

Austin guitar great ‘as soulful as humans get’

DENNY FREEMAN 1944-2021

Peter Blackstock Austin American-Statesman USA TODAY NETWORK

Denny Freeman, who helped give rise to Austin’s blues scene in the 1970s playing with Stevie Ray Vaughan and later became the touring guitarist in Bob Dylan’s band, died Sunday after being diagnosed with abdominal cancer last month. He was 76.

Born Aug. 7, 1944, in Orlando, Fla., Freeman grew up in Dallas, playing in a high school band called the Corals before moving to Austin in 1970. Freeman and

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Vaughan soon were playing together with singer Paul Ray and others in a group called the Cobras at venues including the One Knite and Soap Creek Saloon.

They were part of a wave of musicians who arrived here around that time, including guitarist Jimmie Vaughan (Stevie’s older brother), singers Angela Strehli and Lou Ann Barton and University of Texas student Clifford Antone, who eventually opened a downtown nightclub that became the community’s mecca.

Freeman remained an Antone’s house band fixture when the club moved to Guadalupe Street in the 1980s, frequently backing Chicago blues legends such as Otis Rush when they visited the club. He remained integral to Antone’s when it reopened at 305 E. Fifth St. in 2016, playing Tuesday nights in a band that included younger generation musicians such as Eve Monsees.

Both Monsees and her high school friend Gary Clark Jr. grew up idolizing Freeman. When Clark, who became a partner in the new Antone’s location, occasionally made surprise appearances at the club, Freeman often was in Clark’s band.

“I’ve looked up to Denny since I was 15,” Monsees wrote in a social media post Monday. “Every time I played with him over the past 20-plus years, I felt that teenage excitement getting to share the stage with my hero.”

Though he was known primarily as a guitarist, Freeman also played keyboards and saxophone. A few years ago, he began learning how to play steel guitar, joining the John X. Reed Band’s weekly residency gig at C-Boy’s Heart & Soul.

Freeman, who released a half-dozen mostly instrumental albums under his own name, moved to Los Angeles in the early 1990s and stayed there for about a decade, touring with Jimmie Vaughan, Taj Mahal and others before getting a call in 2005 to join Bob Dylan’s band.

Austin guitarist Charlie Sexton, who'd played in Dylan's band for about five years before leaving in 2003, had been telling Dylan during the making of the 2001 album "Love and Theft" that Freeman might be a good choice for Dylan's band at some point.

"There was a certain style that Bob was starting to move toward," Sexton said Monday. He told Dylan about "a guy down in Austin that not a lot of people are aware of, but they should be, and his name is Denny Freeman. At some point he may be really valuable to you. ... Eventually Denny called me and said, 'I got a call to go out there.'" Freeman wrote about what it was like to play with Dylan in an email to friends in June 2005: "He gives me and everybody else a lot of solos, and we have to be able to play a solo on any song, at any moment. Thank god I spent so much time learning about chords and chord progressions, and how to play solos based on scales, and chords, without having to rely on just blues. And I actually like that a whole lot — playing a solo on 'Tambourine Man,' 'Rolling Stone,' 'Stuck in Memphis' and all those things.

"None of the tunes have musical things that I haven't encountered before, it's just that there's a LOT of songs, and most have been reworked. ... But it's OK. I kinda feel like I've spent my whole life preparing for this gig. Never thought I'd be playing a solo on 'Lay Lady Lay,' though."

Native Austinite Kathy Valentine of Rock and Roll Hall of Fame nominee the Go-Go's was aware of Freeman when she was growing up here, but it wasn't until he moved to L.A. that "our very special friendship began," she said by email Monday. "Denny changed me, changed my life."

Valentine credits him for helping her redefine how she approached playing guitar, recalling how he told her that "you don't need to know a lot to play really cool stuff. Hell, you can even play just one note, and if you do it with authority, that's all you need," she said. "I will always be grateful to him for that."

Freeman also had a deep knowledge of blues, jazz, rock & roll and more. "I knew who the blues greats were; Denny turned me on to the ones I didn't know about," Valentine said. "He turned me on to jazz, everyone from Miles to Bird to Coltrane to Johnny Smith to Lee Morgan, countless others."

Valentine, who earlier this month got a degree from St. Edward's University at age 62, also credits Freeman for helping motivate her return to school. "That started with Denny," she said.

Shortly after a five-year run in Dylan's band, Freeman returned to Austin and began performing regularly in the clubs again. Among his most popular gigs was a Friday happy hour show at the Saxon Pub, which almost always drew a packed house.

Freeman began feeling unwell in March and was diagnosed with cancer about a month ago. Girlfriend Emma Little, friend Stu Gilbert and sister Linda Freeman helped care for him in Austin in his final weeks.

Author Joe Nick Patoski summed up Freeman's influence on Austin in a social media post Monday by asserting that he was "the guitarists' guitarist in Guitar Town, the thread who defined music in Austin for the past half-century and held it all together. The person behind all that artistry was as soulful as humans get."

Sexton, who was 11 when Freeman brought him onstage at the Continental Club in 1979, said that learning guitar from Freeman "was like a master class. He was really the most stylized player of the (Austin blues) bunch."

But he was also "a very sensitive guy, really loving and caring," Sexton said. "He was so eloquent in the way he carried himself. He was a sweet, sweet man."

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