Comin’ and Goin’

Memories of Jazzman Jim Pepper

by Jack Berry

The speakers were fondly articulate, the music was superb, the event deeply sad. A memorial, at the Northwest Service Center in Portland, Oregon, on February 21, 1992, commemorated the passing of a jazz musician. In the century or so that jazz music has existed, such events have become something of an institution. The smell of sage and burning sweetgrass was not typical.

Jazz is of African American origin and has evolved into a complex profusion of approaches to improvisation within ever-shifting structures of rhythm and harmony. But Pepper’s signature song, “Witchi Tia To,” was based on a Comanche peyote chant he learned from his grandfather, a Kaw Indian.

Jim Pepper, born in Salem, Oregon, and raised in Portland, was a formidably proficient performer of jazz music. As a teenager, he was all over local television as a dancer (both tap and Indian) and barnstormed with the Young Oregonians, that genial institution sponsored by the Oregonian newspaper in the 1950s. It toured the state, providing variety show entertainment at high school assemblies. “We were treated like rock stars,” one trooper told me.

After developing his musical skills — first on clarinet and alto saxophone, then tenor saxophone — in sessions at Portland’s old Coffee Gallery, the Shadows, and many other jazz clubs, he left for New York in the mid-1960s. For the rest of his life, Pepper traveled between Portland, New York, Alaska, and Europe, playing and recording with most of the major jazz figures of his day. He performed in Carnegie and Avery Fisher Halls in New York City, many of the notable concert halls in Europe, and some of the roughest bars in Juneau and Anchorage, Alaska.

Pepper was honored at the Portland Jazz Festival in 2005, the year Oregon’s legislature passed Joint Resolution 31. Eleven “whereas” clauses touching on highlights of his career led to three “be it resolved” statements, including: “The members of the Seventy-third Legislative Assembly honor the
extraordinary accomplishments and musical legacy of Oregon native son Jim Pepper and direct that a copy of this resolution be delivered to the Oregon Historical Society for inclusion in its permanent collection.”

SADNESS, WHICH ATTENDS THE passage of almost everyone, is particularly sharp when fullness, in longevity or achievement, is denied. Pepper’s death involved both. To say that “the butcher cut him down” on the eve of fame is an allusion to the parlance of late nineteenth-century New Orleans. Pepper steadfastly insisted that American Indian musical elements were included in music that jubilantly burst from mourners returning from the graveyard, the origin of jazz.

A video of the entire memorial recently came into my hands, fourteen years after Pepper’s death. It was recorded during the production of Pepper’s Powwow, a fine documentary by Sandy Osawa, a Makah Indian from Washington state. The video provided me an opportunity to reassess the very unlikely life and times of this redoubtable figure.

First to speak was Steve Henry, the husband of Pepper’s sister, Suzie, who noted that the musician’s mother, Floy, was Creek, the water people, and his father, Gilbert, was Kaw, of the wind. Two childhood chums, Steve Riddle and Ferris Peery, talked of the warm Pepper household, where they both
lived for a time. Their remembrances were equal parts affection and incredulity. One recalled Pepper showing a picture of his father to classmates and offering to teach them Chinese for a dollar an hour. Music was performed by Gordon Lee, Ed Schuller, Bob Moses, and Dave Friesen, names familiar to people who follow jazz. With a workout on the tom-tom drum, Moses supported Pepper’s contention that there were Indian elements in early jazz.

A PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY, PICTURES screened at the memorial, was riveting. The images reminded me of old, hand-tinted photographs, except they moved. The first segment was Pepper playing “Comin’ and Goin’” — a song with the very simple affirmation, “It’s good where we’ve been and where we’re going” — at the forty-first annual convention of the National Congress of the American Indians in 1985 in Spokane, Washington. The shot stayed tight on his face, and I was reminded of the strangely protean nature of his appearance. Pepper could and did look like six or seven different people. A shape-shifter. This particular manifestation was emblem Indian, profile like the old nickel, face as a sweating projectile.

Pianist Gordon Lee, guitarist John Butler, and many others speak about Pepper’s insistence on intensity. If you can’t play fiercely, don’t. The image reminded me of two stories I have been told. On October 12, 1962, Pepper de-
scended to the basement of the family home and blew against the Columbia Day Storm, an event that toppled 11 billion board feet of timber in the Pacific Northwest. On November 9, 1965, he stepped onto a balcony of an apartment in Manhattan and blew against darkness, the vast East Coast blackout. Today, if he had his youthful energy, he would probably be blowing against global warming.

The other video was introduced by Don Cherry, an essential figure in Pepper’s life. Cherry, a very unconventional power in the world of jazz, intersected with Pepper’s career at several critical junctures. One of the songs Cherry planted throughout Europe was “Witchi Tia To.” For the occasion of Pepper’s memorial, he got up in ceremonial dreadlocks and ribbons and reminded us: “Yes, Jim Pepper went to Africa.”

