

The Reverend Kingfish

The Reverend Kingfish is a bit of an oddity, an outlier seemingly plucked from the Jazz Age. In his natty duds and cocked fedora, he waxes profane in a world he's made for himself. Anyone who find themselves at a Reverend Kingfish show will hear songs about characters who are "hellbound," but whether that's good or bad is a matter of perspective.



[click to enlarge](#)

PHOTO BY AARON WINTERS
Reverend Kingfish performing at The Spirit Room.

His songs are about infidelity, booze, violence, and death, as well as tunes from the Great American Songbook. With laconic twists of phrase and rhythm changes on his arch-top guitar, he'll remind you of the late singersongwriter Leon Redbone.

"The problem is the songs I write are distasteful to a lot of people," the good Reverend, a.k.a. Stephen O'Brien, says. "And they tend to focus on uncomfortable topics."

Kingfish's style is a casual lope across mellow jazz progressions. Cover tunes — from Fats Waller and Jimmie Rodgers to Bessie Smith, Jelly Roll Morton,

and Blind Blake — are also a big part of what he does.

His jazz-infected blues sound like lullabies sung by Anton LaVey. They are beautiful, with classic panache and parlance, which seemingly fly in the face of the Reverend's dark worldview and gallows humor. The songs contain a pinch of noirish sarcasm, too.

"Sometimes I feel like the Mister Rogers of depravity," he says. "I want people to be comfortable in their own skin. Even if society doesn't. I don't think I can do it any other way. It just happens naturally."

Perhaps unsettling to some, Kingfish presents macabre subject matter with nonchalance and sunshine in his voice. "Graveyard, graveyard, I don't wanna live no more," he sings casually, but with conviction, on "Graveyard Blues."

"I like to talk and sing about the inside of people, the part they won't let out, the part they are hiding," he says. "Everybody's got it. I like bringing this to the surface. Not just because it's fun, but to let people know you can have these feelings, even if society doesn't accept them. You're still OK as long as you're not hurting anyone. Rochester is a fairly hip place, you can get away with a lot more than you can in, say, a place like Biloxi."

The Reverend Kingfish has roots here. He graduated from Penfield High School before packing a grip and heading out west for a "business-type career." He came back east two years ago and began performing, which is something he'd never done before.

[click to enlarge](#)



“I hadn’t had any inspiration,” he says of his delayed creative endeavors. “Now, my music comes in two parts. I cover old blues and jazz from the '20s, and soon after arriving back in Rochester, I started to get my own ideas for writing my own songs.”

But don’t hold your breath for a Reverend Kingfish record. He ain’t doin’ it.

“I don’t really have any interest in recording,” he says. “It sounds like a pain in the ass and from what I hear, it’s expensive. I’m only interested in performing in front of an audience.”

If that sounds like he’s selling himself short, it’s because he is.

“I’m good at that,” he says.