

Nick Amster, notable supporter of music and arts in Cleveland, has died

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Nick Amster, a prominent local arts and music supporter pictured here with his wife Sarah Buck, died on Sunday, April 26. (Photo by Kathleen Murphy Colan, special to The Plain Dealer) The Plain Dealer

By [Anne Nickoloff, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Nick Amster, a part-owner of the Beachland Ballroom, generous Rock & Roll Hall of Fame donor, supporter of the Cleveland Cinematheque, musician and onetime indie movie actor died on Sunday, April 26, from heart disease.

Amster was also known around town as the guy with the crazy hair. He had not cut his dreadlocks since the night before he married his wife, Sarah J. Buck, on September 12, 1992. He was unmistakable, grabbing the attention of onlookers with his nearly 12-foot long, grey, matted dreadlock draped over his arm at Cleveland's music venues and movie theaters.

Forty-one years ago, when Buck and Amster met at a College of Wooster cafe concert, he had a head of short red curls. Their first date was the next week: A Canton screening of French thriller “La Diabolique.”

“He was the most unusual person I had ever met 41 years ago, and he remains, probably, the most unusual person I still have ever met,” Buck said. “He was definitely eccentric, and smart, and curious. He called himself a ‘lifer’ for music, that it was so part of his bones.”

Amster was born on Sept. 30, 1948 with the full name Nicholas Amster Jay Fishelson, the son of Julia Amster Fishelson and Joseph Eli Fishelson. He grew up in Wooster and graduated from Wooster High School in 1967, then went to Oberlin College where, as a student, he taught classes about rock and roll. He and Buck moved to Cleveland in the early 1980s. Amster is survived by Buck, his siblings Ida Sue and David Fishelson and his two children, Eli and Claire Fishelson.

Amster’s love of music extended to his community through philanthropy. He constantly gave to Cleveland’s music scenes in ways big and small. Friends said he regularly carried a bag of mixed CDs to hand to friends and strangers. He and Buck bought season tickets to the Cleveland Orchestra every year, even though he couldn’t make it to all of the shows. Beachland Ballroom co-owner Cindy Barber said he would regularly slip \$100 bills to local musicians at the Beachland Ballroom’s bar.

“[Music] was the only thing that mattered,” Buck said. “It was all that really mattered in life to him.”

Amster’s love of music was expansive. With the exception of some opera, he enjoyed every genre and listened to everything. But his biggest musical interest wasn’t necessarily a genre or a specific musician -- instead, it was the year 1967.

“For over 10 years, every single day, he would listen to something that was either recorded or released in 1967,” Buck said. “He did it for years, he was devoted to it. It was just amazing. I wish he had written a book about it.”

The project spanned every kind of music release from all over the world, as long as it was tied to the year 1967, which he considered the finest year in music -- a year that defined some of his favorite musicians, like Bob Dylan and The Velvet Underground.

Amster was more than a fan of music -- he was entrenched in the scene, both locally and nationally, with plenty of run-ins and friendships with the biggest rockers in the world. As a teenager, he ran away to New York City and befriended legendary Beat figures Harry Smith and Allen Ginsberg, and experimental rock band The Fugs. He even worked his way into a Fugs recording session and played a bit of percussion on an album, Buck said. After that, he spent time living in Jamaica, where he became involved with the developing '60s reggae scene.

Amster made his own music, too, hiring musicians of all kinds to record with him at late-night sessions -- including one session with acclaimed rock band Wilco.

"He produced and recorded and did vocals on his own very unusual music," Buck said. "People called him 'Nick at Night' because they'd do their recording sessions in the middle of the night, and they'd go for hours."

Conversations with Amster would often go the same way, friends said.

"Whenever he came to a movie, I knew I'd be there for an hour after the show ended, talking to Nick. He was notorious for hanging around," John Ewing, the Cleveland Cinematheque's director, said. "He was a gregarious person -- he loved to talk and watch old movies. It usually happened into the wee hours of the morning."

Amster's affability and huge knowledge of the arts led to relationships and moments with rock and blues stars. He was a close friend and supporter of Cleveland blues legend Robert Lockwood Jr., until Lockwood's death in 2006. He became acquaintances [with rockstar Lou Reed](#) after talking with him at concerts.

Once, Buck said, Amster got himself, a friend, Buck and Lockwood Jr. backstage at a Rolling Stones concert to hang out with Keith Richards.

"Nick wasn't an imposter trying to get in there," Buck said. "He knew so much and it was so deep in him... only Nick could pull that off."

