

## Dreams, Guitars and Highways

By: Casey Gauntt

*The names of many streets in San Diego are in Spanish such as El Camino Real, Via De La Valle, Camino Del Sur and Del Dios Highway– Highway of The Gods.*

**August 17, 2010.** As he's laying on his back in our living room, Wyatt James Kirby looks deep into my eyes and says, clear as a bell, "**Put a guitar on me.**" I'm absolutely stunned; not by what he said, but that he's talking! I yell to Brittany who's in the kitchen, "Wyatt just talked to me! He's a genius! This is absolutely amazing!" And then I opened my eyes. It was another early morning dream; the ones that are extraordinarily vivid and not forgotten. Wyatt James, our daughter Brittany's first child, our first grandchild, is three months old. This is a story about dreams, babies, Jameses, guitars, highways and too many coincidences.

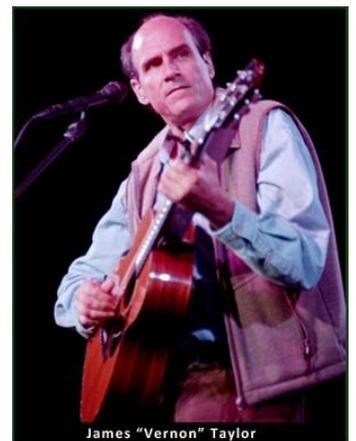


**August, 2008.** My sister Laura and her family arrived in Solana Beach, California on August 7, a Thursday. They live in Weggis, Switzerland, a small jewel of a town a few miles from Lucerne situated on the lake of the same name. The Buties come nearly every year around this time to visit us and our mother who lives nearby. Laura, her husband Anton, and their children Leo, then sixteen and Claire fourteen came to the house for dinner. Leo arrived with a guitar case. I recognized it as the one I had given to him along with a Carlo Robelli acoustic guitar two years earlier. Leo said he wanted to learn to play the guitar, I had several, and I gave him one. After the dishes were cleared Leo brought the case over to me.



"I have a present for you." I opened up the case and inside was the guitar I had given him only now with some writing on it. Leo told me the story. "Our family went to a concert in Lucerne six months ago to see James Taylor. My mother told me how much you love him, so I brought the guitar with me to the concert. He isn't as well known in Switzerland and during the intermission he just hung out on stage and a few people from the audience came up and talked to him. He was really cool with it. So I waited in the back and, when the crowd thinned, I went up to him with the guitar and asked if he would sign it. I told him my uncle in San Diego was a huge fan and I was doing this for him. James said 'Sure, what's your uncle's name?'" He wrote on the guitar with Leo's black Sharpie "4 Casey James Taylor."

"Really?" I was stunned! I hugged Leo hard. No, you have no idea how big of a deal this is. I'm more than a fan. James Taylor is an integral part of me and our family. Our children were weaned on James Taylor's music. I've played and sung his tunes ever since he hit the scene big in 1970 with his Sweet Baby James album which included the ubiquitous classics "Fire and Rain," "Sweet Baby James" and "Country Road."



Brittany delivered Wyatt James at Scripps Hospital La Jolla on May 14, 2010, the same hospital where she and her younger brother James (Jimmy) T. were born. In case you were wondering, the "T" is for Tedrow, after his maternal grandfather—I'm not **that** big a fan. Brittany had brought with her to the hospital a DVD of one of the James Taylor Live concerts in Boston which played on a continuous loop on the TV in her room while we anxiously awaited Master Wyatt. Shortly after my wife Hilary and I got to the hospital, Mr. Taylor began playing Brittany's favorite song of his. As he started the second verse Hilary erupted into tears, with Brittany, her husband Ryan and me close behind. Thereafter, one of us would fast forward through Long Ago And Far Away.

I recently learned that his full name is James **Vernon** Taylor. I had no idea. It certainly is not something I would have forgotten. Wow. Vernon. Most people wouldn't know my full name is **Vernon** Case Gauntt. Not too many Vernons roaming around, I suspect. I was named after my maternal grandfather, Vernon Drury Case, whose clan emigrated from Scotland to the Carolinas in the late 1700s as the Taylor clan had done. I also discovered Mr. Taylor was born on a Friday night; same day I was born.

