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ZJ CZUPOR'S MYSTERY MINUTE: ON TOUR WITH DEAD WRITERS

Richard Samet “Kinky” Friedman (1944-2024), named “Kinky” for his curly hair, studied psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. While in college, he founded his first band, King Arthur & the Carrots, which poked fun at surf music. In 1971, he founded his second band, Kinky Friedman & The Texas Jewboys. That band attracted the attention of George Frayne, a country rock singer known for his band Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen. Frayne recommend Friedman to Vanguard Records, which produced his album and attracted enough attention to get Friedman an appearance on the Grand Ole Opry.

He later toured with Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Review in 1976 and his third album featured Dylan, Ringo Starr, and Eric Clapton. Another album featured Willie Nelson, Tom Waits, and Lyle Lovett. A third album featured Waits, Dylan, Nelson and Johnny Cash. His most famous song was “They Ain’t Making Jews Like Jesus Anymore.” The song is also considered his most misunderstood and controversial.

Rolling Stone magazine called him “country music’s most rebellious renaissance man.” In 1975, Friedman’s band was taped for season one of Austin City Limits, a popular PBS show which aired live concerts in Austin, Texas. But the band’s entire set was deemed too edgy and the show never aired. It was the first time an artist was taped for the show and not aired. The show was eventually released in 2007 by New West Records. Some of Friedman’s performance can be viewed on YouTube.

Friedman said, “Had they gone ahead and run it, I’d undoubtedly be playing a beer joint tonight on the backside of Buttocks, Texas. I’d never had had the chance to become a best-selling novelist, a friend of presidents, and a candidate for governor...So God bless Austin City Limits.”

During his musical career he produced 19 albums from 1973-2025, the last Poet of Motel 6, was produced posthumously. And he had four singles of which Sold American (1973) made the U.S. country chart at number 69. That song made the charts after country music legend Glen Campbell recorded a cover version.

Friedman's band later broke up as performance gigs dried up and the lack of money to pay band members became a pressure point. So, he turned to writing mysteries. His first novel, *Greenwich Killing Time* (1986) and subsequent novels, *A Case of Lone Star* (1987), *The Mile High Club* (2000), and *Elvis, Jesus and Coca-Cola* (1993) were bestsellers. He included himself as the novel's detective protagonist with loose plots, whimsical adventures and in-jokes about New York City, politics, and publishing. His novel *Road Kill* (1997) was a murder mystery about his travels with Willie Nelson. That novel made the *New York Times* bestseller list.

He was as prolific a mystery writer as he was a musician and songwriter and often turned out two to three novels per year. He cited Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler as inspirations.

His popularity as a novelist drew the attention of President Bill Clinton who invited Friedman to visit at the White House. As he stood with Clinton in front of a crowd of 50 or 60 people, Friedman offered Clinton a Cuban cigar, which is illegal in America. Clinton was embarrassed and said, "Do you know what you're doing to me?" To which Friedman replied, "Don't think about it as helping their economy, think of it as burning their fields." The crowd cracked up.

His last novel, *Ten Little New Yorkers* (2005), a send-up of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (originally titled *Ten Little Indians*, 1939), was published by Simon & Schuster. The semi-autobiographical whodunit is about a murderer who's methodically killing off unsuspecting Manhattan men—eight corpses and counting—but the cops think Kinky is their man which forces Friedman to find the real killer. The ending is considered a "shocker."

Here's an example of his rambling and irreverent style in the novel's opening pages:

It was a hard rain, as Bob Dylan might say, but I didn't mind. In fact, I didn't really give a damn if the whole city floated away. Well, maybe it'd be nice to keep Chinatown. When it's raining cats and dogs I miss the animals and people I've loved in my life and I feel closer to them and farther away from today. Today is just a garbageman in his yellow raincoat. Today is the wet woman with the wild hair walking willfully into the white wall. Today's a goddamn vase without flowers. Hell, give me a passably decent tomorrow, I said. Give me a handful of scrappy yesterdays. Give me liberty or give me death or give me life on the Mississippi.

Friedman said, “There are many people around the world who listen to the songs that made me infamous and read the books that made me respectable.” He also wrote two stand-alone novels, in which he was not a character, Kill Two Birds and Get Stoned (2003) and The Christmas Pig: A Fable (2006).

And he authored several nonfiction humorous titles including: Scuse Me While I Whip This Out: Reflections on Country Singers, Presidents, And Other Troublemakers (2004); Texas Hold'em: How I Was Born in a Manger, Died in The Saddle, And Came Back As a Horny Toad (2005); and Drinker With a Writing Problem (2011) a compilation of his Texas Monthly columns.

In addition, he penned a travelog The Great Psychedelic Armadillo Picnic: A “Walk” in Austin (2004), as well as Kinky Friedman’s Guide to Texas Etiquette: Or How To Get To Heaven Or Hell Without Going Through Dallas (2002).

Aside from his musical and writing career, Friedman had an interest in but failing attempts at politics. He ran for governor of Texas in 2006 and placed fourth in a field of six candidates. After his loss, he said, “I won that election in every state but Texas.”

During the campaign, he promised, “I’ll keep us out of war with Oklahoma.” One of his campaign slogans was, “How Hard Could It Be?” He also ran for Texas Agriculture Commissioner in 2010 and lost. He also lost an earlier campaign for justice of the peace in Kerrville, Texas in 1986.

From 2001 to 2005, Friedman wrote a monthly column for Texas Monthly magazine which was suspended when he ran for governor, but the magazine brought his column back in 2008 and he continued writing until 2011. In that span he contributed 63 articles about his life and times, and politics. He also appeared on the magazine’s cover three times.

In 2011, playwright Ted Swindley, famous for the hit musical Always...Patsy Cline, wrote the play Becoming Kinky...The World According to Kinky Friedman. The play, which premiered in Houston, Texas on March 28, 2011 used three actors to portray Friedman in his youth, his singing career, and political run. In the mid-1980s, after living in New York City and Los Angeles Friedman returned to Echo Hill Ranch and with his sister, Marcie, re-opened the ranch in 2021 for summer youth programs. Aside from his rebel attitude toward almost anything, Friedman said, “Echo Hill Ranch is the place where I learned to ride and to shoot straight, and to tell the truth.”

In a 2003 Texas Monthly column about the ranch titled “Hummingbird Man” Friedman wrote,

“The juniper tree blew down in a storm two winters ago, but the hummers have found other places to nest. One of them is in my heart. And I still see my dad sitting under the juniper tree, only the tree doesn’t seem dead, and neither does he.”

His sister said Friedman “began suffering from Parkinson’s as far back as 2020 and knew early something was going on health-wise.” He wrote and produced his last record album Poet of Motel 6 as a goodbye letter.

Perhaps his rebellious outlook on life is best exemplified in this quote, “You don’t accomplish much by swimming with the mainstream. Hell, a dead fish can do that.”

Kinky Friedman died on June 27, 2024 in Medina, Texas from complications of Parkinson’s disease. He was 79. His close friend, Kent Perkins, told the Associated Press, “He died peacefully. He smoked a cigar, went to bed and never woke up.”



**Kinky Friedman, backstage during the Farm Aid benefit concert in Dallas in 1992.
Photo courtesy: Texas Monthly magazine, June 27, 2024. Paul Natkin/Getty**