



## *Altman finally comes home to Wrigley*

**WGN-TV's Bob Vorwald provided this telling image to George Altman of the latter's welcome-home song to Wrigley Field on June 28. Photo credit George Altman.**

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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George Altman indeed found you can come home again to Wrigley Field.

Somehow overlooked in 28 years of the Cubs Convention and 16 years of sing-alongs in the seventh inning, “Big George” staged a triumphant return June 28 to the place where he was a three-time All-Star outfielder in 1961 and 1962. His voice still strong and dignified at 81, Altman did not miss a beat with “Take Me Out To The Ballgame” and talked about old times on radio with Pat Hughes and TV with Len Kasper and Jim Deshaies during the game with the Washington Nationals.

So many dozens have mangled the seventh inning signing assignment. Altman, though, suffered not a twinge of stage fright. After all, he was facing the fans instead of concentrating on the pitcher, thus blocking everything else out.

“It didn’t bother me at all,” he said. “After playing baseball for 20 years and playing in front of crowds, I wasn’t nervous at all.”

An imposing figure at 6-foot-4, the man who out-performed Ernie Banks, Ron Santo and NL rookie of the year Billy Williams with 27 homers, 96 RBIs and a .303 average in ’61 felt he was in a comfortable place. The ballpark looked pretty much the same as when he used to inside-out his left-handed swing to belt homers into the “wind-tunnel” in left-center.

Long before the real image-changers are erected in the planned ballpark renovation, the addition of lights, the upstairs pressbox, suites and 5,000 extra seats in the grandstand and bleachers since Altman’s heyday did not seem significant at all. One perception, though, struck one of the best finds the great Buck O’Neil ever snared for the Cubs organization, back in 1955.

### **As you get older, the fences get longer?**

“It was a thrill looking out over the field,” Altman said of the perch of the broadcast booth, where he sang. “Actually, when I looked out over the field, it looks like the fences moved back.”

Hmmm. Amid all the changes, with much bigger and taller bleachers, advertising adorning the outfield doors and a party area replacing the old right-field catwalk, the dimensions are the same: 368 to the power alleys and 400 to center field.

“I guess when you’re young and strong, hey, this is kinda close,” said Altman. “When you get a little older, you look out there, it’s way back there. You haven’t been in this ballpark for awhile. It looks like someone moved the outfield back.”

Altman did not know a 2007-08 off-season project supervised by “Sodfather” Roger Bossard smoothed out the field and eliminated the “crown” in the middle. Wrigley Field now has a man-made drainage system. He did not recall running “downhill” around third as some players recall.



**The Altman family at Wrigley Field before the June 28 game, when George Altman sang in the seventh inning. (From left) Wife Etta Altman, George Altman, daughter Laura Jones and son-in-law Andre Jones. Photo credit Etta Altman.**

“That means you’d run even faster,” said Altman, who could motor in his day.

Hughes welcomed the chance to chat with Altman in the radio booth during the sixth inning.

“I thought he was absolutely great,” said the Cubs’ senior voice. “I’m amazed how good he looked at 81. He looked like he could pinch-hit and bloop a single to the outfield. A wonderful guy, nice man, smart. He was gracious about talking about his teammates. I hope he comes back.”

One Hughes-Altman sample of on-air time-tripping was the latter revealing he was the only left-handed hitter to belt two homers off Sandy Koufax in one game, at the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1961. Interestingly, Banks was one of only two other players to slug a pair of homers off the Hall of Fame lefty. Mr. Cub did it as part of a three-homer outburst in Wrigley Field in 1963, while Felipe Alou performed the superhuman feat of reaching Koufax for two at spacious Dodger Stadium in 1966.

### **Bring back more good ol’ Cubs**

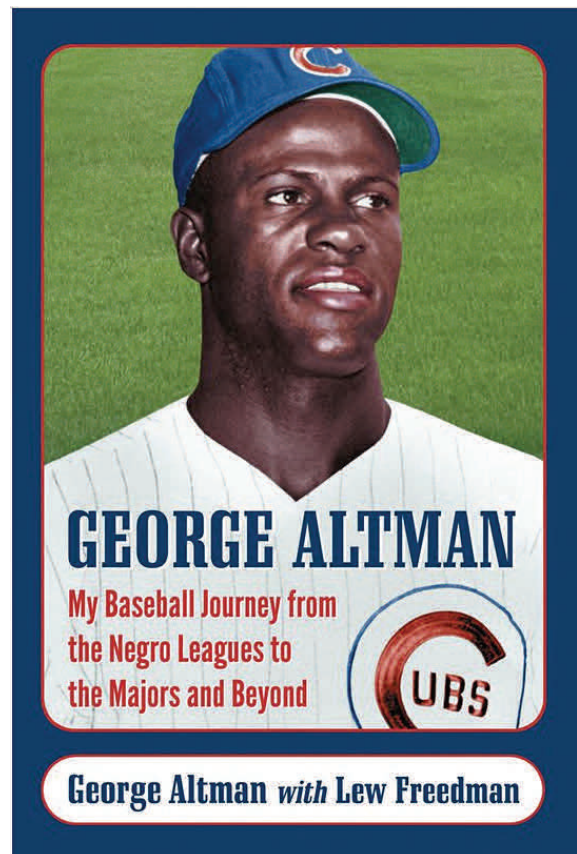
For those longtime Cubs fans who have been waiting for years for the team to honor players other than the obvious personalities from the 1969 and 1984 teams, the Altman appearance was a revelation.

“I thought it was great,” said Al Yellon, editor of the BleedCubbieBlue.com blog, a 51-year fan who attends every game in the left-field bleachers. Yellon also authored a book detailing the players who wore every number in Cubs history.

“I hope they continue to call on Altman and invite him to the next convention,” he said. “My understanding is that he’s a true Cubs fan and follows the team avidly. He had two All-Star seasons for the Cubs in two really bad team years, 1961 and 1962. That’s a real accomplishment, since there were fewer All-Stars in those days and it meant more.

Altman not only produced for the Cubs, but his departure had a positive ripple effect over the years.

Said Yellon: “When he was traded away (after the ’62 season), the return included Lindy McDaniel and Larry Jackson, both of whom had good Cub years and then produced value in trade -- McDaniel went in the (Randy) Hundley deal, Jackson for (Fergie) Jenkins.”



George Altman has authored his autobiography with Lew Freedman, available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and McFarland Publishing.

Altman, a suburban St. Louis resident, was joined by wife Etta, daughter Laura Jones and son-in-law Andre Jones. He keeps physically fit playing in a competitive horseshoes league three times a week.