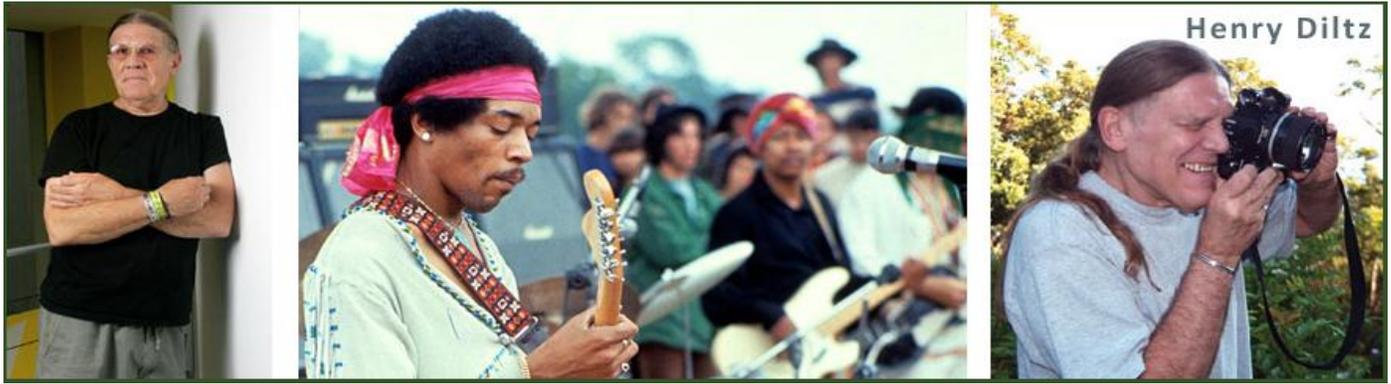
**On August 8, 2008**, another Friday, Hilary, Brittany and I went to dinner with the Buties to [Fidel's Little Mexico](#), an immensely popular local Mexican restaurant in Solana Beach. Our son Jimmy would have joined us, but he got a late start on his drive from his cottage in Laurel Canyon (near Hollywood), living his dream as a professional writer. Not surprisingly, traffic sucked. As we finished dinner my sister and I made a plan to go on a hike early the next morning and, after that, we'd all get together with Jimmy at the beach.



A couple of months after Leo re-gifted the guitar to me, I proudly hung it in my law office in downtown San Diego. It's a great conversation piece. I've got to believe not too many real estate lawyers have a guitar adorning a wall in their office, and every visitor is, without fail, drawn to the writing on the guitar, "James Taylor, really?" and I tell them the story. The guitar is beside some framed photographs, two of which I had placed on the 'James wall' in 2007. One is of Jimmy, the baby of the family, taken by me in 1993 on a vacation in Colorado. We and some wranglers from the dude ranch where we were staying had ridden horses up the side of a mountain to an abandoned silver mine. There was old, decaying, mining equipment strewn everywhere including a half caved-in pick-up truck of an early 1950s vintage. Jimmy, age 10, is sitting on the front right wheel cover decked out in cowboy hat, shirt and boots, the snow capped Continental Divide rising in the back round. The red hewed pickup was shot full of bullet holes, all of the windows long ago blown out. This has always been one of my favorite photos of Jimmy.



The other photograph is of James Vernon Taylor taken by Henry Diltz in 1969. Diltz was a folk musician, but is best known for the intimate photographs he took in the late 1960s and 1970s of music icons such as Taylor, The Doors, Crosby Stills and Nash, The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix and countless more.



Henry Diltz



Henry Diltz shot over eighty album covers. In this particular photograph (right) James, age 21, is sitting on the passenger side running board of a well worn 1946 Chevrolet

pick-up with a crude home-made camper leaning cockeyed in the bed of the truck. I believe this black and white photo was a candidate, but ended up not being used, for the cover of his Sweet Baby James album. Hilary and I found this photo in Diltz's studio in Soho (SOUth of HOUSTON for us left coasters) in 2003 when we were in New York City visiting Brittany. Our wander into Diltz' studio was random, but it was no coincidence we bought this particular piece.



When Jimmy finally made it to our house that Friday night, and before he left for a party with some of his friends from high school—somewhere in between—he saw the guitar and he, too, exclaimed how cool it was that Leo “had the balls” (his words) to ask James Taylor to autograph it for me.

In **March of 2010**, some good friends of ours finally shared a story they’d been shielding from us for many months involving something that happened to them in early August of 2009. Patricia and Rich live in nearby Rancho Santa Fe and were headed out early in the morning to drive up to Mammoth Mountain in the eastern Sierras of California to pick up their daughter who was on a back-backing trip. This is from Patricia’s email to us:

