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IN MEMORIAM

# Jimmy LaFave

July 12, 1955 — May 21, 2017

The last verse of a life in song

By S.D. Henderson

**U**NFLINCHING. FEW THINGS SPEAK more eloquently about Jimmy LaFave's life than the manner in which he approached his death. A man faced with his own mortality might reasonably choose to "rage against the dying of the light" but LaFave's life was inextricably linked to song and he chose to live out his final verses accordingly. Much more Bob Dylan than Dylan Thomas.

There is a stillness in Stillwater now where LaFave and friends carved a Red Dirt niche in the Oklahoma music world; and an absence in Austin after Jimmy performed his last show and departed this plane on May 21.

There are few artists as endeared to both banks of the Red River as Jimmy LaFave. In Texas, where LaFave spent the past thirty years, he was regarded as the oak of the Austin singer-songwriter community by Cactus Café proprietor Griff Luneberg, "Jimmy is like this oak tree. He has always been about community. And all these little oaks have sprouted up around him."

do, that the Red River connects two beautiful traditions. It's an artery, not a dividing line.

The beauty of LaFave's unique musical talent patterned closely to his ability to be embraced and embedded in two distinct traditions. LaFave was a singer-songwriter. Usually that hyphen is weighted heavily on the songwriter end of the equation, but Jimmy was fully singer and fully songwriter. His striking, subdued, and emotive vocals were capable of occupying the full space of another writer's song, transforming them into a work wholly owned by Jimmy. Over the years, he interpreted more Dylan than Dylan; and while it

albums amid the interpretations of others. In the middle of *Texoma*, you'll find "Never is a Moment" and that moment is transcendent. His *Cimmaron Manifesto* includes his own work "Car Outside" which provides the focal point for a tapestry that weaves his words with the souls of other writers in a way that expresses an insight into the human condition unachievable through one man's lens.

LaFave learned just over a year ago that he had a malignant sarcoma in the connective tissue of his chest. While there may have been a host of cells attacking his body, LaFave's heart remained open and committed to sharing the one thing he shared freely throughout his 61 years, his music. He never cancelled a show throughout the ordeal, and for most of his illness never disclosed the gravity of his condition.

After LaFave went public with his grim terminal prognosis; he maintained the same demeanor that etched his soul indelibly in the hearts of his fans. My favorite

a n e c d o t e , pulled from the announcement of his death in the *Austin American Statesman* encapsulated the depth of his connection to song and the people that loved him for his efforts:

"Jimmy adjusts the tuning on his guitar, considers what song to play next. He senses both he and the crowd need something affirming—which turns out to be a rousing take on — "Tulsa Time." But in that last silent moment before the band breaks into song, a woman in the crowd offers a loving pronouncement. Soft words, which carry easily in a hushed

"You

house: will not be forgotten."

"Well," says Jimmy LaFave, his head cocked low over his guitar. "I won't forget you, either."

His last verse, like the many that preceded it, was a beautiful note to end on. ■



"I won't forget you, either.": Jimmy LaFave

Across the river in Oklahoma, he is still regarded as a founder of the Red Dirt movement, which drew it's first sparks at The Farm outside of Stillwater. He embodied the best of both rich musical cultures with a self-effacing humility. His mark on the world reminds us, like few others can

may be a sacrilege to write, he expanded the universe of the original material as his own new creation.

As a songwriter, LaFave delivered complexity through nuance, his body of work as songwriter stands on its own, scattered throughout each of his