are filled with messages, so many that certainly not every child grabs all of them. But it's like he's on stage tossing pixie dust out to the children, and here and there a speck will land on a shoulder or a soul and it will stick, and that is the hope that charges Uncle Jim.

It's easy to look at a rock band on stage before 60,000 people and think the musicians are all made of money, but that's not always the case. Think of it as a company, and the band members are employees, working for a salary.

Okay, a pretty good salary – and some may receive royalties on recordings – but they don't have a lot to throw away.

Mayer's career allows him freedom to work on this project, but he can't bankroll it. He has organized a nonprofit called A Happy, Healthy Child to consolidate resources on bullying prevention. It seeks corporate sponsorships and donations from sales of Uncle Jim materials. Information is at [Unclejimrocks.com](http://Unclejimrocks.com).

"I've got my money," he says, meaning that life with Buffett has set him for life, but "I'm driven to do this by the purpose of saving kids' lives and helping them be happy and helpful.

"This is helping me too, to come here [to Columbus County]. I love doing it. I enjoy doing it. I become a better person by doing it. Hopefully I help other people, and that to

me is the ideal scenario."

Possibly one of his greatest challenges in this scenario hit him in November when Jasmine McClain, 10, of Chadbourne, and an Illinois girl took their lives.

"When I got the news, it shook me to the core," he says. "I was so sad that they made the choice that they did. They must have been so alone – I just can't imagine." Mayer put his thoughts together into the song "Show me the Light," named because the two girls made their choice in the evening, as so many do, and he wished in song that they could have won the struggle through the loneliness of those dark hours until the sun again rose.

If Mayer ever felt a calling to help children, this was the clarion call, and he answered. He offered public appearances to the districts of both of the girls' schools. Columbus County responded, and when he learned of the opportunity and the great need here, he upped his offer.

So, that is why he blocked his schedule for more than three days last week, flew out here, stayed in a motel in Whiteville, paid for an assistant to travel with him, and gave seven performances to about 4,000 grade school children at East, South and West Columbus high schools.

That is why he donated many of his CDs to area teachers, why he set up and packed away his own equipment at each show, freshened up in dressing rooms made for high school kids, and waited on himself, hand and foot. That is why he is happy to talk so eagerly with even a small community newspaper journalist, and why his eyes brighten when he reviews nearly a week spent on his own dime, spent delivering his message for "the purpose of saving kids' lives and helping them be happy and helpful."

His eyes are ones that have seen fans by the millions staring back at him in adoration, that have watched the world go by through windows of private jets, and that light up as he sits in an SUV in a rural schoolyard, summing up a week of delivering his message.

"But I'm playing to 4,000 kids," he says. "That's huge to me!"

