

Prologue

On September 28, 1986, our first wedding anniversary, my wife Nancy and I attended Pepper Adams's memorial service at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City. Adams had waged a courageous battle against an aggressive form of lung cancer that was first diagnosed in March 1985, while he was on tour in Sweden. On that somber yet bright Sunday afternoon, St. Peter's ash-paneled, multi-tiered sanctuary, tucked under the 915-foot-tall Citicorp Center, was packed with friends, musicians, and admirers. The Reverend John Garcia Gensel presided over the service and many jazz greats performed and paid their final respects.

Adams was a friend of mine but, sadly, I knew him only during the last two tumultuous years of his life. At that time, still recovering from a horrible leg accident that had kept him immobilized for six months, Pepper was separated from his wife and ultimately diagnosed with the cancer that would kill him. Although it was an undeniably miserable time for him, it was, conversely, quite a fascinating ride for me. I was a 28-year-old grad student; a passionate jazz fan and record collector who was trying to interest a jazz musician in working with me on an oral history to satisfy my thesis requirement.

Fortunately, because Adams was still recuperating at home he had time to indulge me. What an ideal subject! Here was a major soloist who, from the late 1940s onward, played with virtually everyone in jazz. At our first interview in June 1984 he was so gracious and prepared, so articulate and engaging, when retelling the events of his life.

We met several times at his home in Brooklyn that summer. Eventually I amassed eighteen hours of tape-recorded interview material. Because his recollection of his childhood and early career was so stunning in its depth and historical sweep, I felt strongly that I had the makings of a valuable co-authored autobiography.

But seven months later Adams's cancer was diagnosed. I visited him at St. Luke's Hospital in Manhattan when he began his chemotherapy regimen, and I saw him perform whenever he had a gig in New York. On one occasion, at Far and Away in nearby Cliffside Park, New Jersey, I heard the

suffering pour out of him during a stunning ballad performance that brought me to tears. About six weeks later, between sets at the Blue Note, I saw him bark at a pianist whom he misperceived was harassing him for a job. Although his crankiness seemed out of character, I realized that his grinding medical treatments were beginning to affect his temperament.

Because chemotherapy and his international travel schedule made our autobiographical project an impossibility, I decided that writing a full-length Adams biography would be a more sensible approach. When Pepper was home, either convalescing or between gigs, I watched football games with him while going through documents and dubbing copies of his tapes. Although I was trying to gather as much information as I could in the little time that was left, it would have been improper for me to pry about the minutiae of his life. Despite my youthful curiosity I had to respect the fact that his cancer treatments made him feel awful and he was fighting to stay alive.

In the summer of 1985 I moved three hours away to Boston. No longer able to visit with him nor catch any of his gigs we stayed in touch by telephone. Late that year I somehow learned that he had an upcoming four-night stint in bitterly cold Minneapolis. Concerned about his well-being I urged a friend to attend as a courtesy to me. Thankfully, Dan Olson caught one of the performances and also taped both sets. During intermission he said hello for me, bought Adams a beer, and the two had a chance to chat at the bar.

My final conversation with Pepper took place in August 1986, only a few weeks before his death. Bedridden and under the watchful eye of a home-health aide, I called to see if there was anything I could do for him. His hospice caretaker answered and asked me to hold on for a moment. While I paced anxiously for at least five minutes, Adams somehow found the energy to drag himself to the telephone. In a sentence or two he acknowledged that time was short, thanked me for calling, said a final goodbye, and hung up. That was right around the time that Dizzy Gillespie called him on Mel Lewis's behalf to say that one of Pepper's dearest friends, trumpeter Thad Jones, had just died of cancer in Copenhagen.

About a year later, once I began interviewing Adams's colleagues for this book, I spent a very memorable afternoon with pianist Tommy Flanagan, Ella Fitzgerald's longtime music director. I was meeting him for the first time and completely star-struck. One of the last people to see Pepper alive, Flanagan especially wanted me to know that the transcripts of my Adams interviews were stacked high on Pepper's nightstand just days before he died. Flanagan told me that at one point, while sitting next to Adams on the edge of his bed, Pepper awoke and tried feebly to push my interview materials towards him. As if Flanagan was brushing crumbs off a tabletop with the backside of his fingertips, he

accentuated his story by imitating Pepper's debilitated attempt to move the heavy pile of papers in his direction.

