

Bio Jimmie Ward

On September 1, 1935, a star was born in Monroe, Louisiana, to the proud parents of Isaiah Jack and Ozell Ward. Jimmie Lee Ward was born with an indomitable spirit, and a relentless desire for success. This blue star was destined to shine as bright as any in the heavens. As a young man, Jimmie lived the rough life of his rural southern community. He picked cotton which was one of the few opportunities blacks had to survive and help their families. A lifelong friend, Beret "Chief" Armstrong, remembers that he and Jimmie were shared row cotton pickers. Meaning, they each had a long row of cotton to pick, and then shared the cotton picking in the long middle row of cotton between them.

Jimmie graduated from Richwood High School in 1955, but he had plans and dreams far beyond his Ouachita Parish home. One of his first better job opportunities was driving the school bus for his fellow students while he was still in high school. Between the cotton fields and his bus driving responsibilities, Jimmie decided there must be another way.

One day, Jimmie's good friend Norwood Spencer came by in a brand new car. Norwood was driving the biggest, brightest, shiniest new Cadillac that Jimmie had ever seen. Norwood was returning to his boyhood home from California. After being impressed by riding in Norwood's new automobile and considering his best options, Jimmie decided right then and there to move to California; that anything would be better than picking cotton in the hot sun of a Louisiana summer.

After moving to his new home state of California in 1955, Jimmie worked at whatever opportunities came his way. He spent two years in the U.S. Army and was honorably discharged in 1961. He had the opportunity to work as a bartender for Ray's Club, a favorite night spot in Oakland, CA in 1961. Jimmie enjoyed his job, and made many good friends quickly as he honed his bartending skills. He eventually landed a job as a Longshoreman in 1963. He worked the docks by day and the bars at night. As a dock worker, Jimmie made good money—he made even more good friends. Jimmie was happy with the burgeoning California economy. Shortly after his new found success, Jimmie was not only able to buy his own shiny new Cadillac, but a Lincoln Continental as well. Times were good.

Jimmie's outgoing infectious, down-to-earth personality soon had him entertaining and wanting to share his new found success with others in his own location. In 1959, Jimmie expanded his entertainment options and opened his first night spot, The Lamp Post on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, CA. His location was a success, fueled by the support of fellow Longshoremen and his quick rising popularity behind the bar. Unfortunately, with his new found success, also came notoriety.

After an incident that almost caused Jimmie to lose his life, a new and better Jimmie Ward emerged. Doctors said if a stab wound near his heart had been just a fraction of an inch different, Jimmie's move to California would have ended very early and his California experience short lived. Instead, doctors thanked sweet Jesus that Jimmie's life had been spared, and his charming personality had them all talking about the sweet blessings that had been bestowed upon the hospital staff and to his friends. Soon, in their affections about their courageous new patient, the popular expression sweet Jesus just seemed to naturally evolve into the sentiment "Sweet Jimmie". The name stuck with him and it has become a moniker that fits the man to a "T" and has been part of his wonderful persona ever since.

As Sweet Jimmie's reputation and personality began shaping the Oakland night scene, Jimmie closed the doors of the Lamp Post in 1982 and started his second night club venture, Sweet Jimmie's on 17th Street in Oakland, CA the same year. He held on to the location until the night spot was destroyed by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake which forced Jimmie to close due to structural damage. He moved his operation to Clancy's in Jack London Square to continue to service his patrons. Soon Clancy's wasn't big enough. However, the opportunity of a lifetime presented itself and allowed Sweet Jimmie and his good friends to open his biggest and most successful operation yet. With the support of his lifelong shared row cotton picking buddy "Chief" and another long-term friend and fellow Longshoreman from Crowley, Louisiana, Irwin "Dusty" Williams, the three were successful in opening Jimmie's Nightclub & Entertainment Complex at 17th and San Pablo Avenue in 1990.

The new club was an immediate success, packed with patrons and supporters almost every night. Major stars of a golden era were welcomed and appreciated by a warm receptive audience that enjoyed good music in a warm friendly atmosphere of great sound and high energy. The good food and good drinks made most evenings a very special occasion. The club featured such marquee names as Bobby

Blue Bland, Buddy Ace, Denise La Salle, The Dramatics, The Ike Turner Review, Jimmy Witherspoon and Jimmy McCracklin. With local talent lined up and waiting, Jimmie's new venture allowed local talent to prosper and grow, and provided the community activists and non-profits a comfortable place to stage their events and activities.

Jimmie believed in supporting local businesses and spent thousands of dollars in the community advertising through SoulBeat Television, local newspapers, radio stations and the various print medias. The success of the entertainment complex continued to grow and allowed Jimmie to expand his facility even further to include a restaurant in 1994. His now million dollar a year operation, allowed him to hire, and support over 40 people on his staff, and a multitude of supporting companies. But Jimmie's service to the area didn't stop at the people he hired and loved working with him. It extended to the companies he did business with and to a good number of community based activities, as well.

Throughout his years of operation, Jimmie was very conscience about his community and people less fortunate or more in need than himself. From almost the very beginning of his night club experience, Jimmie has supported the community. He's sponsored softball teams and basketball teams in Oakland and in Richmond CA. Sweet Jimmie made it a point to give to the less fortunate by sponsoring a toy drive every year for our East and West Oakland youth. He extended that to include a golf tournament for scholarships for the youth as well. It was hard to find Jimmie not giving to someone or somebody's cause. Beyond the kids, Jimmie fed the homeless; offered shelter to others; he used his facility to give benefit fund raisers to help several staff members and entertainers that were associated with his club that were down on their luck; anything that would help them out and keep them on their feet and out of life's dangers.

Jimmie was instrumental in establishing such needed organizations as CAL-PAC and needed activities as the Round Robin. CAL-PAC allowed black business owners in the bar and liqueur industry to have a voice—a collective voice—to combat unfair practices toward minorities in the industry. The organization is still active today. The weekly route of the Round Robin group allowed black bar owners to almost guarantee a good night of activity during one of the slowest nights of the week, each week. He would often host events for organizations such as the Police Officers Association, the Oakland Black Board of Trade & Commerce and the Prince Hall Masons. Most of these arrangements were done for gratis and in support of the community. He hosted

events for Oakland's finest such as the banquet for newly appointed Oakland Police Chief Richard Word, the pre-election party for Willie Brown of San Francisco, CA, Dr. Lee Brown, the Drug Czar under President Bill Clinton's administration and Jesse Brown, the first Black Secretary of Veterans Affairs of the United States who was also under President Bill Clinton's administration.

Jimmie's was known as a place where young artists (musicians, singers, dancers, comedians, entertainers) could go for an opportunity to be on stage, to be heard; a place where everyone was welcome; a place where you could go and immediately feel at home. Jimmie continually opened his doors to entertainers that had few, if any other places to go. He has always been known for his giving; he was always open for giving something. He made the business work; he made the community work.

If we had the opportunity to choose from a thousand names, from a thousand places, I'm not sure that anyone could ever have picked a better more suited name for this sweet, beautiful, gentle man than "Sweet Jimmie" Ward. Always, always, always Sweet Jimmie. Never, never, ever Cheap Jimmie.