

JESSE MORRIS
Talented rock 'n' roller

Family, friends and fans of musician Jesse Morris are mourning his early death and struggling to understand what happened. He took his own life in his Ellis Street apartment the evening of Nov. 4. Two days later, he would have turned 27.

"His death was a disaster," said Joe Dean, guitarist in Mr. Morris' backing band, the Man Cougars, who knew him six years and was a mentor to him. "I've been through suicides — my dad committed suicide — but this was tragic as could be."

Hundreds turned out for a wake Dec. 4, when musician friends took turns singing Mr. Morris' songs while the Man Cougars backed them. A week after his death, at Oakland's Uptown nightclub, at what had been scheduled as a gig for Mr. Morris and the Man Cougars, friends and admirers raised the money to pay for his cremation.

"Everybody liked him, he had a lot of friends," said Carole Lennon, owner of Lennon Rehearsal Studios in SoMa, where the wake was held. "A very warm, wonderful person."

Mr. Morris packed a lot into his lifetime. He played music in a variety of genres, in several bands including HeP.Si, in which he used the stage name Jesse Jaundice, the U.S. Kings, the Tenderloin Two and, for the past few years, the Man Cougars. He was a familiar sight at the 24th Street BART Station, singing and playing his father's Guild acoustic guitar for commuters.

Many clips of him survive on YouTube to validate astonished testimonials to his uncannily faithful renditions of Johnny Cash songs — and his popularity. His Cash-sounding version of Kris Kristofferson's "Sunday Morning Coming Down," filmed at 24th Street BART, had almost a quarter-million page views at press time.

"He could mimic anybody," Dean said. He had a voice like "honey on tits. He could do me better than me, he could do Cash better than Cash."

BART featured him in a video on its website and the SF Weekly named him "Best BART Musician" in 2008. Dean said that Mr. Morris could bring in \$180 in a few hours' work at BART, and that other BART buskers said Mr. Morris "showed us that we could do this — everybody in BART stations loves and thanks Jesse." Over the years Mr. Morris played at BART stations more than 1,000 times, he told the online magazine Alarm Press in 2010.

At the Board of Supervisors' Nov. 15 meeting, Supervisor John Avalos paid tribute to Mr. Morris, screening a YouTube video, paraphrasing "Folsom Prison Blues," to wit: "I hear the BART train comin' ..." and remembering "a big tattooed guy singing Johnny Cash songs with an uncanny impression of his baritone. While his appearance may have been intimidating, he was a warm and friendly guy with a great sense of humor. ... For years, commuters enjoyed his songs echoing up the walls. He was a much-loved member of the community."

"Jesse Morris and the Man Cougars" was the group's only album released during Mr. Morris' lifetime, but Dean says they recorded another, which he expects to come out in 2012. "This was a good band," said Dean, who, at 43, was its next-youngest member. For the first time in his career, he said, instead of the usual drill of calling around for gigs, he was fielding offers and picking and choosing from among them. Opening for the Dwarves, he said, "we would absolutely slay crowds of a thousand people. ... We have a record contract. In this day and age, who even has a record contract?"

Before meeting Mr. Morris, the members of the Man Cougars had toured Europe repeatedly and been

hired by the U.S. Department of Defense to play for troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. The band got its name when Mr. Morris teased them about their appeal to younger women.

The band produced its own album. A friend in Los Angeles played it for Jimmy White, national sales director of Cockroach Media, an independent record label distributor.

"I just flipped over it; it really is an amazing record," White told The Extra, and he got in touch with the band to talk about pushing the album.

The record is selling particularly well in Japan, Dean said, and seems to be experiencing the all-too-typical surge in sales in the aftermath of Mr. Morris' death. White said it's sold in at least 11 European countries, South America and Canada.

The album is available only on vinyl or as a download, not on CD.

"He was an old school vinyl junkie, and saw no use for a CD version," White says.

"We measure success a whole lot differently than bigger record companies," White told The Extra. "Being involved with the release of this album was a labor of love for me, 'cause God knows there's no money in selling LPs by a local artist who plays at BART stations. Still, I felt compelled to sit people down and make them listen."

Mr. Morris was a commanding presence, 6 feet 4 and heavily tattooed. Though at one time he weighed 390 pounds, his mother, Julie Augustine, said that the medical examiner weighed him in at 230. The weight gain was due to his prodigious appetite — and perhaps his mom's "amazing" cooking — but when he decided to lose it, he worked it off through diet and exercise over about 18 months.

Mr. Morris also worked the door at Divisadero Street's Minibar, which is where his fiancée, Apphia Williams, a writer, met him in 2010.

Mr. Morris was bipolar and struggled with depression and had been prescribed medications for these conditions since he was a teenager, and was known to self-medicate. He'd been hospitalized in September after a suicide attempt thwarted by Williams with the help of their next-door neighbor, Jesse Harper, another musician and close friend.

Mr. Morris lingered in an induced coma after that incident, and his mother said he subsequently entered a rehab center in Burbank dedicated to musicians, a visit that was paid for by an admirer. He was apologetic in person and online — his Facebook page linking him to hundreds of "friends."