To be friends with Amster, Ewing said, was "like being a friend of Santa Claus." Amster would regularly gift his friends new music, concert tickets and experiences. The first time the Rock Hall induction ceremony was held in Cleveland, Amster gave Ewing a ticket to the event -- a ticket that would have cost hundreds of dollars.

"It was just a nice gesture," Ewing said. "An out-of-the-blue generous thing, which Nick Amster every now and again, would do and bestow on you."



Nick Amster and John Ewing, outside of the Cleveland Cinematheque. (Photo by Les Vince, Cleveland Cinematheque)

Amster's generosity extended significantly to Cleveland venue the Beachland Ballroom, which he became a part-owner of around 2013.

"If it wasn't for Nick, the Beachland probably wouldn't continue to exist," Barber said. "The roof was falling in, we had buckets and put basins up underneath the drop ceilings. He got so fed up with it... He wanted to fix things. He wanted to help."

Amster paid what ended up being about \$100,000 to completely redo the Beachland's roof, Barber said. He also installed a recording system at the club to make CD recordings for every band that performed in the venue, so that there could be a record of each show.

Fixing up the Beachland was, like most of Amster's life, focused around the music, Buck said.

"It wasn't about the food, it was not about the alcohol -- he didn't even drink," Buck said. "It was about the music, always about the music."

He was a decades-long advocate and friend for blues star Robert Lockwood Jr., helping his family after Lockwood's death in 2006 by selling one of Lockwood's guitars to the Rock Hall and giving the funds to the family.

Amster was also a longtime friend of legendary folklorist Harry Smith and later became a board member of the Harry Smith Archives. Amster was integral to the release of Grammy-winning reissue of "Anthology of American Folk Music," according to Harry Smith Archives director Rani Singh. Amster even [helped Smith walk onstage](#) at the 1991 Grammy Awards.

He was also a big part in planning the Harry Smith Project concerts, bringing in various bands to perform on stages around the world.

"What Nick brought to his role as a board member of the Harry Smith archives was very much a really good business sense, a sense of the music and the film world. He really knew the landscape and was very generous in his time and also financially in helping to bring all of these things to fruition," Singh said. "He was a real special cat from a special part of the forest, and there will not be another one like him."

At the Rock Hall, Amster was a financial supporter from the start, later funding events that brought in older rock and blues stars, said Terry Stewart, the Rock Hall's former director. In particular, Amster helped fund the American Music Masters program at the museum.

"He was a music lover and facilitator and a donor, and he was sort of omnipresent, a little bit of everywhere in those days," Stewart said. "We had a lot of fun being around each other. I never got to spend enough time with him, he was always on the move."

In addition to his music endeavors, Amster also became involved with the Cleveland Cinematheque, donating and presenting films over the years. Amster even starred in an indie movie screened at the theater, Ewing said.

"Living Dreams," directed by Alan Greenberg, screened on March 20, 1988. The Cinematheque's flier for the event shared a plot summary:

"Eight bizarre characters -- including a record producer, a boudoir photographer and a Cuban exile -- play out their destinies and their dreams in contemporary Miami in this outrageous, intentionally offensive new comedy."

In the flier, Amster was noted to be attending the showing, stating that he was a “well-known Cleveland movie buff... who makes his acting debut as one of the movie's funniest oddballs.”

Out in public, Amster was a visible character in Cleveland’s arts and music scenes. At home, he shared his generosity in smaller ways -- always in the form of his favorite language, music.

In February, Amster helped buy headphones and a CD player for Buck’s mother, who is hard of hearing, so she would be able to listen to music. Inside the CD player, Amster placed an old family recording of Buck playing the piano, so that her mother could hear the performance.

Buck brought the setup to her mother, and played the CD for her in February.

“All of the sudden, tears were rolling down her face, because she could hear music for the first time in years,” Buck said. “He gave me that CD to take to my mother. He said, she has to hear her daughter playing.”

Amster never stopped spreading his love of music with loved ones. One of the last emails he sent to friends on Sunday, before his death, mentioned his reactions to coronavirus and the changing world.

Ewing and Barber were two recipients of the email, which, Ewing said, included two musical excerpts and a short clip from the film “Apocalypse Now.” The clip featured Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore, played by Robert Duvall, stating: “Someday this war’s going to end.”

Later, after Amster passed, Buck found a batch of freshly-made CDs and other gifts, labeled and ready to deliver to his friends. Some of them, perhaps, included his signature used to sign off on personal correspondences:

“Yours in music, Nick.”