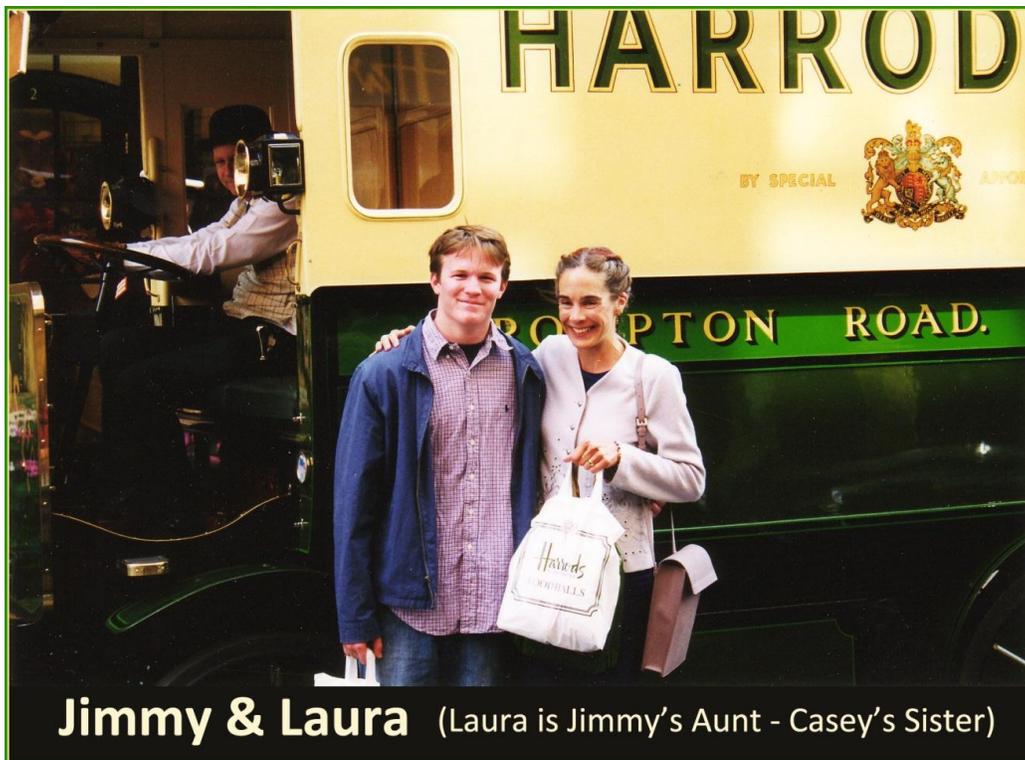


THE SAX PLAYERS—A CHRISTMAS STORY

By: Casey Gauntt

***Christmas Day 2008** was spent at our house in Solana Beach, California. My sister Laura, her husband Anton and their teenagers, Leo and Claire, had returned from Switzerland to spend the holidays with us. They had been in Solana Beach only four and a half months earlier for their annual visit. In fact, my sister and her family were the first people at our door after the San Diego County Medical Examiner and Sheriff's Department delivered to us the news of Jimmy's death. They knew this day—our first Christmas without Jimmy—would be exceptionally difficult for us. And they had come to our doorstep, once again, to prop us up.*



My mother, Barbara, Brittany and her husband Ryan were also with us this Christmas Day. Around noon, after we had gone through the motions of opening a few presents, Jimmy's good friend John Dale called—I answered the phone—and asked if he could come over to bring us something. John lives and works (waiter, writer, actor and radio talk show host) in Los Angeles. He grew up in Solana Beach, and he and Jimmy had been good friends since the 2nd grade. After finishing college, Jimmy (USC) and John (UC Davis) lived together in L.A. for about a year and a half and were writing partners collaborating on several comedic endeavors. Oh, and by the way, John's uncle, another Solana Beach boy, is skateboard legend Tony Hawk.