THE TRIP, UNDER THE AUSPICES of the U.S. State Department, had revitalized Pepper’s spirit and music. He spoke frequently and fervently about the connection between village life in Africa and the traditional life of Native Americans. “It comes up from the ground,” is how Pepper described the power of African and American Indian music. “Malinyea” is a song Cherry found in Mali, and he showed a clip of the two of them performing it shortly before Pepper’s death. Wearing a fedora to cover his bald head and shade his chemo-bloated face, Pepper played fiercely.

Being Indian gave Pepper status with African Americans. The associations were early and close. His father worked in the shipyards during World War II, and Pepper had black companions when the family moved to Vanport, the large, racially mixed housing project for imported workers. As a fledgling horn player, he gravitated incessantly to the Williams Avenue district on Portland’s east side, performing in the Cotton Club and other black venues.

During the 1970s, at the height of the Black Power movement, a phenomenon called Crow Jim materialized. Some major black jazz musicians began insisting on an exclusive franchise; only African Americans could authentically perform the music. Pepper, who played with more white than black musicians, opposed Crow Jim, but he was also spared most of its consequences and was rarely spurned by black musicians. (Pepper’s mother Floy recalls saying at the moment of his birth: “How light is he? If he’s white, dip him in some chocolate. I want an Indian baby.”)

In the early 1980s, we worked for a time on a writing project. It was intended to show how the musical connection between, in his words, “the skins and the brothers” reflected a larger and neglected story, the way Africans and Native Americans collaborated to survived in racist America.

His singularity as a performer was the merging of two very different musical idioms, jazz and traditional Indian song. This made him difficult to categorize, one reason his recorded music is so difficult to find. It is probably more accurate to say that he played the two idioms side by side. The Indian songs are almost purely melodic, un-
complicated by the harmonic density of jazz. Most of the Indian songs come from tribes of the Southwest, where Pepper spent summers during his youth. He is better known by American Indians in that part of the country than he is to members of tribes in his native Northwest.

In addition to the attention his music attracted, Pepper was both famous and infamous for his careening deportment, and “Pepper stories” more than abound. Gordon Lee recalls one that demonstrated Pepper’s athleticism. He decided to enter a Portland blues club grandly, playing his saxophone. He tripped on the riser to the stage, executed a tuck-and-roll somersault, and rose, not having missed a note. During a life that fluctuated wildly from triumph to calamity, he was usually able to extricate himself from the latter with spellbinding charm.

THE PEPPER STORY THAT SEEMS appropriate in the pages of this journal has to do with cultural exchange. According to Jim Pepper Henry, Pepper’s nephew and an associate director at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, the Kaw (or Kansa) Indians were removed from Kansas in 1872. There seems to have been little thought given to the seemliness of appropriating the name and ejecting the people. One of the ejectees was a very large member of the eagle clan, Pepper’s great-grandfather, Moká’pa. A condition for receiving annuities in what became Kay County, Oklahoma, was the adoption of Anglo names. Most of the tribal members took the names of people near at hand, missionaries or local politicians. The evidence is that Pepper’s namesake, irate about the move and the conditions imposed to receive survival rations, took the name of what was in hand, a fifth of James E. Pepper whiskey. Happily, there is more to the story. Quite a bit more.

Reportedly, James Pepper lived an exemplary life. He was part of a historic delegation of the Kaw to Washington, D.C., and participated in one of the earliest manifestations of cultural exchange among American Indians. The Kaw are related to the Omaha, Ponca, and Osage tribes, Pepper Henry told me. Collectively, they were once known as the Alkonza, as in Arkansas. For these and all indigenous people in America there was a traumatic ambivalence that persists today. How can the old ways (identity) be reconciled with new ways (solvency)? And the way this drama played out — its chronology — differed, depending on material circumstances and the disposition of tribal leaders.

In the popular mind, the Osage are associated with the law of unintended consequences. Oil was found on their land, and, more remarkably, title could not be circumvented. But even before this event, the Osage had been drifting away from their connection to the past. The situation was considered perilous enough by 1884 that Osage traditionalists sought help from the Kaw, a smaller tribe that had sustained a more traditional existence.

James Pepper and two or three other Kaws fashioned two drums and took them to the Pawhuska and Hominy districts in Osage Country. There they reintroduced a ceremony
called Ilóshka (Kaw spelling), “Playground of the First Born Son.” It is a warrior society ceremony where the first-born dance in honor of those who have fallen in battle and to prepare for future challenge. More generally, it is a tribute to Wakónda, the creator, and a celebration of good deeds and accomplishments by members of the tribe. “The Osages have taken that and have kept that ceremony since 1884 and it’s going very strongly today,” said Pepper Henry. “They started out with just a few dozen dancers” and now there are two or three hundred dancers on a given night in June.

