December 2011

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THE MUSIC MAN
HOW HE CHANGED THE AMES MUSIC SCENE FOREVER

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In 2007, Nate Logsdon was not a musician. But that was before Don Mumford. On a warm night in July, Nate, an ISU student studying English literature, left his West Street apartment in search of dinner. Walking south on Campus Ave, he was stopped by a middle-aged man on a red bike.

“Hey, man,” the disheveled cyclist yelled hoarsely. “You an artist?”

“Not really,” Nate replied. “I go to Iowa State. I guess I like to study art.”

And just like that, Don Mumford invited Nate to his apartment to hang out and throw back a couple of beers.

But Nate, a 2009 graduate, hesitated. The haggard man looked to be in his 50s, with curly graying hair and a thick mustache. He’d recently been hit in the face with a bottle, and the broken blood vessels in his eye had left it red and swollen. But for some reason still unknown to Nate, he accepted the invitation and gave Don his phone number. “He had a sparkle in his eye that made me trust him,” Nate says of Don. “He had a youthful, contagious energy.”

Unbeknownst to Nate, Don was also legendary. A jazz artist who grew up in Lawrence, Kan., Don toured South Africa, Europe and the U.S. with artists like Sun Ra, a Hall of Fame composer, before settling in Portland, Ore. But when Don’s girlfriend moved to Ames, he, too, relocated—to a dark, diminutive basement apartment on Campus Ave.

At 5 o’clock that afternoon, Nate arrived at Don’s place. A sign above the rickety front door reading “Mung’s Bat Cave” seemed to accurately describe the hole-in-the-wall studio apartment he was about to enter. “It was a tiny, tiny place,” Nate recalls. “So small that his drum kit took up over half of his space. Then there was a couch, a TV on a small shelf, and a little table, but it was covered in papers—papers with phone numbers all over them.”

Those phone numbers, Nate would later discover, belonged to dozens of other Ames artists Don had come...
in contact with, some in the same way he’d met Nate. Nate, unsure of what lay ahead, sat on the couch as Don fiddled with the TV. Don settled on a video of one of his tours, walked over to the drum kit and began playing along with himself on-screen. “I look at the TV, and there’s Don Mumford playing in 1986,” Nate says. “I look behind me, and there’s Don playing in 2007. It was surreal.”

Don mentioned he was trying to get a jazz band together, so Nate told him about his girlfriend Kate Kennedy, who was a saxophonist also living in Ames. Don asked Nate to bring Kate back in a couple of days, when he was hosting a jam at his apartment. Nate agreed. He and Kate returned to Don’s apartment that Sunday and were greeted by six other musicians. “Up until the jam, I hadn’t really played music with people before,” Nate says. “Kate sat down and started playing one of her songs on guitar. While she was playing, Don looked at me and said, ‘Hey, Nate, play with your girl.’ I started messing around on the drum kit, and Don was like, ‘No, like this.’ He changed one little thing with my hands, and suddenly, boom. I was playing the drums. That was a really important moment in my life, and I didn’t even realize it then.”

Post-jam, Don invited the crew to return the next Sunday so they could start practicing together. But when the new bandmates arrived a week later, Don wasn’t home. They called him several times, but he was nowhere to be found.

The next day, still no one had received word from Don, and the group began to worry. They called area hospitals, hoping to at least locate him, but confidentiality regulations prevented them from getting any information. When Nate heard Don had been in an accident, he went back to the basement apartment, where he found an open front door. He went down into the Bat Cave only to find Charlie, Don’s girlfriend’s son, standing before him. “Oh, hey,” Nate said. “I was just coming to see if Don was here.” Charlie looked up at Nate. “No,” he said with remorse. “Don is dead.”

Don had been in a bicycle accident on Grand Avenue earlier that week and suffered severe head trauma that led to his death. Though Nate had only known Don for nine days, he felt something come over him. “I walked out of there and could feel my life was about to change,” Nate explains. “I didn’t know how, but I could feel it.”

Change didn’t take long. Mere months after Don’s death, Nate, Kate and other local artists opened the Ames Progressive (now called The Space For Ames), a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting local music and art. The group who first met at Don’s continued to meet and held a show at the Progressive in his honor. Shortly after, Nate, Kate and their friends started a band, Mumford’s, to carry on Don’s legend. Several other local artists also formed bands, and before they knew it, the Ames music scene was huge.

