

Published October 03, 2012 9:00AM | Updated October 04, 2012 4:44PM

KELLY, Karl Dexter

Region loses 'great showman' with death of musician Karl Kelly

By Joyce Conlon, Day Staff Writer

Karl Kelly was remembered Wednesday as a "great showman" and soulful singer who fronted several bands over four decades.

He played virtually every local live music venue, including the Melody Lounge in Groton, Rhum Runners Lounge at Howard Johnson's in Mystic, and the Mabrey Hotel, the Capitol Theater and the Lighthouse Inn in New London.



"He was an icon," said fan Janet Serluca-Schermerhorn of New London. "If Karl Kelly was playing somewhere, I was there."

Kelly, 65, of New London died Tuesday from complications of lung cancer at Lawrence & Memorial Hospital.

As news of Kelly's death spread through the city, musicians and fans filled social media pages with memories of the man who was in so many bands that friends and family have trouble remembering them all.

One of the area's best-known and most-enduring musicians, Kelly was a giant of a man, not only in his 6-foot-4-inch stature but also in his voice and personality. In the early-to-mid-1990s, Kelly was the voice behind Little Anthony & the Locomotives and, more recently, The Karl Kelly Band.

Rhonda Dempsey, co-owner of Sneekers Cafe in Groton, said Kelly and his band played there for at least 28 years and always filled the room.

"He would walk around and talk to everybody. He just had a very nonchalant way, and then when he sang — Bam! — he had that big soulfulness about him," she said.

Dempsey's friend Rob Reed said, "If there was a Mount Rushmore at Sneekers, Karl would be on it."

Kelly moved to New London from North Carolina as a boy, and it wasn't long before he was singing at churches and community centers. By the time he was a senior at New London High School, he was

playing gigs in venues ranging from clubs at Misquamicut Beach to New London's Lighthouse Inn, to weddings and even funerals.

Kelly was a part of a lot of great bands, said Wayne Manca, a close friend who has played on and off with him for nearly 40 years. "Every musician will tell you the same thing: Karl was such a great entertainer. As a musician on stage with him, we'd be entertained as well," he said.

When asked to share a fond or fun story about his friendship with Kelly, Manca laughed. "I was just thinking the other day about that, and, really, most of them I can't repeat."

Dwight Baldwin, a local percussionist, had known Kelly since he was 13. Baldwin said the whole Kelly family was musical, but singing was Karl's calling. Baldwin particularly remembers Kelly's version of songs by Sly and the Family Stone and Stevie Wonder.

"He was truly blessed. He could sing songs like he owned them," Baldwin said. "He was generous, too. He would invite others to sit in with him. I remember the time he invited me up at a gig at the Lighthouse Inn — he was like that."

Kelly also enjoyed fishing at the New London waterfront, visiting gardens and watching soccer games at Mitchell College. But it was the love of music and the arts that defined him, and the Hygienic Art Park and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center were among the places that were important to him.

"Karl felt the O'Neill was magical, from the conversation to the music," his wife, Susan Kelly, said. The Kellys, who recently celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary, participated in spiritual counseling during the last weeks of her husband's life. "It was very important to Karl that we, as his family, would too be at peace with his passing," she said.

Guitarist Bill Light recalled a recent evening when he, Kelly and Danny Solomons were performing in the lounge at the O'Neill.

"Karl got the crowd to do whatever he wanted them to do — waving hands, singing refrains. They ate it up. We had a ball. Karl could do that," Light said.

Musician John Fries said that he and Kelly were in a band called Karl Kelly & the Secret Service in the mid to late '90s.

"At the time, I was in my mid 20s, and Karl was the first guy I had played with who had been out there doing it for real. It was an awesome education for me, learning from him on and off stage. To this day, Karl is one of the best front men I have ever seen in the area. He could command the stage like no other," said Fries, who now fronts his own band, The Heat.

Riverdogs singer-guitarist Ben Parent said Wednesday that he was a fan of Kelly's dynamic live shows. "It wasn't a regular gig," Parent said. "He was a great showman and soulful musician."

Kelly was a fixture in downtown New London, where he worked for Thames River Greenery for about 15 years.

"Karl always made me laugh when I ran into him downtown — I'm really going to miss that," Fries said.

Plans are being made for a memorial service and a benefit and tribute celebration.

"A lot of people saw Karl Kelly as an icon, and he was," Baldwin said. "But a lot of us really just saw him as a friend."

Day contributor Stephen Chupaska contributed to this report.