

An Oregon Original – Jim Pepper Lives

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During his tumultuous career as a columnist for *The Oregonian* and *Portland Tribune*, Phil Stanford liked to snicker at the region’s provincial striving for distinction by playing more or less tongue and cheek tribute to local inventors and discoverers.

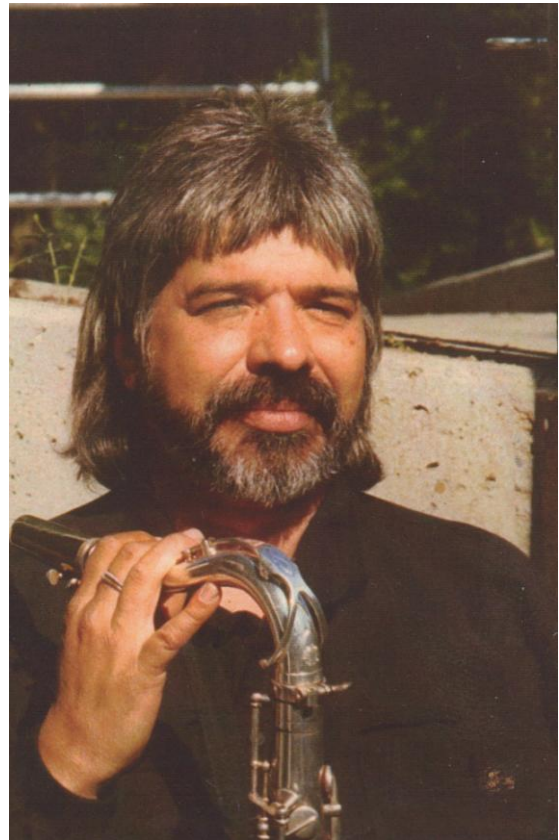
One Portland immortal he cited came up with hacky sack, a game, if not a game changer. Others included a figure who produced the plastic clip used to close bread bags, the promulgator of frozen French fried potatoes, and the fabricator of processed maraschino cherries (about which, more later). Stanford hardly neglected the first sighting of UFOs outside of Seattle in 1948.

This regional “achievers” list is something of a funhouse version of the compilation assembled by Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission. And Stanford did have a connection with the man I’m confirming here as an important “Oregon Original.”

In early 1992, Phil witnessed and wrote about the final public performance of Jim Pepper. He appeared at the Brasserie Montmartre, the off and on again downtown Portland club. Stanford’s item was a sorrowful description, not a review. Lymphoma had taken a punishing toll on Pepper’s exultant voice but the tenor saxophone still spoke volumes.

“Witchi Tia To” may be the most recorded song ever ascribed to an American Indian. More than 70 individuals and ensembles have recorded Pepper’s adaptation of the Comanche peyote chant, versions ranging from the superb to the preposterous. It was far too important to be included on the funhouse list.

Stanford followed Pepper’s condition as it worsened in early 1992. Not having “Witchi Tia To” readily at hand, he called me for the lyric. “Of course”, I thought with a sinking heart – “Makes me feel glad that I’m not dead.”



Jim Pepper and his beloved Selmer

I'd just returned from the Pepper family home, watching Jim fight to stay alive. How could the use of that line be anything other than a cruel irony? Yet Stanford reproduced the entire lyric and it came off well, was respectfully moving. Thank you Water Spirits.

There was nothing bogus about Pepper's commitment to Indian song, particularly not after his 1980 State Department tour of Africa with Don Cherry. But to be recognized solely on the basis of this one song would greatly dismay him. From his mischievous time at Parkrose High School and final year at Madison, Pepper had grown determined to be a dominant figure in the world of jazz.

At the time of this writing, 21 years after his death, the jury is still out on whether Pepper's legacy has more to do with expanding the range of Native American expressiveness or as one of the notable tenor saxophone players in the history of jazz. His life as a Wildman makes for sensational copy but tends to obscure more important claims to fame. Among the host of ironies that cluster around the Pepper story is the disparity between the many renditions of "Witchi Tia To," and the scanty and difficult to obtain evidence of his recorded work as a startlingly unorthodox jazz player.

The most scrupulous assessment of Pepper's music to date was undertaken by H. R. B. Harris, self identified as "Ratzo," a bass player from the Bay Area who played with Pepper in the 1970s. Fully 20 pages of his 219 page thesis on Pepper, for a Rutgers University masters degree, is given over to a measure by measure examination of Pepper's solo on the 1971 recording of "Witchi Tia To."

Harris noted that it was virtually identical to his performance on this signature song several months earlier at *Ray's Helm*, a club on Portland's NE Broadway, also the setting for a number of the best Wildman stories. His love / hate dealings with owner Ray Oeschger epitomize his relationship with his hometown. One incident had to do with stolen steaks hidden in the bell of his horn during hot weather – weevils and bad smells oozed forth.

It is intriguing to learn that Pepper, an improviser par excellence, shaped one of his most famous solos in Portland and reproduced it for the "Pepper's Powwow" recording session.¹

Curiously, the most immediately distinguishable element of Pepper's playing – the scream – likely stems from both of his musical manifestations – Indian song and jazz.

