

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

These People's Stories Have to Be Shared

John H. Cunningham and Ted E. Haynes cut 25 hours of Coral Reefer testimony into Occupational Hazard — and learned what Jane Buffett thought of it only after Tom Freston emailed her from Santa Barbara.

Interview by Paul Salfen • AMFM Magazine



Official key art for Occupational Hazard: The First Coral Reefers. Courtesy Greene Street Entertainment / Confluence Productions.

By the time Paul Salfen sat down again with John H. Cunningham and Ted E. Haynes, *Occupational Hazard: The First Coral Reefers* had already done the festival circuit's hardest job: it had made rooms full of strangers cry in the dark. They first crossed paths with Salfen at the Dallas International Film Festival, where the picture took the 2026 Audience Award for Documentary Feature. Now the rest of the country can see it. The 92-minute documentary — directed by Cunningham, produced by Cunningham and Haynes, narrated by Academy Award winner Jeff Bridges, shot by Troy Jackson and cut by Richard Lowe — opened a limited theatrical run on September 4, 2026, Jimmy Buffett Day, after premiering at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

Cunningham sounds like a man who has finally been allowed to exhale. "You're fighting every step of the way to keep things happening, stay on schedule, stay on budget," he told Salfen. "And we're finally into the theatrical release time, and social media is blowing up. Everybody's so excited. It's very rewarding." Haynes calls this the fun part — not that the grind of production and post wasn't, he is careful to add, but this is the part where the work leaves the cutting room and meets the people it was made for.

WHERE THE PARTY BEGAN

Cunningham did not arrive at this story as a tourist. In a director's statement issued with the film he is plain about the assignment: "Jimmy Buffett was one of the most prolific and

successful performers of our time. We created *Occupational Hazard: The First Coral Reefers* to document the untold story of his formative years and the creation of the original Coral Reefer Band through the firsthand accounts of the musicians, producer, tour manager, and friends who were there. Capturing these stories was especially important because, like Jimmy himself, many of the original players are no longer with us.” He first saw Buffett and the Coral Reefers perform in 1977 and moved to Key West the following year. “His music — and the island that inspired so much of it — has remained an important part of my life ever since. As a filmmaker, writer, and historian, I felt a responsibility to preserve these stories before they were lost.”

That life already ran through the music. Cunningham is the USA TODAY bestselling author of the twelve-book, Key West–based Buck Reilly adventure series. With permission from Buffett’s longtime manager, Howard Kaufman, he put Jimmy on the page as a character in the third novel, *Crystal Blue*. That book inspired *The Ballad of Buck Reilly*, which Cunningham co-wrote with singer-songwriter Matt Hoggatt, whose first album came out on Buffett’s Mailboat Records. Through Hoggatt he met many of the musicians who sit at the center of *Occupational Hazard*. Those relationships became songwriting collaborations with original Coral Reefers Roger Bartlett and Keith Sykes — both of whom appear in the film.

“Those experiences convinced me there was an extraordinary story waiting to be told,” Cunningham writes. Legendary harmonica player Greg “Fingers” Taylor called the stretch the band’s “heavy artillery years” — young musicians as unpredictable as they were talented, long before the polished unit audiences would know for the next three decades. The 1970s and early ’80s were a different era for touring musicians, and the picture is built to hold both the excesses and the artistry. The cast walks through how defining songs and albums came together, how Buffett fought the industry to record with his own band instead of studio players, and how success forced hard decisions about the very people who had built the sound.

The numbers around the career are public: 32 studio albums, 14 live albums, 11 compilations, fifty years. What *Occupational Hazard* argues is narrower and sharper. The music that defined the concerts largely came from this early period, and few fans know the story behind it. “Life on the road was raw, unpredictable, and often broke,” Cunningham writes. “Jimmy and the band were simply young musicians chasing a dream, embracing adventure wherever it led. Sometimes they looked like rising stars; sometimes they looked like shooting stars. Either way, they kept moving forward.”

For some people the legacy is the Margaritaville empire. For others it is the Parrot Head parking-lot church of tailgates and coconut bras. Underneath both, Cunningham insists, was the music and the group that helped invent it. “Jimmy Buffett’s final message to his friends was simple: ‘Keep the party going.’ *Occupational Hazard* shows where the party began.”

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— JOHN H. CUNNINGHAM

TWENTY-FIVE HOURS, NINETY-TWO MINUTES

Salfen wanted the moment they knew they had something. Not the press-kit version. The private one, mid-production, when a scene lands and the room changes temperature.

