

Sharp new songs for 50 years of Cebar shows

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At this point, Paul Cebar isn't just a Milwaukee musician. He's an institution.

This year marks five decades since Cebar first started rocking around town, developing a singular songbook inspired by New Orleans funk, bluesy soul, Latin American rhythms, Caribbean grooves and beyond.

His songs have been shared as a solo artist and through several celebrated bands — the R&B Cadets, Paul Cebar and the Milwaukeeans, Paul Cebar Tomorrow Sound — and been championed by accomplished friends like Bonnie Raitt, Nick Lowe and Los Lobos. He's on the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's list of the most impactful Wisconsin musicians of the past 100 years. And beyond the gift of his own music, Cebar's blessed Milwaukee with a one-of-kind radio program on WMSE-FM (91.7), "Way Back Home," for over 30 years.

He's earned the victory lap, but he isn't taking it.

Cebar's two-hour, two-set hometown show at Vivarium Jan. 9 follows the fall release of his self-titled album, his first album since early 2014. Decades deep into an impressive catalogue, Cebar has crafted some of the best music of his career on "Paul Cebar." The album landed on the Journal Sentinel's best Milwaukee music list of 2025, with the new songs' joy and tenderness transferring marvelously to the stage.

At Vivarium there was "The Brink of Things," infused live with buttery keys from Bob Jennings. "Back in the Wind," a resilient rocker Cebar co-wrote with esteemed Milwaukee native Peter Mulvey, had a little extra bounce courtesy of Mike Fredrickson's bass lines. And live, "If You Lead Me" carved out a little extra space for a tender Cebar guitar solo.

That latter song especially illustrates why "Paul Cebar" is such a strong addition to Cebar's discography. Cebar's songs have long been infused with feel-good soul and riveting rhythms. But there's a softer sweetness to many of his songs on "Cebar," making them among his most nourishing material. That gui-



Paul Cebar performs a hometown show at Vivarium in Milwaukee on Friday, Jan. 9, 2026, with saxophone player and keyboardist Bob Jennings. PROVIDED BY WILL HUGHES/PABST THEATER GROUP

tar solo on "Lead Me" live was naturally impressive, but its primary power came as a moving complement to lines like, "There's been a great spirit pulling me on/And a quiet place to ease my mind/Most of the great obstacles have fallen away."

That sort of sentiment informs many of the strongest "Cebar" songs that made the Vivarium setlist, like album opener "When We Sing," a trademark Cebar swinger whose strongest element was its message of human connection. And "We Sure Got Enough" and "Dreaming Back" — both co-written with Pat McLaughlin (a collaborator with the late, great John Prine) — paint touching pictures of gratitude, whether it's Cebar happily singing "Life ain't grand but we got love" on the former, or gently embracing the joy of his lover bringing him a cup of coffee to bed on the latter. "Back" especially is one of the loveliest songs Cebar has ever made.

But Cebar has long been a tried-and-true party starter, and he was frequently in that mode at Vivarium. The originals that made up the vast majority of his 25-song setlist spanned back to debut 1993 Milwaukeeans album "That Unhinged

Thing" (including the title track and "Twice Little Sixteen"), and touched on songs released in 1996 (including "Didn't Leave Me No Ladder," "Hold Me To Your Bones"), in 2007 (including "Spread That Sugar," "The Gimp Sparrow," "How'd You Get Like That?"), and in 2014 (including "Not Necessarily True" and "Like Loving People Do.") They kept the dance floor at Vivarium full throughout the night, but on this night the biggest thrill came from "You Make Me Feel So" from "That Unhinged Thing" with Reggie Bordeaux strutting his stuff on the drums while Cebar danced around the stage.

But as great as Cebar's longtime bandmates were, he showed he could keep the good times alone on stage, without even an instrument, singing "Cebar" song "Keep On (Lookin' Like That)" a cappella. But he wasn't alone, with Cebar offering a steady hand clap that the crowd mimicked, understandably eager to clap for the man on the stage, and for everything he's given us, for fifty years and counting.

Four takeaways from Paul Cebar's Milwaukee concert

• Cebar didn't have a guitar tech in the wings at his show Friday, suggesting he'll get one some time. If he had, that would have deprived us of the moment where he followed a slightly awkward instrument-switching pause to ceremoniously introduce his Silvertone, prompting an impromptu tribute song from Fredrickson and Jennings.

• Cebar also shared a fun backstory about how Bordeaux became his drummer. Cebar said he had told his librarian he was looking for a drummer, and that librarian was Bordeaux's mom.

• In addition to his originals, Cebar did two swell covers at Vivarium: The Beatles' "I Should Have Known Better," reimagined with a bit of a reggae beat; and Peter Gabriel's "The Book of Love" that Cebar covered solo on electric guitar.

• If you missed Cebar Jan. 9, you can catch him reunited with his bandmates from his breakout Milwaukee group, the R&B Cadets, at Shank Hall Feb. 14.

Paul Cebar's Vivarium set list

1. "Like Loving People Do"
2. "Baby Shake"
3. "The Brink of Things"
4. "Spread That Sugar"
5. "Back In The Wind"
6. "How'd You Get Like That?"
7. "When We Sing"
8. Instrumental
9. "Marv's Fluttering Guitar"
10. "Didn't Bring It Up"
11. "I Should Have Known Better"
12. "Can't Blame a Lover"
13. "Keep On (Lookin' Like That)"
14. "The Book of Love"
15. "The Gimp Sparrow"
16. "That Unhinged Thing"
17. "We Sure Got Enough"
18. "Not Necessarily True"
19. "If You Lead Me"
20. "Dreaming Back"
21. "You Make Me Feel So"
22. "Hold Me To Your Bones"
23. "I Got Trouble"
24. "Didn't Leave Me No Ladder"
25. "Twice Little Sixteen"

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