

JIM PEPPER

BY KATRIN BRIDGET SNOW

It has been 15 years since Jim Pepper came back home to Oregon to die in 1992. The following is revised from an article in the Times Eagle written at the time to commemorate him. He was a well-regarded friend of many. ~MPMc

Jim Pepper's mainstream and fusion jazz breathes with the beat of his grandfather's Native songs. Pepper was the first Native American jazz musician to infuse jazz with the rhythms and melodies of Native songs, and he put his stamp on the international jazz scene by blending the African- and European-American elements of jazz with his own Kaw and Creek roots. His unique musical style earned him the respect of some of the top players of modern jazz in the United States and Europe.

Jim Pepper died in Portland in the winter of 1992. His music inspired and gave courage to people, and we miss him. As is true in the lives of many artists, many of us who miss him never knew him, and never told him or his family that his music deepened our humanity and, in its celebration of life, strength-ened our commitments to whatever we hold dear. I am one voice among many who discovered Jim Pepper's music and found my life richer for it. We honor Jim Pepper's memory and his music, as it lives on in his recorded works and his influence on the ever-evolving genre of jazz.

Paul Roland interviewed Jim Pepper in Oregon in 1990. The following is a brief sketch of Pepper's music based on that interview, and written in the summer of 1991 by Paul and I for National Native News, a radio service of Alaska Public Radio.

Growing up in Oregon and Oklahoma, Pepper learned traditional songs and dances that bred in him an affinity for music based on rhythm and melody, like native songs are. The tap dance classes Pepper took as a child immersed him in great jazz and trained his ear to sophisticated chord changes and complex rhythm. Pepper first turned to the saxophone in his teens, learning the rudiments from his father, who was also a sax player. He didn't start out with the literal blend of Native songs and jazz that he is known for now. He immersed himself in the 1960s avant-garde jazz scene in New York, working with some of the innovators of modern jazz. Then one night he met New York's genius saxophonist, a man whose music ushered in a new era in free jazz, and who encouraged Pepper to change the course of his own music.

"There weren't very many people there and I happened to look over the wings, and God! It was Ornette Coleman," Pepper said. "He was just standing there watching me. I almost swallowed my horn. He was there for the first set and he stayed the whole night." After the show, Coleman and Pepper began to strike up a friendship. "He started talking to me, saying 'Wow, you really have a sound, you really play beautifully,' and I was going, 'Aba aba aba aba aba'"

Coleman urged Pepper to fuse his Kaw and Creek roots with free-form jazz. Pepper thought back to his earliest musical memories, and found the Native spiritual song that became his most famous recording, *Witchie Tai To*.

"That's one of the first melodies I remember in my life, the chant," Pepper said. "I'm still singing that song to this day; other people all over the world are singing this song. It's turned into an anthem, and it's incredible that it's a peyote song. It's a celebration of water."

Pepper took his music to his grandfather to find out what his grandfather thought about performing Native songs in a jazz form, or recording Native songs.

"I took the tapes down and played for him, and he listened to it," Pepper said. "And then he got a big smile on his face, and he said, 'That's good. That's good.' And that was it for me."

The song *Witchie Tai To* and his first album, "Pepper's Pow-wow," were well received. *Rolling Stone* called Pepper's saxophone runs "utterly superb." But New York's music scene had disillusioned Pepper, and he returned to the Pacific North-west and Alaska, to work as a commercial fisherman. He finally returned to New York when trumpet man Don Cherry, who jammed with Pepper in the old days, called him back to the jazz world. He had most recently lived in Vienna, where he developed a large European following and recorded with his Europe-based quartet, and with jazz great Mal Waldron.

Jim Pepper's last recordings continued to evolve his particular style of ethnic jazz, blending mainstream jazz with a wonderful irregular pulsing rhythm, rolling chants, and the echoes of animal sounds.

Katrin Bridget Snow works for National Public Radio in San Francisco. She was formerly program director for KMUN-FM in Astoria and a frequent contributor to the *Times Eagle*. She originally wrote this article following Jim Pepper's death.



A FATHER OF FUSION

BY CARY CLARKE

On Friday, April 27, at the Wonder Ballroom, as part of their last concert of the 2006-07 season, Portland's 'Third Angle New Music Ensemble' performed two pieces by the late composer Jim Pepper. Until reading the evening's program I had never heard Pepper's name, let alone his music.

Jim Pepper was a saxophonist, composer, and singer of Native American descent born in Salem, Oregon, in 1941. He became one of the pioneers of jazz-fusion of the '60s. His role in the creolization of American cultures continued, as Pepper went on to hybridize aspects of jazz and Native American music over a career that included collaborations with many marquee jazz names, such as Don Cherry, John Scofield, and Hamid Drake. Until his premature death in 1992, Pepper made his home and career in Portland.

The two Pepper pieces performed on April 27, *Lakota Song* and *Ya Na Ho*, were both arranged by Portland-based pianist and music educator Gordon Lee, who was himself a frequent Pepper collaborator. This means that Third Angle, a local sextet, performed local arrangements of local compositions. That's three "locals." Throw on top of that the fact that, unlike most Portland bands, Third Angle features several native Oregonians, and you've got four, making the event a strong contender for the most hometown concert the town has ever seen. So why is this performance by one of the leading contemporary classical chamber ensembles in the Northwest not spoken of by Portland music-enthusiasts with the same bated breath as recent concerts by current hometown heroes like the 'Shaky Hands'? Unfortunately, lack of access.

There is very little accessible infrastructure for young people to discover music that falls outside the bounds of what is generally considered "pop music." Inasmuch as the internet has become the primary means of new music discovery for people under 30, contemporary classical is terra incognita, and most young people simply won't pay to hear live music sight unseen, as it were. A search for Pepper tunes on MP3-blog aggregator Hype Machine yielded zero results, and the number of twenty-somethings planning a night out who are well-funded and adventurous enough to pay \$30 for Third Angle, instead of \$6 for a familiar band's show, is quite small. Additionally, Northwest DIY purists who are generally excited about local music may have a difficult time making sense of a contemporary classical group like Third Angle's relationship to originality, given that they commission new works instead of writing them, as is expected of rock bands.

Which is a shame, because Portlanders have revealed themselves in recent years to be aesthetically very open. And what could be more in keeping with the city's predilection for genre-crossing, unusual instrumentation, and all things local than seeing a hometown chamber ensemble play music by one of the fathers of fusion? Let's take a chance Portland, and claim Jim Pepper — and Third Angle — as our own.

Cary Clark wrote this article for the *Portland Mercury*.

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