The page also hints at his sense of humor, stating, for instance, that he "studied ADD at GED."

"He does have that quick, wicked, sorta dark sense of humor," said Dina Silver, who knew Mr. Morris since he was "about 4."

"He had a 'don't give a damn attitude' — shake 'em, and if they're still standing then maybe they're worth talking to."

"It was fun playing with him, he was a great kid," recalled longtime friend, guitarist Jimmy Crucifix, citing as fun years the "hardcore punk thing" when Mr. Morris performed as Jesse Jaundice. But he said that Mr. Morris "was uncomfortable in this world."

"I just saw him always as a great

kid. He seemed a little lonely, depressed. He wasn't afraid to sit down and cry." His emotional side, Crucifix said, was in part "what made him such a good player. Playing music put him in a different world."

He said Mr. Morris eventually told his friends he had blacked out and that the September suicide attempt "was a stupid thing to do" and blamed it on a bad mix of chemicals. "To me," Crucifix said, "it means he was hiding something."



PHOTO BY HEIDI ZUMBRUN

Jesse Morris, two nights before he died.

Williams said they'd been enjoying a romantic evening together when it happened. She went to the bathroom, came out, he went in, she heard a noise and found him hanging.

"He had a perfect moment and figured that's when he wanted to leave," Silver theorized.

"There was so much more to Jesse than his music," said Sunny McEwing, who has a son a bit older than Mr. Morris, knew him since his early teenage years, housed him at different times in his life and traveled and became "best friends" with him. "I can't tell you how many times, wherever we went, he'd just get crowds around him — people he didn't know. He'd get everybody laughing."

"He wasn't inhibited at all. That was part of the wonder of Jesse. The flip side of that was that he was incredibly sensitive, really, really sensitive and he did care," McEwing said.

"He was a very charismatic guy. I didn't mean to fall in love with the guy, but I did, and always will be," Dean said. Dean said his band was looking for a frontman when they met Mr. Morris, and that they worked with him to get him to be less derivative, and comfortable with his own identity.

When they started working together, Dean said, he could hear Mr. Morris' influences — Flipper, the Buzzcocks, Merle Haggard, Cash — in his songs. "We kept pushing him to try to find his own voice," Dean said. "Fortunately, in the last year of his life he had gotten further away from the mimicking and got to where he sounded like himself."

"We had a lot of success," Dean said, citing how quickly they'd risen to headliner status at the now-dark Folsom Street Annie's Social Club, where they'd get \$500 for a show — unheard of for a band that's been together less than a year.

"He was never comfortable here unless he was performing," Dean said.

"I think he was scared of himself, unsure of how to be," Dean said. "He said that over and over again."

When he hanged himself, he was alone. After trying to reach him all weekend, Williams found him Nov. 7. "I was worried that it would happen again," she said. But "he assured me many, many times that it wouldn't. I don't believe that there was any forethought decision-making that led up to this. It was a moment of despair."

Although he left no suicide note, Dean said, "over and over and over, in 80% of every song that he wrote," he'd cite how he had everything to live for and yet felt hopelessly despondent. "If you try to kill yourself once on dope, and once when you're sober, that's a decision that I have to respect," Dean said.

Working with him in a business mode was enervating, Dean said. "It's the completely insane people that have the talent. If I was half as talented as he was — I'm two times as skilled, but there's a difference — maybe I would've killed myself," Dean said. "He used up all his fuel."

"Suicide is about pain," said Eve Meyer, executive director of San Francisco Suicide Prevention, the city's most knowledgeable suicide expert. "Most of the people who die of suicide die on the first attempt." She pointed out that in San Francisco, suicide takes half again as many

lives each year as homicide — 110-120 compared with 75-80. Her organization's research found that ratio generally holds throughout the United States.

"There are a lot of stereotypes about suicide because we don't talk about it very much," Meyer said. Repeated attempts, she said, are "not typical," but "that does happen." Up to 10% of those who attempt suicide once ultimately die by their own hand within 10 years, the organization estimates.

"It often happens with somebody who may not have totally wanted to. It's a final thing; people understand that. People love life and are in pain and have not made that decision yet but work their way toward it by making one attempt after another until they get to the point that the part of themselves that wants to live is not there."

Meyer didn't know Mr. Morris but said, "He must have been in tremendous pain, and you worry that he couldn't find his way out of that."

"What you really need to concentrate on is trying to nurture the part of them that wants to live. And try to remove the pain, because the pain is what gets in the way of them wanting to live." Attempting suicide "absolutely" is a cry for attention, Meyer said, "and that's appropriate. If they're in pain and crying out for help, they need help and you try to help them get help."

"No matter what anybody said, he would have done what he wanted to do," Silver said. "He was done; he wanted to leave." If you believe that people should be allowed to live freely, she said, "they should be able to leave in any capacity they like, as long as they don't take anybody out with them."

"The one thing Jesse failed to realize in his life," Crucifix said, "was that a lot of people loved him."

Mr. Morris was born in San Francisco and raised largely in Pacifica. From a very young age, his love of