

Introduction

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 915-foot-tall Citicorp Center, was packed with friends, musicians, and admirers. 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 I knew him only during the last two years of his life. We first met in 1984, while he was recovering from an auto accident that had kept him immobilized for six months. Then afterwards, while separated from his wife, he was diagnosed with the illness that would take his life. Although a miserable time for him, it was an exciting ride for me. I was a twenty-eight-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 at City College of New York. Adams, I soon learned, was an ideal subject: a major figure who, from the late 1940s onward had played with virtually everyone in jazz.

Because he was homebound that summer, we met several times in Brooklyn, discussing his career, listening to music, and once going out for lunch and running some errands. Our conversations yielded eighteen hours of documentation, captured by my trusty Sony microcassette recorder. The depth and historical sweep of his recollections were stunning. I knew right away that I had the makings of a valuable co-authored autobiography. But seven months later his cancer was diagnosed. Because cancer treatments and international travel made our autobiographical project an impossibility,

I decided that writing a full-length biography would be the more sensible approach. When Pepper was home between gigs, I watched football games with him while going through documents, eating pizza, and dubbing copies of his cassette tapes. Although I was trying to gather as much information as I could in the little time that remained, it was improper to pry about the minutiae of his life. Despite my curiosity, I had to respect the fact that he felt lousy, and his leisure time was sacrosanct.

The following summer I moved to Boston to further my studies and Adams research. No longer able to visit, we stayed in touch by telephone and postcards that he sent me from the road. Our final conversation took place eight months later, only a few weeks before his death. In August 1986, when Adams was 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 caretaker answered and asked me to hold for a moment. While I paced anxiously for at least five minutes, Adams somehow dragged himself to the telephone. In a sentence or two he acknowledged that time was short, thanked me for calling, and hung up. That was right around the time that Dizzy Gillespie called him on Mel Lewis's behalf to say that Thad Jones, one of Pepper's dearest friends, had just died of cancer in Copenhagen.

A year later, once I began interviewing Adams's colleagues for this book, I spent a memorable afternoon with pianist Tommy Flanagan, Ella Fitzgerald's longtime music director. One of the last to see Pepper alive, he wanted me to know that transcripts of my Adams interviews were stacked on Pepper's nightstand days before he died. Flanagan told me that at one point, while he was perched on the edge of Adams's bed, Pepper awoke and tried to push those 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 feeble attempt to move the heavy pile of papers in Tommy's direction.

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

Flanagan's interview was one of more than 250 I conducted. Repeatedly, interviewees affirmed Adams as a complex individual—a hero, a genius, a model of grace, an intellectual, a virtuoso stylist—yet someone also very hard to read. The contradictions they depicted intrigued me. Adams, they said, was an unworldly looking sophisticate, a white musician who sounded

like a black one, and an exuberant saxophonist who was soft-spoken and mild-mannered off the bandstand. Many told me of his unprecedented agility on the baritone, that he played it like an alto. Before Adams, baritone sax was a cumbersome, fringe instrument. Today, because of his innovations, it is no longer viewed as a novelty.

Throughout his career, Adams told interviewers that the baritone's low pitch was like his speaking voice. He felt this, to some extent, explained his affinity for the horn. But more 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 unique style on an infrequently heard instrument. Like Duke Ellington, whom he greatly admired, Adams believed he could similarly stand 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 disregard for low-pitched instruments and his resultant status as a sideman prevented him from both fronting his own band and recording far more albums as a leader, particularly any with widespread distribution. Moreover, refusing to double on bass clarinet disqualified him from studio work that could have helped financially when jazz gigs were sporadic.

When I began collaborating with Adams, I knew he was a superb instrumentalist but had no idea of the breadth of his contribution, how much his colleagues adored him, nor the degree to which his life intersected with some of the greatest poets, writers, painters, and musicians of his time. Thanks to our working relationship, the door to the international arts community burst open for me right after his death. As a result, 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.

Without a doubt, my interviewees are the heart and soul of this book. You will read some of them speaking, at times with surprising tenderness, of their fondness and admiration for Adams. His death was a significant loss, and their remembrances of his last few years are filled with sentimental accounts, sometimes with them breaking into tears. Besides helping me grasp the totality of Pepper's character and accomplishments, Adams's friends have given me a profound sense of interconnectedness with the jazz world. I'm grateful for their kindness and support, particularly when writing this book seemed insurmountable.