Nate credits Don and his coffee table full of scrawled phone numbers with what is now a vibrant musical community. “Before he died, he brought people together,” Nate says. “He knew this was going to happen. It’s unreal the number of Ames artists with connections to Don. He is our foundation.”

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Chris Ford took the stage at DG’s Tap House in downtown Ames, ready to begin his set. He’d played hundreds of shows with his band, Christopher the Conquered, without anxiety—but this time, he was nervous. Chris was opening for his favorite band, The Mountain Goats. “Years ago, I told friends my biggest dream would be to open for John Darnielle [frontman of The Mountain Goats],” recalls Chris, a 2008 Iowa State grad. “What he sang resonated with me on both an emotional and personal level.”

But Chris’ dream wouldn’t have come to fruition without a lot of history.

“There are a bunch of bands in Ames with members
who are very good friends,” Chris says. “We help each other put out records and book shows on a regular basis. We’d been talking about ways to form a financial collective—that is, everyone puts in money, and that pays for one band’s record, then those profits pay for the next band’s record and so on—and we decided to form a label.”

In early 2011, that label would become Maximum Ames Records, an all-Iowan effort to put out vinyl albums. The group originally began with four bands—Christopher the Conquered, Mumford’s, Kate Kennedy’s band, Pennyhawk, and Derek Lambert and the Prairie Fires, another local group. Now, the label signs several other bands, including local celebrities Poison Control Center, who will put out a new limited-release album later this year.

But a record label wasn’t enough to satisfy Chris, Nate, and their friend, Chris Lyng, also an ISU graduate. “We knew we wanted to do something big,” Nate says. “And we knew Ames had the potential for something great.” Following several phone calls and meetings, they had their answer: Maximum Ames Music Festival. After some collaboration with Iowa City’s MissionCreek Music + Arts Festival leaders, Nate and Chris Lyng were sold. Maximum Ames Music Festival was slated for September.

After months of sourcing, planning and little sleep, Nate and Chris had finished a lineup: 103 bands, all Midwestern and mostly Iowan, would play September 22 through 25, 2011 at 23 Ames venues. “We had such a huge variety of venues,” Chris says. “From houses to parks to clubs, cafés to radio stations to galleries, we covered it all.”

One of the highlights of the planning stages was securing The Mountain Goats and Euforquestra, both nationally renowned artists. “The Mountain Goats frontman used to live in Ames,” Nate says. “He used to play at the M-Shop. And Euforquestra is originally from Iowa City. Even the national bands we booked still have Iowa ties.”

The festival, which took place downtown in Campustown and as far west as the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Hyland Avenue, supported nearly every style of music: rock, punk, folk, bluegrass, electronic, soul, blues, hip-hop, jazz, even country—you name it, that genre was present at Maximum Ames.

“It was great to see people we wouldn’t normally see at local bands’ shows,” Chris says. “They might have come to see a headliner, but they saw a local band open and got really into it. That’s what we were going for—that was our goal in all of this.”

“This is our thing,” Nate agrees. “We love the scene here in Ames. There is so much talent, and we wanted to put on an event that put all that energy and talent and ability together. The festival exists to promote Ames culture. Every year, we’re going to step it up and make it bigger and better.”

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On a Sunday night this past August, Mumford’s was preparing for a show at the 8th Street Tap Room in Lawrence when the bartender approached Nate. “Hey, are you guys named after Don Mumford?” he asked. “Yeah,” Nate said. “He’s why we’re playing.” The bartender raised his eyebrows. “Did you know this was Don’s bar?” he asked. “Look at this.” Behind the bar was a framed news article: Don’s obituary. “It gives me chills to talk about it,” Nate said. “We had no idea.”

The bartender went on to explain that every Sunday night, Don would host a jazz jam in the exact spot Mumford’s was about to play. “That was one of those moments where I was like, ‘We are being guided. This band, this whole experience, is being guided by Don Mumford.’”

If he was alive, he would have been a big part of it. So much of this vision was his: he told us that we don’t have to just dream about a music scene. He made us believe we could make it happen in Ames. And he was never worried about experience—never once did he ask, ‘Hey, are you a good musician?’ He just wanted to play. It was about the music, and it still is.”