
Quartzite's Most Famous Pianist

By Kerry Pechter *Wed, Dec 16, 2015*

Paul Winer, aka Sweet Pie, is a 72-year-old blues musician, nudist, used book seller and one of tiny Quartzite, Arizona's principal tourist attractions. If you visit his store, be sure to buy a few books or albums. He never saved much for retirement.

What happens if you don't save enough for your retirement?

You might spend your golden years in the desert, nearly naked but deeply tanned, living hand-to-mouth, peddling plastic-wrapped pulp fiction, and banging out boogie-woogie on an old piano for curious French video-bloggers.

In short, you could be 72-year-old Paul Winer, aka Sweet Pie, the retired musician and current proprietor of the Reader's Oasis Bookstore in Quartzite, Arizona, a sun-bleached pit stop on I-10, mid-way between Phoenix and Los Angeles.

Earlier this month, a friend and I were motoring west from Phoenix on I-10 en route to Joshua Tree National Park, where we planned to hike and camp before I attended the IMCA 2015 Retirement & Decumulation conference in Scottsdale later in the week.

We stopped for gas in Quartzite, a tiny town that blossoms in January and February when regiments of rock hounds arrive in RVs for one of the nation's largest rock and gem fairs. We passed Sweet Darlene's Restaurant & Bakery, an open-air junk-and-rock shop, and a used bookstore with, curiously, a parking lot big enough for tour busses.

As red flowers attract hummingbirds, used bookstores attract me. Kim, a friendly, honey-haired clerk, welcomed me into the dark, non-climate-controlled store, which was as much Bedouin tent as conventional four-walled structure. When my pupils adjusted from the outside glare to the inner shade, I noticed a small framed photograph of a thin, brown, half-naked man seated at a piano. A moment later, that same man scurried by me between two tables stacked with books, each one protected by plastic wrapping from the invasive desert sand.

"Is that you in the picture?" I superfluously asked. He confessed that it was. He wore a black wool sweater, a black hat covered with buttons, a thong, sunglasses and sandals. The hat, sunglasses, and a free-range moustache and beard hid most of his face, but his thin beef-jerky legs were fully exposed. He appeared to have no buttocks or body fat.

Paul Winer (pronounced with a long "i"), it turned out, is not shy about revealing either his body or his personal history. "I've had 68 court cases filed against me and I won every one of them," he told me. Really? I asked. For nudity? For obscenity? "Yes, for all them," he said. I soon learned that he hails from New England, that he knew Johnny Winter but not Paul Butterfield and that his home is the only one in Quartzite with a mezuzah on the doorjamb.

As "Sweet Pie," Winer performed barrelhouse piano on the college concert circuit in the U.S. and Canada during the Blues Revival of the late 60s and early 70s. His specialty: Performing naked but for a codpiece. Later, he moved to Arizona to be near his aging parents. His father died recently at age 90-something. His daughter, he mentioned in passing, died when she was eight years old.

"Count Basie told me that I had the best left hand on the piano that he had ever heard, beside himself. But I never studied music," Winer told me, as he tells hundreds of people

who pass this way each year. We stood



“I invented the phrase, ‘F— ‘em if they can’t take a joke,’ he continued. “Everyone thinks Bette Midler invented it. But I used it first at Brown University and she used it for the first time a month later. I’m famous on the Internet but we’re just making room and board here.” Two women in down parkas approached us from the parking lot. “Excuse me for a moment,” he said.

Winer’s international fame then became evident. The two women, a videographer and sound technician, said they worked for a French TV station. Like many Europeans, they knew about Winer from the “[Roadside America](#)” website, and knew that he was one of the few tourist attractions between Taliesin West (Frank Lloyd Wright’s former home and architectural studio in Scottsdale, AZ) and posh Palm Springs, CA.

On the one hand, there's only one conventional way to prepare for a secure retirement: You amass a big pile of securities or real property in advance. On the other hand, there's no limit to the range of inventions that older Americans will employ that will allow them to at least muddle through—and perhaps even enjoy—their final decades even when they haven't saved “enough.”

Let's count the ways: Some people move to cheap digs in places like Nicaragua or Portugal; some share homes with people they meet through the Green House Project; some take to the road in Airstream trailers; some earn \$10 an hour handing out canapes to shoppers at Wegman's Markets; some move in with their adult children; some offer their children's bedrooms on Airbnb. There will always be a “retirement savings gap,” and older people will always build bridges across it—even if it means going naked and opening a bookstore in the desert.

The French journalists had asked Winer to sing and play the piano for them while they videotaped and recorded him. To prepare for his photo op, Winer mounted an adult-sized tricycle and pedaled out of sight. He returned in a new outfit: a red holiday sweater, red socks and a seasonal codpiece: a small, red, upside-down Santa's cap with a white pom-pom at the tip. Then he led the French women to a baby grand piano inside the store. He sat down and played an original composition, “A Little Nothing.” You can listen to it [here](#). (Video courtesy of Jeffrey Schell.)

Before my friend and I departed for Joshua Tree, I bought a copy of Winer's 1971 “Lost Tapes” CD for \$15. It seemed like the least I should spend in return for an hour's amusement. As we drove west, however, I remembered his comment about the daughter he'd lost. An under-funded retirement can test a person's resourcefulness, but some things are almost beyond endurance.

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