John swung by and gave us a wonderful framed 11" by 18" black and white photograph of Jimmy playing his saxophone outside in front of Torrey Pines High School during his senior year (2001-2002). John thinks it was taken at one of the Battle of the Bands contests.

John was the guitar player in the band but is not in the picture. "We really weren't that good," John recalled, "and we mostly just winged it. But we had an awesome sax player, and we usually won." Jimmy named his sax "Henry" after its manufacturer, Henri Selmer of Paris, France. The photograph captures Jimmy from the shoulders down to his knees; hands caressing his instrument, leaning forward, pressing into the groove. He's wearing a nice plaid shirt, sleeves rolled up mid forearm, watch on his right wrist (he's left handed) and a light pair of khakis.

Since the picture stops at the knees, we can't tell if the pants go below his ankles or his socks match—we assume not. He looks good. There's a drum kit in the background. Even though it's a still photograph one can sense the movement and hear the music.



Jimmy at Torrey Pines High School (2001-2002)

[CLICK TO ENLARGE](#)

Jimmy was an excellent sax player—he had a gift. When he got into a song his soul was right in front of him for all to see. It takes a talent and some guts to let go like that—free the soul as they say—for others to see and hear. It's not unlike taking off your clothes before hundreds of people and saying "Well, this is me." Baring the soul. Jimmy could read music, but he used no sheet music—no props—for these performances. He would take the elements of whatever tune the band was playing and then go exploring on his own adventure of expression: unafraid, inquisitive, letting the music, the feel, take him where it may. His eight years of training with one of the masters of the instrument, Anthony Ortega, instilled in him the confidence that he wouldn't falter on his journey—he could just let go—no safety net was required. He wouldn't get lost in the music. He always stayed connected with his band-mates and they remained in sync even as Jimmy explored the edges. As parents, we'd be in awe, and slightly afraid for him as he took wing on one of his solos. "Where is this going? What if he gets too far out there and spins out, or just stops, or hits a string of bad notes, or people stop listening?" Those doubts were completely unnecessary and, as Jimmy would say, "a bad idea." All of this and more was in the picture John had given us.

John left a short time later after another round of thanks, hugs and a few tears. We placed the picture on the couch, then on the piano and later on other places of honor in our family room upstairs. Jimmy was with us this Christmas day, as we so hoped he would be.



About an hour later, the phone rang and I answered—it was John again. "Did you just call me?" he asked me. I said I hadn't. John continued "Is Jimmy's cell phone still working?" I told him, "Well, we have his phone, but I'm pretty sure his number has been closed from our account for a few months now." I keep Jimmy's phone and his wallet in our bedroom closet upstairs, the battery has not been recharged, and Hilary closed his Verizon account and discontinued his number shortly after he died. "Did he call you?" I asked. John stammered "Oh—I don't know— uh, I didn't check my caller I.D. I can't tell who called." Our call ended awkwardly.



Jimmy's cell phone in the box in our closet

I immediately told Hilary and Brittany what happened and Brittany called John right back from her cell phone. John came clean with Brittany. John, in fact, had received a call on his cell phone and the caller I.D. displayed Jimmy's cell phone number. There was silence on the other end of the line when John answered "Hello?" John was pretty freaked out. Brittany confided—partially—to John that she—actually we— had recently seen a medium, and the medium had foretold Jimmy might be calling today and that we should be ready. Brittany said this didn't seem to settle John down. Quite the opposite, actually.

Brittany also let John know that a few weeks earlier she had called Jimmy's cell phone number and someone else now has it. Jimmy's contacts memory wouldn't be attached to the number. So, perhaps this person who now has Jimmy's number randomly or accidentally called John Dale. Not impossible, I guess— but highly unlikely. The picture John gave us was the best Christmas present we received, and I'm pretty sure the call John received that day from 858-395-XXXX was his—even though it would take a few months for that to sink in for him.

