

Remembering Jim Pepper, Oscar Pettiford, Floyd Red Crow Westerman



David Amram
at right

From 1956-1959 when I was a member of the great bassist Oscar Pettiford's big band, we would often go to his house after playing at Birdland and he would show me dances and sing songs he learned as a boy in Oklahoma.

And he talked about the great trombonist Big Chief Russell Moore, Jack Teagarden, pianist Mary Lou Williams and other masters of jazz who like Oscar had Native American heritage and how the various nations comprising what was known by most people as all being "American Indians," each had their own music, their own language and their own history.

And Oscar always had pride in his Choctaw and Cherokee heritage, and felt that jazz and the community it created of players and listeners was an extension of the harmony articulated in the old saying "Respect, Love and Sharing-The Indian Way."

Back in the 50s, Oscar had two French horns, Julius Watkins and myself, as well as a harpist, and Oscar occasionally playing cello.

"Maybe this will hip the symphony cats to opening up their minds as well as their ears" he used to say, when we would talk about Jazz, Native American music, and all the sincere forms of music built to last that were mostly ignored by the classical music establishment as well as the Pop and rock world.

"Someday, if our band hits it, we won't be going to them, they'll be coming to us."

Oscar passed away in 1960 and we never got the chance to work with any symphony orchestras, but in every symphony I ever worked with, the classical bass players all knew and revered Oscar Pettiford.

When I met Jim Pepper in the 60s, he knew all about Oscar and shared the same interest in having the treasures of jazz and Native music receive the same respect awarded to the treasures of European classical music.

Jim and I crossed paths many times over the years, and musicians I worked with like Mal Waldron, Colin Wolcott and Don Cherry all loved his music and his spirit. We also appeared together in many benefit concerts for Native American rights during the years I played as the accompanist for Floyd Red Crow Westerman.

In the summer of 1990, Jim was the featured artist in a concert we did at Prospect Park, where I conducted the Brooklyn Philharmonic in an evening celebrating Native American music and jazz. Jim was his usual dynamic self and when the concert was over, Jim and his group played almost an hour more and the whole symphony stayed to listen.

He left us way too early, and in 1993, we did a memorial tribute to him, which included his mother reading Chief Seattle's famous speech, accompanied by the orchestra.

I wish I could be there to lend my support and am so happy that Jim is receiving this honor.

I have been blessed to know and play with three of the people at this concert...Joy Harjo, Pura Fe and John Trudell, and I know how happy Jim would be to have them there as well as the original members of "The Free Spirits."

Jim opened up a lot of doors to take people to places that they had never been before, and we all have to work to keep his legacy alive and open more doors for young people to inspire them to live their lives creatively and make a contribution to the world while we are here, the way Jim did.

Thank you, Sean Aaron Cruz, for your years of hard work to make this dream a reality, as well as to all the people in Portland for sharing the gift of Jim's creations with the world with the first annual Jim Pepper Native Arts Festival.

David Amram Putnam Valley, New York June 10, 2013

David Amram (born November 17, 1930) is an American composer, conductor, multi-instrumentalist, and author. As a classical composer and performer, his integration of jazz, folkloric and world music has led him to work with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Lionel Hampton, Willie Nelson, Floyd Red Crow Westerman, Langston Hughes, Charles Mingus, Pepper Adams, Leonard Bernstein, Sir James Galway, Tito Puente, Mary Lou Williams, Joseph Papp, Arthur Miller, Arturo Sandoval, Stan Getz, Pete Seeger, Elia Kazan, Christopher Plummer, Ingrid Bergman, Odetta, Lord Buckley, Dustin Hoffman, Steve Allen, Machito, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Allen Ginsberg, Nina Simone, Gregory Corso, Bob Dylan, Steve Goodman, Gerry Mulligan, Sonny Rollins, Thelonius Monk, Hunter S. Thompson, Johnny Depp, Levon Helm, Betty Carter and Jack Kerouac. In the early 1950s, he was encouraged to pursue his unique path by mentors Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, the New York Philharmonic's conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos, Miles Davis, Aaron Copland, Gunther Schuller, and visual artists Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Today, as he has for over 50 years, Amram continues to compose music while traveling the world as a conductor, soloist, bandleader, visiting scholar, and narrator in five languages. –

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