

Berkeley Daily Planet (www.berkeleydailyplanet.com)

Commentary

Campbell Coe: Not a Myth to Many By SANDY ROTHMAN

Tuesday January 17, 2006

Thanks for publishing a lengthy obituary on Campbell Coe, one of Telegraph Avenue's colorful characters and an important person in the local music scene. Scott Hambly's writing evokes the wide-ranging talents of a true "Renaissance man" and observes his conversational style thoughtfully. His description of the "incredible" tales that turned out to be true was as well put as it's ever been. I have a few corrections and comments:

The accompanying photo is erroneously credited to Carl Fleischhauer (correct spelling), according to Carl.

Hambly writes (perhaps assumes) that Campbell died in his sleep. That is not true. According to the Seattle hospice owner, who was with him at his passing, Campbell was fully awake and conscious right up to the moment of death. (The hospice is not called "Honeydew House," as reported in this piece. Its correct name is "Honeydew Adult Family Home.") The manner of his death convinced the owner, not that she hadn't already discovered (even knowing nothing of his broad interests and skills), that this patient was a most remarkable person.

The obituary says Campbell was in the UC Berkeley graduating class of 1955. According to the university, he would've been in that graduating class if he'd completed his studies, but he did not, so he wasn't. His major was biophysics, not biochemistry.

Aschow's wasn't the East Bay's only violin shop back then, as stated, but it was likely the best. Respected luthier Hideo Kamimoto apprenticed with the Aschow family after learning from Campbell at Campus Music Shop or, as he says, learning patience by waiting for Campbell to show up at the shop.

I believe it was Barry Olivier, not Campbell, who originally helped Jon and Deirdre Lundberg start their Berkeley guitar shop, although at an early point Campbell was in partnership with the Lundbergs. Later the two shops existed not far from each other. Lundberg's was well known for collectible acoustic instruments and a coolly rarefied "folk atmosphere." Campbell's shop had affordable instruments, sometimes electric guitars and country LP records, and people remember it, and him, as "warm and friendly." When he was there.

During the '70s, Hambly writes, the music store's "transactions diminished incrementally." In fact, Campbell (whose abundant energy and flowing rap caused Jerry Garcia to dub him "the straight Neal Cassady") continued sharing his wealth of musical knowledge with pickers far and wide, pursuing his passion for marine and other photography, and continuing whatever playing and repairing gigs came his way. Also in this period Campbell, an expert carpenter/woodworker like his father and brother, presaged the recycling movement by working with his pals in what he liked to call the "deconstruction trade": salvaging useful parts from old houses slated for demolition. While in the '60s you might've gone to his shop

to look through dusty boxes of old banjo or mandolin parts, which he would often sell for next to nothing, in the '70s you'd find boxes of interesting old door locks and face-plates rescued from houses.

A gifted musician, Campbell's major guitar inspiration was Chet Atkins. Hank Snow is cited, but he really wasn't a special exponent of that flatpick style. Able enough with a flatpick (though he usually used a thumbpick as a flatpick, even on mandolin), Campbell was without question mainly a fingerstyle guitarist. He was also a spirited singer, notably from the western swing songbook.

Hambly says Campbell occasionally tested the "his own limits, and those of others, as well." I'd say it plainer: he might take six years to finish your banjo repair job, a delay best appreciated by your upstairs neighbor.

But "blandishments"? I don't think so. Flattery and cajoling seem to be at the core meaning of this five-dollar word, and I didn't see that. Yes, we'll remember his "confidence, optimism, and irrepressible spirit," and something even greater: his humanity and continuous advocacy. Not to those who "he thought needed his support," a strange and incorrect spin. To know Campbell as a friend was to be encouraged by him.

Decades ago somebody, I still don't know who, produced a run of Day-Glo bumperstickers reading "Campbell Coe Is A Myth." It was hard to know what effect this might've had on Campbell, but it was entertaining when one of them was spotted on a Berkeley police car. After Campbell's Oct. 2 passing, a mutual friend's e-mail was titled: "Campbell Coe: not a myth to me."