Cunningham started with the math. Twenty-five hours of interviews. A feature that had to live at 92 minutes. Half of that runtime reserved for archives. “It’s kind of like, all right, what do we keep in, what do we leave out?” The first paper cut ran a hundred pages and ballooned into four hours of film with no archives at all. Getting from that pile to the picture now in theaters was, he said, “very challenging.”

They had help. Award-winning editor Richard Lowe — the cutter behind the music documentary *Muscle Shoals* — and a small, competent crew that delivered another ten minutes every week. “We just increasingly felt, all right, this is going well,” Cunningham said. Then he handed the floor to Haynes, half-joking that he might be overly optimistic.

Haynes was not. “There was a moment in the very first interview that I, taking my copious notes, said, oh damn, we’ve got something. Like this is going to be something.” He still wanted the validation — other people saying it was a pretty good movie — but the stories themselves announced their size early. “It was pretty early on when we heard some of these stories that it was apparent we had something great.”

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NOT A NORMAL DOCUMENTARY EXPERIENCE

Salfen had already seen what the picture does to a Dallas room. Tears. Not the polite festival snuffle. The real thing. He asked what they hoped people would carry out of the theater, because *Occupational Hazard* is not the usual rock-doc loop of clips, credits, and a closing-credits needle drop.

Cunningham estimated the team watched the film fifty times before anyone outside the inner circle saw it. “Every one of those times I would still tear up on certain parts. And then when we’re at a theater watching it with people and I see other people getting emotional, if you get choked up, it’s like, all right.” That, to him, is the beauty of pulling something together that not only hits you — it hits the stranger in the next row.

The interviews were not dry history lessons. Michael Utley. Mac McAnally. Men on the brink of tears while the cameras rolled. Cunningham remembered the instinct and the limit in the same breath. “If I’m Barbara Walters right now, I’m going to go one level further and make them cry. But at that point I probably couldn’t even talk. I’m seeing these guys get choked up, so I have to change the subject because it’s like, we’re not going to torture you here.”

Haynes declined to decorate the point. “I don’t know if I can expand or improve upon John. I don’t want to step on that. It is quite an experience.”

Salfen put the next question in the mouths of the aspiring filmmakers who had already looked at Occupational Hazard the way young directors look at a finished picture and think, that's the job. What would each of them tell someone trying to follow the same path?

Haynes went first, after a little deferral. Supporting young filmmakers is not a talking point for him. It is practice. They brought on a recent University of Tampa graduate as assistant editor on purpose — they needed the help, and they wanted to hand someone the chance to be inside a feature. Then the credo:

"The thing that I always lean on is story is absolutely king. If you have a good story, if there's something that you're passionate about, do not stop. There are ways to accomplish it. Be diligent and determined. And if the story is there, chase it until the best possible story." He added the asterisk that matters in a music documentary stuffed with famous names. "Story is about characters. It's not about events. It is about the people. And that's where it starts."

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This is Cunningham's first feature after two shorts, though he has written a stack of books and chased other kinds of creative work. His advice is less manifesto than field note. "Follow your heart. Don't be afraid to fail. Believe in yourself or the process. Surround yourself with good people." You may not land a Richard Lowe, he said, but you can find someone as hungry as their associate editor — "a kid right out of college" who would crawl over hot coals to get the picture where it needed to go. Work ethic. A good team. And then, circling back to Haynes, the story and the characters. Without the team, "it doesn't go anywhere."

HAIL MARYS, PLURAL

Salfen's co-host is Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboy who caught the Hail Mary and later walked into the Hall of Fame. On their show the Hail Mary is a working metaphor: the moment you have to go for it. He asked Cunningham and Haynes for theirs.

Cunningham counted several. Getting Kenny Chesney. Getting Jeff Bridges. Pushing through the ordinary adversities that try to kill an independent documentary. Even the small ones counted. Deborah McColl told them she didn't remember much, didn't have anything to add, that it wasn't worth their time. They flew to Los Angeles anyway and interviewed her alongside Michael Utley. "She was amazing, and she had great recollections. Part of her stories and the other stories kind of determined, all right, now we've learned things that we didn't know that help really sculpt the storyline."

Haynes said every decision felt like a Hail Mary while they were inside it. They planned well. They prepared well. The timeline was brutally short. The first grouping of interviews arrived almost immediately after they decided to make the film. "Probably our biggest Hail Mary was,

we're just going to do this. It's not going to be a ten, fifteen minute short film. This is a feature because it's the story that needs to be told."