As you can imagine, I was stunned by the implications of Adams's gesture. At first I was astounded, something that I must have readily communicated by my astonished gaze and stunned expression. Then my heart sagged and my eyes watered as I became increasingly aware that our months of work together had somehow comforted Pepper at the very end of his life.

During the next few weeks, as Flanagan's story continued to wash over me, I noticed that I was taking my role as Adams's biographer a lot more seriously. As the proud guardian of Pepper's legacy, acutely aware of how important it was to him that his work carry on after his death, my research acquired renewed vigor. And my resolve to do this book and all the other Adams projects that preceded it was strengthened.

Flanagan's interview was one of more than 250 I conducted, mostly in the late 1980s before my daughter was born. Over and over again my interviewees affirmed Adams as a complex individual—a hero, a genius, a model of grace, an intellectual, a virtuoso musician and stylist—yet someone also very hard to read. The contradictions they depicted equally fascinated me. Adams, they said, was an unworldly looking sophisticate, a white musician who sounded like a black one, and a dynamic, commanding saxophonist who was soft-spoken and mild-mannered off the bandstand.

Many told me of his unprecedented agility on the baritone, how he “played it like an alto.” Before Adams the baritone sax was a cumbersome, fringe instrument rarely played outside of a big band. Today, because of his innovations, it is commonplace and no longer viewed as a novelty.

Throughout his career Adams told radio interviewers that the pitch of the baritone was similar to his speaking voice. He felt that this, to a certain extent, explained his affinity for the instrument. But much more about him can be divined from his adoption of the instrument. For one thing, he greatly prized originality. Becoming a baritone saxophonist in the late 1940s gave him an opportunity to create a completely unique style on an infrequently heard instrument. Like Duke Ellington, whom he greatly admired, Adams could similarly stand way apart from everyone else.

Paradoxically, despite enhancing the idiom and securing his place in history, Adams's fealty to his instrument also hurt him. The public's inherent bias against low-pitched instruments and his status as a sideman hindered his ability to either front a band or record far more albums as a leader, particularly any with widespread distribution. As pianist Roland Hanna once asked, who knows what Pepper might have achieved had he instead chosen the tenor saxophone?

Throughout his career Adams was exclusively a baritone saxophonist for hire. Refusing to double on the bass clarinet during the 1960s and early 1970s disqualified him from certain studio

assignments that could have helped him financially when jazz gigs were sporadic. He never experimented with other instruments nor taught the saxophone (except an anomalous lesson here and there, or at master classes sponsored by educational institutions). Always the fierce individualist, Adams's lack of pragmatism interfered with other aspects of his life.

When I began collaborating with him, I knew that he was a superb instrumentalist but I had little idea of the breadth of his contribution, how much his colleagues adored him, nor the degree to which his life intersected with so many of the greatest poets, writers, painters, and musicians of his time. Much to my delight, because of our working relationship, the door to the international arts community burst open for me right after his death. I have had the remarkable privilege of speaking with so many of his esteemed colleagues, all of whom honored my interest in such a deserving artist.

Undoubtedly, excerpts from my taped interviews are the heart and soul of this book. You will read some of my respondents speaking, at times with surprising tenderness, of their fondness and profound admiration for Adams. His death was a significant loss for them, and their remembrances of his last few years in particular are filled with sentimental accounts, sometimes with them breaking into tears.

It was my interviewees who helped me answer so many of my pressing questions and, ultimately, grasp the totality of his character and many achievements. Respectfully given quite a bit of space throughout this book, their thoughtful responses allowed me to fill in many of the gaps left over from my interviews with Pepper. Despite his eagerness to share many aspects of his life, he was reluctant to discuss his personal relationships or his time in the U.S. Army. Though radio appearances and magazine articles were of some help, they too were of little use regarding his private life. For the most part I had to start from scratch.