And this story could end here—but not quite. Around 5 that afternoon our house phone rang and I answered. It was Dave Koz. Dave is a very well known—ok, famous— contemporary jazz saxophonist. He's been a regular on the top of the smooth jazz recording charts for years. He hosts two nationally syndicated radio shows featuring the latest in smooth jazz. and is regularly heard on San Diego's Smooth Jazz station, FM 98.1. Dave is constantly on tour all over the world and even played a gig at President Obama's Inauguration celebration. He's probably known by hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people. The thing of it is, I didn't know Dave Koz—oh sure, I'd heard of him, and listened to his tunes on the radio and maybe even saw him perform at a concert sometime—but I'd never met the guy and I certainly had never spoken to him before.



Dave had called to express his condolences for the loss of our son Jimmy and his empathy for how difficult this Christmas must be for us. He wanted to send his love and blessings and let us know he was thinking of us.

“What the heck is going on?!” one might ask. I need to back track a few days.

On the Sunday before Christmas, Hilary, Brittany and I went to Coronado (across the bay from downtown San Diego) to meet for the first time with Tarra. Tarra (aka: [Tarra of Sedona](#)) lives and works primarily in Sedona, Arizona, but she frequently comes to Southern California to work with clients. Tarra is a very well-known medium—someone who connects with those who have departed and enables them to communicate, through her, with friends and loved ones who are living in this space. As she describes it “I tune into frequencies others can’t hear.” Tarra is also a psychic. Six weeks earlier I had received out of complete nowhere the call from Emily Sue Buckberry and the letter from my father, so we were game. And plus, we asked ourselves “How can we possibly lose anymore?”

Our “reading” with Tarra, as these sessions are called, was scheduled for an hour—ours lasted an hour and a half. Tarra was not like anything I expected—her hair wasn’t purple, she didn’t have any piercings that I could see, and there was no crystal ball or flowing robes or turbans. Tarra looked like the mom in her fifties that she is with a New York accent and an infectious laugh and wit. I will not here give a full account of the reading or attempt to convince anybody of its veracity. I will, however, share one of the episodes during the reading relevant to this particular story. About an hour into the session Tarra said, “Jimmy says, ‘Tell Tony I’ve been following Dave Koz around. Ask Tony if he knows Dave and his music.’” Tarra continued, “Oh this guy’s a character (referring to Jimmy). He says ‘Tell Dave I’m better than him. I’m not as good as Chris Botti, though.’ Jimmy also says ‘Tupac is here. And that means anybody can get here.’” We all were laughing at this point. And dumbfounded.

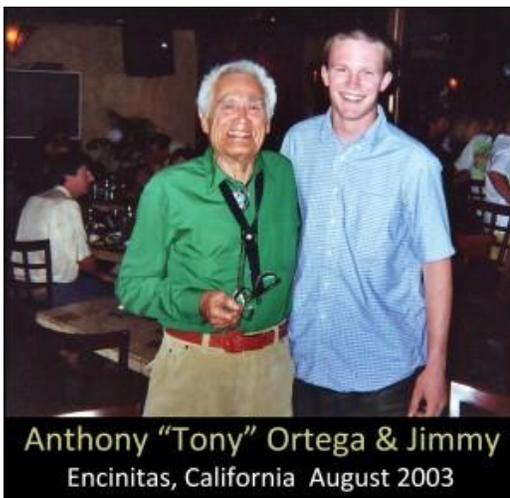


Tarra went on to share with us that she’s friends with Dave Koz and Chris Botti, so it’s not unusual that **she** would mention Dave or Chris. But, keep in mind this was the first time we had met Tarra. We didn’t give her our last name when we made the appointment—Tarra prefers it that way. It was the reference to “Tony” that blew our minds. How in the heck did she come up with “Tony” and that Jimmy was a saxophone player? Anthony Ortega was Jimmy’s saxophone teacher for eight years. Jimmy began taking lessons from Anthony in the 4th Grade and studied with him continuously through high school. At Jimmy’s memorial service Anthony Ortega played one of **Jimmy’s favorite Charlie Parker songs, “Now’s The Time.”** Anthony taught Jimmy how to play that song—a song that was forever embedded in Jimmy’s soul. Anthony, now in his eighties, is a world renowned jazz saxophonist. He is known as “Anthony” Ortega, but those who are close to him, like Jimmy was, call him “Tony.” We had not mentioned one word about a “Tony” or an “Anthony” or that Jimmy played the sax during our reading.

