

**Heavy**  
by  
John Bryant

Like other aspects of his life, James Clay's nickname indicated there was more to this totally unique human being than meets the eye. I don't know how he got it - all I know is that the name was accurate in so many ways. From the first time that I met James, I knew this was a man who was solid. Sure. Uncompromising. Heavy.

Like many of us, the first time I saw James he was playing his tenor sax. It was hard to believe such a big sound was coming from a person so slight. It was so impressive that it made me lose awareness of my surroundings, but only for moments at a time.

It was 1972 and I was a student at what was then North Texas State University, now the University of North Texas in Denton. I was the drummer for the 1'0 Clock Lab Band at that time, and was gradually making way through Dallas and Fort Worth on a mission to hear the top professional musicians in the area.

While on this pursuit, I met a fabulous bass player named Mike McKinney, who took me to the Woodman's Auditorium in South Dallas one Sunday afternoon. He pulled into the parking lot like he owned the joint, hopped out and headed straight for the kitchen entrance in the back. Being a young white boy unfamiliar with the territory, my plan was to stick like glue to Mike, so I was close on his heels as he sailed through the back door with a confidence that a seasoned musician knows so well.

And all of a sudden my ears were treated to a sound I have never forgotten. There in the middle of some of the best musicians I had ever heard, holding forth with that sound that still plays clearly in my mind was James Clay.

I was totally mesmerized, and so I didn't notice when Mike roamed away to see some friends. I looked around and realized I was the only white person in the room, so I found myself slinking back into a corner in an attempt to disappear.

After a few songs the band took a break. James left the bandstand, made his way through the tables, and walked straight towards me in my darkened corner. As he approached I tried to send Mike telepathic signals to return my side, so he could tell James it was ok for me to be here - that I was a musician, too.

James walked up to me with friendliness and confidence, offered his handshake and said, "You must be a musician."

I later realized that said it all to me about James. He knew I was unsure about being there, and immediately put me at ease. I told him I played in the Lab band at NT, and he shocked me again.

"You want to sit in?"

I did just that, and so it was James who introduced me to a new musical world that would become so important to me. Being young and inexperienced, I became emboldened to try some musical tricks I had recently learned, trying to impress the older musicians. James didn't say a word, but simply walked over and laid his hand on my hi-hat cymbals, calming them down, and effectively saying, "Relax son, you don't have to do that – just play the music."

There were many more occasions to play with James over the next two years, and to meet and play with other musicians whom he brought into his circle. One of these great musicians who I was fortunate to meet was Duane Durrett. James Clay loved Duane, as both a drummer and a person, and so do I.

I owe a huge debt to Duane and James – a life altering debt. One day in the Summer of 1974 my phone rang, and it was Ray Charles on the line. What? He says he heard about me from James Clay. That he was unhappy with his drummer and wanted to make a change. Could I be in Denver the next day to start a tour with him?

As James would say, "Solid toody, Mr. Moody!!"

How did this happen? Why me?

It was simple and logical. Ray asked James about drummers and James called his favorite drummer, Duane Durret. Fortunately for me, Duane's wife was about to have a baby, and being the good and caring person he is, he told James he couldn't leave.

Then he changed my life by suggesting to James he should call me. I played two years with Ray Charles and James Clay. But we don't have enough time or ink to cover that story.

I'll just say that I still miss James something terrible, with both my heart and my ears. He was truly a one of a kind musician and person. He was funny, serious, sincere, full of music and mischief, and walked this Earth with both feet on solid ground.

He was Heavy.