Harris characterizes Pepper's screams as manifestation of multi-phonics, "where several overtones are simultaneously made to sound louder than a given fundamental." This

¹ The Portland session was recorded at *The Helm* by the late Bob Thompson, who accumulated some six thousand audiotapes and videos of jazz in Oregon over a period of some thirty years. The proper archival Oregon home must be found for this music, which includes Pepper tapes and videos in my possession.

splintered, congested wail climbs into the stratosphere. Harris associates it with Pepper's Indian heritage. Calling attention to Pepper's Indian name, Flying Eagle, he observed: "It sounds remarkably like the call of seagull or certain eagles."

This connection is supported by Indian singing. Pepper would play visitors his recordings of powwow music for hours, identifying elements that he was convinced were among the building blocks of early jazz. One was the pitch, intensity, timbre, and volume of many Indian lead vocalists, a penetrating scream possessing many of the qualities Harris associates with multi-phonics.

Early on, Pepper identified himself with the hard bop and "free" or "outside" performances of east coast black players. He particularly dilated on encounters with Albert Ayler during his first New York City trip in the mid-'60s. Ayler was a bearer of cultural heritage emergent from Africa via field, church and watering hole – the vocal and instrumental scream. The primal scream was commensurate with the living conditions of many black lives, becoming a central element in both their sacred and secular music. "Honkers, Bar Walkers and Screamers" is a famous anthology of black bar music. John Coltrane played with Earl Bostic's rhythm and blues band and did his own bar walking.



Yasu and Sandra Sunrising Osawa – Filmmakers

In Sandy Osawa's fine documentary "Pepper's Powwow," tenor player Bert Wilson explains and demonstrates how he and Pepper worked on shredding fundamental tonality to achieve statements of maximum bellicosity. Sadly Wilson of Olympia, Washington, a close Pepper associate and revered jazz scene figure, departed in June, 2013.

Between these sources of Pepper's scream, there is intriguing resonance. Given the steep swings of his behavior, there has been raffish speculation about an evil twin. He wrote two songs about his sign, Gemini, the Twins, and began working on a book about

collaboration between Native and African Americans to survive in a system often utterly destructive to both.

For at least 400 years, colonizing planters in the South feared nothing so much as an insurrection led by united bands of slaves and Native Americans. Both cultural and military implications were inherent in this intermingling, and Pepper was determined to call attention to the musical manifestations. Intermarriage between African and Native Americans was common, and the list of notable jazz players with Indian ancestry is long.



Joy Harjo, poet & musician, Floy Pepper, Jim's mom, and an Indian education colleague at PSU

Poet / singer / instrumentalist Joy Harjo, a Creek like Pepper's mother Floy, notes that New Orleans' Congo Square, frequently identified as the birthplace of jazz, was long an Indian ceremonial site before slaves began using it to stage their circle dances.

Pepper was immersed in this phenomenon in the early 1970s. Only recently has the story attracted broad attention. Consider the preamble of the traveling Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NAMI) exhibit – *IndiVisible* – on view at Parkrose High School during the Jim Pepper Native Arts Festival, August 7-10. "Within the fabric of American identity is woven a story that has long been invisible – the lives and experiences of people who share African American and Native American ancestry." That's appropriateness wearing a tuxedo.

The Jazz Player

Closely approaching the prominence of multi-phonics (the scream) in Pepper's playing was its opposite. Alone among exponents of hard-edged "energy" music, Jim also trafficked in beauty, flowing into a meltingly effective ballad player. This bespeaks a virtually unprecedented breath and range, Pepper's strongest claim to lasting notice.

The distinctiveness of tone emergent from his 1938 silver-plated Selmer Balanced Action saxophone – now a featured item at the NAMI – elicited awe early in his career. Ornette Coleman reportedly declared, "It cries."

Pepper attributed some part of featuring Indian song in his repertoire to Coleman. He liked to recite this exchange. "You're an Indian, aren't you?" "Sure am" "How come I'm not hearing that?" Asked a few years back at the Portland Jazz Festival, Coleman said he doesn't recall proffering this advice but remembers Pepper with fondness.

For a sense of other qualities of the music Jim Pepper contributed to jazz consider "The Path." First released in 1988 by German label *enja records*, I wish you good luck finding it. Like most of his works, its re-release is long overdue.

"The Path" displays the spectrum of Pepper's artistry – two Indian songs, ballads, anthems, a Caribbean tinged roots piece leavened with "Oh Little Liza," even a lullaby.

I once tried to convey a sense of Pepper's fleetness with this over-wrought phrase: "torrents of rippling and twirling triplets." Curiously, Pepper's solo stance when soaring to the heavens was immobile, sunk into the earth, rendering the storm of his inventions – heavy weather indeed – the more dramatic.