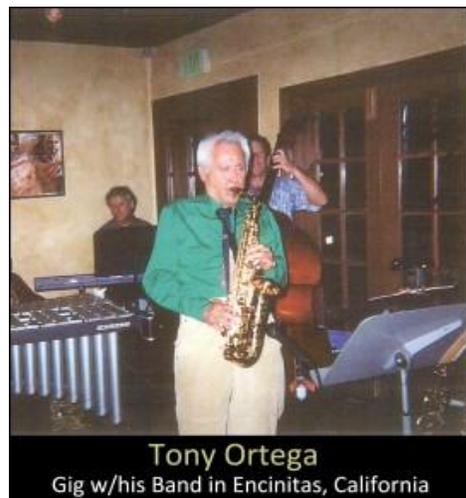
It seemed to us a little out of character for Jimmy to boast that he was better than someone at something. He was a pretty modest guy, but I guess it's a different playing field now. As I later reflected upon it, I could see how Jimmy might think he was a "better" sax player than Dave Koz. Jimmy was taught by an "old school" jazz-man and Jimmy turned up his nose at the "smooth jazz" artists as too commercial and giving in to what the masses want to hear. Once I asked Jimmy, "Why don't you ever play any Kenny G or stuff like that?" "That's NOT jazz!" he snorted. So, it kind of makes sense he might "diss" Dave.



Charlie Parker (08-29-20 ~ 03-12-55)



Anthony "Tony" Ortega & Jimmy
Encinitas, California August 2003



Tony Ortega
Gig w/his Band in Encinitas, California

As she would tell us a few months after Dave called that Christmas, Tarra had called him after our reading to tell him about Jimmy and that he had "called him out." Tarra also mentioned to us she has read over 40,000 people during her lengthy career. Apparently, she was moved enough by this one to tell Dave about it. As was Dave, for it was he that asked her for our number and said he might want to call us.

Tarra called Hilary early Christmas morning. She wanted to let Hilary "Mom" know that Jimmy was happy and he wanted us to celebrate today. "He is definitely going to be around you today. Look for birds at the windows, and something may be happening with the phones. **There may be a call from Jimmy, and Casey should answer the next call.**" And I did, but it was the call from John Dale asking if he could come over because "I have something for you guys." I made a point of answering every other call that day, which is out of character.

So looking back on it, when Dave Koz called later that afternoon, it was not completely out of the blue. The thread had started spinning out four days earlier during our reading with Tarra. Dave spoke fondly of this connection that had been created between us. I told Dave of Jimmy's boast during our reading with Tarra that he was "better" than Dave. I apologetically let him know I had no idea where that came from. Dave laughed and assured me "no offense taken." He didn't say if Tarra had already told him about the reading, and I was too blown away by his call—the whole day really—to even think to ask. I thanked him for calling and told him how utterly amazing it was that we were having this conversation at all. I praised him for his courage and sensitivity in taking the time to call us, virtual strangers, on this day of all days.

When I hung up with Dave, I immediately told Hilary about the conversation and then we called Brittany to bring her up to speed on the latest event of the day. We make a point of sharing everything like this. Why did this guy call us? What motivates someone like a Dave Koz to pick up the phone on Christmas night, as he's beginning a celebration with his family, and reach out to a family he doesn't know in the throes of their grief for their son and brother on their first Christmas without him?

Why did John Dale get his phone call that day?

I don't know—maybe it's something about saxophone players.