Despite Pepper's eagerness to share aspects of his career with me, he was reluctant to discuss his personal relationships or his time in the US Army.

Radio appearances and magazine articles, too, were of little use regarding his private life. So, I had to start from scratch.

Unraveling the complexities of such an enigmatic individual, plus digesting his thousands of hours of recordings, conceptualizing a narrative structure that suited his life, and transferring my personal observations and mountain of data into prose, took me thirty-seven years. Discounting some promising fits and starts, I waited until I felt ready to write the kind of book he deserved. That began in April 2017, after I gave a series of lectures about him, including a memorable residency at Utah State University.

Because chronological storytelling is hackneyed and outmoded, I always intended to write the book thematically. As Milton Lomask has argued, “The cradle-to-grave approach in biography is strictly a literary convention. Only in biographies and never in life do we get to know another human being in that consecutive fashion . . . No human life is so tidy, so uncomplicated, that you can construct it by simply reciting the events of it in sequence.”

Biographer Leon Edel expressed the same point of view: “Biography need no longer be strictly chronological, like a calendar or datebook.”

Lives are rarely lived that way. An individual repeats patterns learned in childhood, and usually moves forward and backward through memory. . . . Chronological biography tends to fragment and flatten a life. A chronological recital of these facts reads like a newspaper; we jump from one item to another, and the items seem unrelated. . . . The task and duty of biographical narrative is to sort out themes and patterns, not dates and mundane calendar events which sort themselves.

After writing a few chapters with that in mind, it occurred to me that Adams’s life would best be rendered in two parts. I decided to entitle the first half of the book “Ascent” to delineate his early years in Detroit and Rochester, New York, while becoming a virtuoso. “Dominion” could then cover the remainder of his life as a full-fledged musician based in New York City.

I further resolved that divulging Adams’s death within this prologue freed me from ending the book with his demise, yet another banality. Insofar as “Ascent” could mostly proceed topically from Pepper’s youth to his relocation in New York, I decided to defy common practice by beginning “Dominion” with a full account of Adams’s terminal illness, then work my way back thirty years to his arrival in New York. Going backward, a device often found in cinema, not only struck me as a writing challenge, but seemed

consistent with Adams's distaste for cliché. Emboldened by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who regretted not crafting her Lyndon Baines Johnson biography in reverse-chronological order, I liked how inverting "Dominion" circled me back to 1956, setting up my conclusion (chapter twelve).

Before I began writing, my years of research allowed me to comprehend Detroit's jazz culture and socioeconomic history. I was interested in understanding its automobile economy, profound racial problems, and illustrious jazz history. I was most curious about the extraordinary postwar "band of brothers," that clique of world-class jazz musicians who descended on New York City in the mid-1950s and 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 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. New York City's jazz scene in the 1950s and '60s, of course, intrigued me. I especially wanted to understand how jazz cross-pollinated with other arts and Adams's place within that world.

Inasmuch as biography is "a portrait in words of a man or woman in conflict with himself, or with the world around him, or with both," I sought to understand my subject's personality traits, strengths and weaknesses, how he behaved with others, and the inner myths he guarded and outer myths he promulgated. I wanted to explore his genealogy, learn about his childhood, get my arms around his relationship with women, and penetrate the veil of secrecy about his mother and tenure as a soldier. I strove to grasp why, despite his exceptional gifts and the universal respect he received from his colleagues, he wasn't financially successful. Was it because of his instrument, the way he conducted himself, or other factors?

Undoubtedly, writing about Adams satisfied my wish to contribute something tangible to the music I love. But truth be told, my work over the years morphed from a passionate hobby to a *raison d'être*. After building pepperadams.com, in 2012 I produced a five-CD box set of Adams's entire oeuvre. The anthology was co-branded with *Pepper Adams' Joy Road: An Annotated Discography*. A sixth CD, produced separately, featured big-band arrangements of ten of his tunes. Now, with this companion study I, at long last, have fulfilled my original promise to him and myself.

Please visit the Instagram page ([instagram.com/pepperadamsblog](https://www.instagram.com/pepperadamsblog)) that serves as the repository of Adams photographs and documents. More importantly, whether you are encountering him for the first time or are already hip to his career, be sure to listen to his glorious saxophone playing, some of which is posted at YouTube and pepperadams.com.