THE PEOPLE WHO WERE THERE AT THE BEGINNING

Salfen asked what they tell themselves when the footage pile starts to look unmanageable — the private sentence that keeps a filmmaker on the path.

Haynes has one. It is the lack of recognition for the Rodgers and the Keiths and the Joshes and the Deborahs, the people who were there at the beginning and whom most of the culture still cannot name. "To have these performers be somewhere and be asked if they know any Jimmy Buffett music, I mean, that just blows my mind." On the worst day, that is the sentence that works. "These people's stories have to be shared. And sooner than later, because we've had some folks say along, even during the making of this film, that we didn't get an opportunity to share that story. They're not going to be around forever. We've got to do this. Tell the story now."

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Cunningham's version is a vow to the cast. Stay true to them. Share the story while they can still sit in a theater and enjoy it. The subjects are fifty years old as history, and very few people know the details. The trap, he said, is making the film so detail-oriented that it becomes boring. The assignment is justice — and an ensemble picture.

"It was never meant to be a Jimmy Buffett story, quite frankly. Jimmy's the leader of the band. He started with him failing in Nashville and coming to Key West because Key West was important to it, and setting out on the road from there. But what we really wanted to get to was all of our other characters' stories, and how it impacted their lives, and how meaningful it was to them. So that was, got to keep focused on that and not deviate away from what that original goal was."

WHAT WOULD JIMMY THINK?

Salfen asked the question hanging over every authorized-feeling music documentary made after the principal is gone. What would Jimmy Buffett think of Occupational Hazard?

Cunningham had two answers, and he offered them in the order they arrived. First, Michael Utley — on every album from the Seventies forward, producer of a lot of them, as close to Buffett as almost anyone in the band. After they finished the film and sent it to him, Utley's sentiment was simple: Jimmy would have loved this.

Then the nail-biter. Through what Cunningham called "a series of fascinating events," they met Jane Buffett. She reached out. Tom Freston, the co-founder of MTV, had seen the picture at its Santa Barbara premiere and written her. The email arrived out of the blue. "My friend Tom Freston said it was great. I got to see it." They sent the film. She watched it in Malibu with

Anjelica Huston and Jane Rosenthal, who founded Tribeca. On the call the next week, Jane Buffett did not hedge. “I loved it so much. It was just how it was back in the day. So great to see the people back then and how they are today.”

Cunningham laughed at the memory of the wait. “Once again, now we feel a little safer.” Haynes would not pretend to speak for a man who is gone. He would only say that the people who were closest, the ones who have already said yes, make him believe Buffett would enjoy and appreciate what they were trying to do. Salfen closed the thought the way the room wanted it closed: Jimmy smiling down on it.

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WHAT COMES NEXT

Salfen asked the last practical question. What are they making now?

Haynes is already in pre-production on another feature documentary, this one about the role of tabletop role-playing games in the prison system. “A little different topic. A little different vibe.”

Cunningham is circling back to the work that made him want a film credit in the first place. Before *Occupational Hazard* he was adapting screenplays from his novel series — he is the USA TODAY bestselling author of the Key West-set Buck Reilly adventures — and he had never put anything on film. “All right, well, I’ll make a film that I can control, and then I’ll have something to talk about.” They met a lot of people on this one. He hopes to push the next thing forward.

Salfen signed off the way AMFM likes to leave a conversation that still has heat in it: tell everybody to check it out. The original Coral Reefers — Fingers Taylor’s “heavy artillery,” the ones who were there before the Parrot Head empire had a name — finally have a picture that treats them as the story, not the footnote. Capturing it mattered, Cunningham has said, because like Jimmy himself, many of the original players are no longer with us. The party Buffett asked his friends to keep going has an origin now, in 92 minutes, with Bridges on the track and Jane Buffett already on the record.

FIND OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

Occupational Hazard: The First Coral Reefers (92 min.) is in limited theatrical release as of September 4, 2026 — Jimmy Buffett Day — with a U.S./Canada digital and TVOD window to follow. Narrated by Jeff Bridges. Directed by John H. Cunningham. Produced by Cunningham and Ted E. Haynes. Cinematography by Troy Jackson. Edited by Richard Lowe.

Official site: occupationalhazardfilm.com · Instagram: [@theoccupationalhazardfilm](https://www.instagram.com/theoccupationalhazardfilm) · YouTube:

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Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, September 2026.

*Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of *Going For It!*, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.*