

EDITOR'S PICK

Norman musician mourns, memorializes friend, former bandmate

By Doug Hill | For The Transcript For The Transcript
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Photo Provided

Former Norman resident James Lambeth during his jazz performance career in the United Kingdom.

Simon Biffen



Ty Kamm first met James Lambeth in ninth grade at a school bus stop in Norman. That initial contact became a friendship that lasted over 40 years. The pair of young musicians bonded over sound which was always a key component of their relationship.

Lambeth died last month in the United Kingdom at the age of 53 of lung and spinal cancer cutting short his life and professional career as a musician. He was the son of noted Norman musician Jahruba Lambeth and Pauline Darity. The family are planning private celebrations of James' life here and in Oklahoma City this weekend.

"James played in a couple local mainstay bands in the 1990s," Kamm said. "He and I started our first band after high school called Soul Shaker together with Matt Babich, Klipspringer's first bass player. James was the singer, Matt on bass and I was on guitar."

A project called Soma Holiday followed along with a succession of other bands.

"I think James is one of the best voices to come out of Norman, period," Kamm said. "I won't even say rock vocalist because he could do it all in so many genres. My favorite is the jazz bands he played with in the UK. His voice is just absolutely amazing."

Kamm is probably best known as vocalist for power pop band Klipspringer that has been a fixture on the Norman music scene for decades. They have performed most recently at several Norman Music Festivals.

"Around 2000 James met some British friends in New York and mentioned that he wanted to live somewhere else for a while," Kamm said. "Neither one of us were George W. Bush fans. We both said if he was elected president we'd move from the USA. James actually did it. One of his friends Jeremy said he had an extra room in his Bath, England flat and he could stay there. James had dual citizenship and made a life for himself there. I always admired that about him. He wanted a change and made it happen."

Lambeth jumped into the British music scene and began a performing and recording career.

"He joined an established ska band called Kenisia on Household Records after the former lead singer left," Kamm said. "James tried out and they snatched him up. He played trumpet also, perfect for a ska band. He played with them for years even after they were just doing the occasional reunion show after disbanding."

Lambeth went on to play in no less than ten other bands in a variety of genres.

"One in particular was called 'The Lambeth Swing' that played all over Somerset County," Kamm said. "It was non-stop gigging and recording. Some of my favorite albums of his were two jazz albums of mostly standards with some originals and jazz versions of pop songs. His voice is highlighted and so pure and beautiful."

The two friends' initial relationship was cemented by their love for music diverse as Devo, Miles Davis and David Bowie.

"Then there was the music we made together and the joy that brought us and our buddies," Kamm said. "It was a lifelong, 40 year friendship. Besides a few family members I have left he was the only person who has been in my life that long. He meant the world to me and James truly was like my brother. We lived together in the early band days and stuck together all these years, good times and bad times, mainly good times."

Lambeth didn't forget his Oklahoma roots and made the effort to maintain friendships despite the distance. He came home frequently to see his mom, dad and friends. Lambeth knew Kamm's wife Heidi and their young sons.

"James loved my boys and my wife, and they loved him. He always brought or sent them gifts and cards, and always remembered their birthdays," Kamm said. "My boys call him Uncle James. Our world is not the same. I'm still devastated and in shock. I try to remember all the great times we had, the love and friendship we shared, and the music we made together. We will always have that."