And his ear. One of the central tales of Pepper's long stay in Alaska has him playing flute, trading phrases, with a puzzled but game dickey-bird. Confirmed by a reliable witness, this story helps explain Pepper's unique approach to playing through and around chord changes. He heard connections inaccessible to the ordinary improviser.

Too Much Juice

I'm guessing that Jim Pepper occasionally asked the Life Force to take back some of the fire stoking his constitution. Energy is glorious, preternatural energy is dangerous, a "be careful of answered prayers" problem.

One of Pepper's closest running buddies in New York during the late '60s was drummer Elvin Jones. John Coltrane's primary percussionist, Jones' physical stamina was

legendary. He and Pepper would famously go on several day tears, leaving a myriad of companions shattered in their wake. A portion of a Pepper and Jones session has survived, but has never been released. Some performers have tension relieved by playing high-energy music; others find it almost impossible to come down. This dynamic duo obviously defines that latter category.

Of course non-scheduled substances were involved in these carryings on. Such compulsive consumption almost always requires extra-ordinary energy – to force creativity beyond the beyond. Among the scores of Jim Pepper stories I've collected over the past 30 years, one is particularly telling. Gordon Lee, the gifted Portland pianist who lived with Pepper for a time in Brooklyn, relates a story about appetite. Indeed that consummately Oregon funhouse product – maraschino cherries!



**Gordon Lee –
pianist & long-time Pepper collaborator**

Once Pepper found a big jar on a top shelf in the Pepper family kitchen. It took no more than two or three for the young prowler to arrive at a sickening certainty. Though he didn't particularly like the taste, an artificial, sticky sweetness, nor the mushy texture, he knew he would consume the entire jar, violently hurl, and endure white face sickness of a doomsday duration.

So Via Maraschino (think Via Dolorosa) led Pepper toward the addiction that beleaguered and shortened his life. The atrocious irony of the period when he came up in jazz was the phrase "Getting Well." One "got well" by using. The question wasn't who was "getting well," but who wasn't.

Pepper constantly venerated the therapeutic properties of traditional song and regularly sought the ministrations of the Water Spirits. Why then could the physician not heal himself? Perhaps these ancient entities assert their influence in obscure ways. Ralph Pepper, his Kaw grandfather, was healed during a peyote ceremony and became an important Road Man. He taught Jim "Witchi-Tia-To" and authorized his grandson's treatment of the chant: "That's good. That's good."

One of Pepper's last hometown performances was an outdoor concert at Blue Lake Park. Most of the locals who followed him closely throughout his vexed but astonishing

career were there. Over the years I've encountered many who attended and, to a person, they said it produced the strongest sense of community they've ever experienced, before or after.

During the flood of 1996, there was the Aladdin Theater memorial concert. Tom Grant had to be bullied into playing. His "Witchi-Tia-To" sold more than any of Pepper's, and he felt consistently awkward about their relationship. Yet perform Tom did, chorus after rising chorus, with a sensational band, a parting of the waters.

To establish clearly that attention has been paid from on high, Jim was taken up by Gunther Schuller, one of the most important composers, conductors, performers and musical scholars in 20th Century American music. In 2002, Schuller arranged, conducted, and recorded a remarkable program of Pepper music in Cologne, Germany.

Guitarist Joel Harrison received a grant to perform four concerts of Pepper music on the west coast. I was there in Santa Cruz, CA and talked to Dewey Redmond, who deeply relished playing Pepper's parts – "something profound is going down." Redmond helped shape Pepper's sound more than he did that of his famous son, Joshua. And in Seattle, Dewey patted the late Olympian Bert Wilson on the head during an eruption of sound from that wheelchair. Wilson, as a child one of the nation's last polio victims, informed me his left arm was paralyzed in the perfect position to play tenor.



Jim Pepper Remembrance Band – 2005 Portland Jazz Festival Pepper Tribute

In 2005, Pepper was honored at the Portland Jazz Festival. Indians from the Warm Springs Reservation swept everyone into a circle dance around the Unitarian Church chapel. Gordon Lee, tenor sax Dennis Springer, singer Caren Knight, drummer Charlton Jackson

bassist Glen Moore, and guitarist Dan Balmer (see above) rose to the lofty occasion. It always seems to be there at Pepper events.

In 2007, Oregon Public Broadcasting aired an “Art Beat” feature I produced, using video from a 1978 performance by Pepper at the Jazz Society of Oregon Picnic. Now an annual Jim Pepper Native Arts Festival will carry on, and hopefully expand, this tradition.

This is quite of bit of action and far from a complete account. Additional Pepper events have unfolded in Oklahoma, Washington D.C., and New York City, with reference on the Festival webpage – www.JimPepperFest.net.

A stage play based on the life of Pepper is being developed by Don Horn of Portland’s Triangle Productions. Resurrection of the “Free Spirits” at the first annual Jim Pepper Native Arts Festival continues this joyful panoply of posthumous events. Water Spirit feeling springing round my head. Not dead indeed. ∞



**Native American Musicians – Portland State University Native Center
2005 Portland Jazz Festival Pepper Tribute**

Photos courtesy Jack Berry & David Milholland