Thus, much like a fine Bordeaux, bringing this book to maturity took many years. Unravelling the complexities of such a private, enigmatic individual, putting a lifetime of work in perspective, conceptualizing a narrative structure that suited his life, and then transferring my mountain of data and personal observations about him into prose took me 36 years. I intentionally waited until I was finally ready to write the kind of book that I felt he deserved. That began in April 2017, after I gave a series of lectures about him in Utah, including a very memorable residency at Utah State University.

Before I began writing, many years of research allowed me to finally comprehend Detroit's jazz culture and socio-economic history. I was especially interested in understanding the growth of its automobile economy, its profound racial problems, and its illustrious jazz history dating back to the 1920s. As a friend of the underdog, I wanted to exhume some of the Detroit musicians who contributed significantly to its jazz scene but have remained largely unknown. (See

<https://www.pepperadams.com/Detroit.pdf> for a closer look.) I was most curious about what it was that produced the extraordinary, postwar “band of brothers”: that clique of world-class jazz musicians who descended on New York City in the mid-1950s and so thoroughly reinvigorated the music.

Regarding Rochester, New York, where Adams attended public school, I wanted to know how that city came to be, why its economy was so much better off than the rest of the country during the Great Depression, and what took place there during World War II when Adams was a teenager. I was equally curious about its jazz culture and the influence of the Eastman School of Music. The New York City jazz scene of the 1950s, of course, intrigued me. More than just recounting Adams’s gigs and living arrangements, I wanted to understand how jazz cross-pollinated with the other arts, and define Pepper’s place within it.

Mostly, however, I wanted to understand my subject: his personality traits, his strengths and weaknesses, how he behaved with others, what it was like to be in his presence, and what myths he created or believed about himself. I wanted to penetrate the veil of secrecy about his mother and his time in the army. I wanted to learn about his childhood, research his genealogy, and get my arms around his relationship with women. I wanted to grasp why, despite his exceptional gifts and the universal respect that he received from his colleagues, he wasn’t financially successful. Was it mainly because of his instrument or was it due to the way he conducted himself or still other factors?

Looking back, my journey has been an extraordinary gift. On one level, Adams’s music has immeasurably enriched me. Moreover, writing about him has satisfied my inveterate wish to contribute something tangible to the music I love. But on a still deeper level, my work has morphed from a passionate hobby to a *raison d’être*. Along the way, I’ve gotten to know so many Adams admirers, for whom he was a sage and musical beacon. Their friendship and support during this long voyage have given me a profound sense of interconnectedness with the world, and their help greatly comforted me, particularly when the task of writing this book seemed insurmountable.

Knowing Adams personally and working on this project has brought me as close to genius as I’m likely to experience in my lifetime. After researching his life, collecting his recordings, overseeing <https://www.pepperadams.com/>, and unearthing his wonderful compositions for six recording sessions, in 2012 I produced a five-CD box set of Adams’s entire oeuvre. Featuring newly commissioned lyrics to his seven magnificent ballads, it was co-branded with my book *Pepper Adams’ Joy Road: An Annotated Discography*. The sixth CD, released separately, featured big-band arrangements of ten of his tunes. Now, with this companion volume I, at long last, have fulfilled my promise both to him and myself.

My aim, dear reader, is to showcase an important person who lived an extraordinary life, and to contextualize his many unique contributions to Twentieth Century music. As you work your way through the book, I urge you to do two things. First, visit the Instagram page that serves as the official repository of Adams photographs and documents: <https://www.instagram.com/pepperadamsblog/> Second, whether you are encountering him for the first time or are already hip to his career, be sure to listen to Adams's glorious saxophone playing by accessing the book's Directory of Music Samples. Using the links within it will allow you to hear 450 tunes, most of the music I've described throughout the text. Half of these extraordinary performances have never before been made available to the public. As always, thanks so much for your interest in Pepper Adams.

Gary Carner
Salt Lake City
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