The treatment of cultural artifacts is a touchy subject. Controversies associated with the transmittal, expropriation, exploitation, and a variety of other accepted and challenged uses of cultural material are myriad. What about the case of Jim Pepper’s “Witchi Tia To” and his other Indian songs? During an interview on the Portland radio station KBOO in the late 1980s, Pepper was asked by Paul Roland if he had been criticized by members of the Native American Church. This was his reply:

No. And I was really paranoid about that. When I first made the tape, you know, I figured the best critic would be my grandfather [Ralph Pepper, who taught him the chant]. And so I took the tape down and played it for him. And he listened to it 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. And to tell you the truth, I’ve never had any criticism from anybody, from any Indian, that I did a taboo…. how can somebody be a thief when you’re sharing something so beautiful. Music. And the musics are chants, and they’re celebrations of the earth and people.

The extensive reworking of Comanche material in “Witchi Tia To” is congruent with one perspective on cultural tradition. David Lowenthal describes this way of looking at cultural traditions:

To be a living force the past must be ever remade. Heritage is not to be stored away in a vault or an attic; the true steward adds
his own stamp to those of his predecessors. . . . To receive and transmit a legacy is not enough: it must be refurbished and given new resonance while in our care.¹

JIM PEPPER HENRY CONCLUDED his story. The isolation that contributed to Kaw traditionalism, permitting James Pepper I and his group to replenish the Osage’s store of song and ceremony, was ultimately tragic. The tribe was again uprooted when the Arkansas River was dammed in the late 1950s. Ralph Pepper, Pepper’s grandfather, considered himself the last male speaker of the Kaw language. “Now I can only talk to God,” he would lament.

“There were only a handful of Kaw traditional dancers,” Henry said, “and just recently, myself and some of the other Kaw tribal members decided it was time to revive those traditions. The Poncas helped us out this time. They had a drum made and last year we had our first full fledged Ilôshka dance since probably the 1940s. So that was a pretty big deal for us and me being the first born great great grandson of James Pepper and the first born great grandson of his son Ralph Pepper, the first born grandson of James Gilbert Pepper, and the first born nephew of James Gilbert Pepper II, it was quite an honor to be involved in that. I guess you could say it was a responsibility for the Pepper family to take the lead in reviving these traditions. Hopefully this will grow . . . this will be carried on indefinitely to future generations.”

The Hethu’shka Society was restored
to the related and much larger Omaha Indian Tribe in the 1980s.\(^2\)

As a resident of in-between, a mixed-blood son of urban Indians, Pepper’s links to community and the earth could not be defined by any traditional, isolated tribe. The inimitable, rending tone Pepper produced on the tenor saxophone has been widely celebrated and the delicate roar of his voice was also singular. Randomly assembled people all over the world became communities for the duration of this song, and the spirit that emerged was renewed. In performance, song became the sound of belonging and echoed the life and death juxtaposition of jazz at its inception.

Water spirit feeling springing around my head
Makes me feel glad that I’m not dead.

More memorial concerts have been given for Jim Pepper than any musician I am acquainted with, and, even without his voice and soaring horn, the community still emerges. East Coast writer Bill Siegel has published articles about Pepper in several magazines and the “Pepper Lives!” website. Collectors of Pepperabilia congregate at the list-serve Siegel facilitates, and one person has compiled a list of seventy cover versions of “Witchi Tia To.” The song even figures in The Last Go-Round, a book about the Pendleton Round-up by Ken Kesey and Ken Babbs.

At best, “Witchi Tia To,” the Ilóshka ceremony, and other efforts to sustain “heritage” all ignite a flickering intimation of underlying worth. They have to do with what Floy Pepper means when she talks about the attitudes toward the world in which we briefly live. “Indian values” are different enough to merit contemplation. Values that Pepper might say “come from the ground up.”

NOTES


2. You can read about the Hethu’shka Society and hear the music on the Library of Congress’ website. It was enabled by music collected in the 1880s by Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche. Initially put off by Indian music, she eventually produced “A Study of Omaha Indian Music,” a pioneering and strongly influential work in the early years of anthropology. But she was also a friend of Senator Henry L. Dawes and promoted the allotment program that bears his name. She was also one of the first administrators of this policy which led to the loss of a huge portion of land that had been allocated to American Indians. Fletcher had genuine respect for the complex interrelationships of traditional Indian life, links to community and the earth that were everywhere sealed and enhanced by music. But she could envision no future other than total assimilation, a complete submission to the values of frontier America. See Joan Mark, A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 221.