

Lewis

Continued from 1A

an. He was just a great friend. He was one of my best friends."

Lewis in 2000 returned to his native Houston to be close to family but said he always considered El Paso his hometown.

Lewis developed his craft in Houston in the 1950s with jam sessions alongside blues greats such as Albert Collins and Johnny "Clyde" Copeland. Lewis would become part of touring bands backing blues players such as T-Bone Walker.

In the early 1960s, Lewis moved to El Paso and became a part of the Borderland's live music scene even as musical tastes changed over the decades.

"I have known Arthur 27 years," Patterson said. "I played actively with him three to four nights a week for probably 22 years and played all sorts of places from the fanciest places to the diviest dives you'd ever see in El Paso."

Patterson said the most remarkable thing about Lewis was his dedication to the music he loved and an openness that allowed him to perform with anybody.



▶ See more photos of saxophonist Art Lewis.

"He wouldn't give up," Patterson said. "He was there to make the gig no matter what. He would play a lot of times with just a saxophone and a high-hat."

Lewis told the El Paso Times in 1998 that part of the secret to his longevity was a belief that age was a state of mind and the idea that he was a student of music whether playing jazz, Latin jazz, blues or rock.

"You get burned out (doing the same thing). I call it a 'know-it-all professional musician.' I am a student of music and that is the key for me," Lewis said during an interview while having coffee in the Dome Bar of the Camino Real Hotel.

Lewis was the well-respected grandfather or elder statesman of the music scene in El Paso, said George Reynoso, owner of All That Music & Video, a locally owned music store.

Montes said he met Lewis in the mid-1970s at a jazz club on North Piedras Street near Kiki's Restaurant, where Lewis also performed regularly, sometimes just playing his sax alone.

In the 1990s, Montes started Lewis' annual Birthday Jam concerts with other musicians and promoted Lewis' CD "El Paso Art."

"When we started his birthday (shows), it was because I always felt he was under-recognized, under-appreciated," Montes recalled. "I told him, 'We need to start promoting you as a local jazz and blues legend.'"

El Paso musician Fernando Lechuga met Lewis in the 1970s and they regularly performed together over the years, including when Lewis played a Music Under the Stars concert last summer. It would be one of Lewis' final shows in El Paso.

"A lot of people would relate him to this city," Lechuga said. "He would be playing all over the place, coming out on ads on TV. You would see him at private events, nightclubs. He was all over the place."

"It was not because of his fame but his personality. He was a wonderful person. A good friend," Lechuga said.

"I never heard him make a bad comment about another musician," Lechuga said.

"It's a big loss. Maybe they needed a sax player in heaven."

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TIMES FILE PHOTO

Art Lewis performs at his Birthday Jam in 2008. The 75-year-old saxophonist died Tuesday in Houston.

Legendary jazzman Art Lewis dies at 75

By Daniel Borunda
EL PASO TIMES

Jazz and blues player Art Lewis, whose saxophone sound became a part of El Paso music history, died Tuesday afternoon at a Houston hospital, friends said. He was 75.

Lewis was a legend in El Paso music circles for his longevity, friendly demeanor and a local fame that grew to make him one of the city's best-known musicians.

Lewis' longtime drummer Ace Patterson said Lewis had been in the hospital since before Christmas dealing with heart problems, diabetes and other medical problems. Patterson said funeral services will take place Saturday in Houston.

Hector Montes, who promoted the saxophonist's annual Birthday Jam parties, is working on organizing a memorial show in El Paso at a yet-to-be-determined date.

"There were years when if you wanted to see jazz and blues in El Paso, you went to see Art Lewis. He was the man," Montes said, holding back tears. "He was a great man in addition to being a great musician. He was a philosopher and a humanitari-