*“We left about 5:30 in the morning and headed east on Del Dios Highway toward I-15. As I told you, I think of Jimmy often and that morning especially for all the obvious reasons. It was nearly a year to the day. I began to tell Rich how I have a spot on Del Dios where I think the accident may have occurred and I would tell him when we were there. I don’t really know where the accident happened but the spot for me is west of The Crosby and right before Del Dios curves left. At this point, everything that occurs next is almost instantaneous. It is very dark, we pass the street light and I tell Rich that I think this is the spot. At that moment exactly, headlights appear from around the curve in our lane. The driver of that car yanks back into his lane and speeds past. We don’t even have time to react. Neither one of us spoke for a long time. Rich finally said “that was weird.” I kept thinking “what just happened?” There were too many coincidences. I hope my telling you this experience is not hurtful to you. I really felt that something was being said that morning. How ironic that the Highway is named Del Dios.”*

After Jimmy left our house with a hug, kiss on my lips and “Love you,” he went to a couple of parties, a local bar and ended up at a friend’s house in Rancho Santa Fe. Very early Saturday morning Jimmy arose and decided to walk the three miles back to our house. Jimmy was a walker, his good friends told us later, particularly late at night after too many beers. As he was walking on Del Dios Highway, at a spot within a few yards of the place Patricia pointed out to Rich, Jimmy was stuck by a car travelling in the same direction (west) as the one that nearly ran into them. The car that hit Jimmy overturned, its roof partially caved in, most of its windows shattered; broken glass strewn across the road. Nobody’s fault. The driver was thankfully unhurt. Jimmy was instantly killed. August 9, 2008, 5:30 a.m.

*And in between what might have been  
And what has come to pass,  
A misbegotten guess alas  
And bits of broken glass*

*Where do the golden rainbows end?  
Why is this song so sad?  
Dreaming the dreams I've dreamed my friend,  
Loving the love I love.*

**August 19, 2010.** The Friday night before the Buties were to return to Switzerland, we had a large family dinner at our house. The Buties had come for their annual visit and to meet Wyatt James Kirby, attend the wedding of Antonia the oldest daughter of Anton and his first wife, and to be with us for the second "anniversary," if that's what you call those things. Hilary's mother, Virginia, and oldest sister, Ainsley, had arrived the day before from northern California. We were also joined by my mother Barbara, Wyatt's other great grandmother, my cousin Diana, her daughter, Erin, Antonia, and her husband of six days, Yousef. Except for Wyatt and Yousef, everyone else (and more) had been at our house two years earlier for some refreshments following Jimmy's memorial service. Two years. Our house was lighter, there was laughter, and cameras were flashing as we lined the family up for the "four generations" photos. The kitchen buzzed with cooks as the bon voyage feast was prepared and enjoyed by all.

And then the entertainment began. Wyatt James of course, with his presence, had entertained everyone. Seated in his little (redundant?) reclining chair, he kicked, punched and grinned up a storm much to the "he is so cute" delight of everyone, and especially that of the two great grandmothers who had shed twenty years a piece during the previous few hours. Claire played several songs on the piano—a very talented and gifted musician. She plays with her soul in front of her, as Jimmy did when he played his saxophone, and I swear I saw angels with harps hovering over her shoulder.

And then it was Leo's turn. He picked up my everyday, very beat up, thirty year old Yamaha acoustic guitar and played and sung Jack Johnson's Do You Remember.

He had bravely performed the same song at Brittany and Ryan's wedding three years earlier before 200 guests. When he finished I asked him "Leo, what kind of bass guitar do you have?" I don't know why I thought to ask him that. Probably because he had told me several days earlier that he had been invited to join a new band as its bass player, although he had never played bass before, and his band was going to have its first gig at a nightclub in Lucerne soon after he returned home. "An Esquire. It's a Fender knock-off. I want a Fender, but I can't afford it." And that's when it clicked. One of those fleeting moments of absolute clarity.

I rose from my chair "I'll be right back." I went downstairs to Jimmy's old bedroom and immediately found what I was looking for. I was tingling; the goose bumps were all over me again. I went back upstairs and walked over to where Leo was sitting. Everyone stopped talking and looked at us as I spoke. Wyatt paid no attention, entirely focused on his punching and kicking. "Leo, you and I have a tradition. This time it's my turn." Leo stood up and I placed a black canvas guitar case on his chest. "There. **I've put a guitar on you.**" "Really?" He quickly unzipped the case and pulled out the nearly new Fender Jazzman bass guitar someone had given to me a couple of years earlier and that had been collecting dust in a closet. Leo's joy filled the room and was contagious. "Leo, this is yours to keep, but if you should ever run into Leland Sklar..." the bass player in James Taylor's original band.

I picked up the Yamaha and sang a few tunes by the Taylors much to the delight of my captive fan base: One More Time by Livingston Taylor, and Frozen Man, Copperline, Country Road and Music by his brother James. Maybe someday Walking Man and Long Ago will make it back on the playlist.