

Jay Robert (Bob, Jay) West – longtime traditional jazz and blues musician, radio show host, and record producer – died on July 31 of cancer. He was 74. Respected by musicians and collectors the world over for his field recordings and interviews, Bob was Seattle's premier archivist of country blues music.

Born in Seattle March 27, 1942, West moved to Chula Vista, CA for high school when his father took a job in the aircraft industry. Returning to Seattle after graduation, Bob became involved in radio when Lorenzo Milam asked him to host a country blues show on KRAB FM radio 107.7. The show, known as "King Biscuit Time," was named to honor a former Helena, Arkansas radio program which aired blues music in the 1940s.

West's parents collected records before he was born. His father, Frank, favored Harlem-style bands featuring Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Fletcher Henderson, and Earl Hines. Frank appreciated some blues players, but it was Bob's mother, Taimi, who really liked the blues. The prize of her collection was a mint copy of "Peetie Wheatstraw's Blues," a very rare record on the Bluebird label.

"I really started listening to the music when I was about 10, 11, or 12," he recalled. "I got so if I heard a record I never heard before I could tell it was Barney Bigard on clarinet, and I could distinguish Earl Hines from Jelly Roll Morton on piano, so it gave me the ability to really find these personal styles."

During the early 1960s, West was employed tensiling and braking metal parts in the Boeing laboratory's mechanical task department when fellow employee Leroy Johnson took him to see "a kid band" playing at a bar in West Seattle. The group, which called itself "the Great Excelsior Jazz Band" gave Bob his first chance to hear the tunes of Kid Ory and Kid Thomas played live in their original styles. Between sets, he met band members Ray Skjelbred and Mike Duffy, who introduced him to Bob and Sylvia Graf, local record collectors and jazz enthusiasts sitting in the next booth.

That evening proved to be a turning point in West's life, "It all fell together right there," he remembered. "Ray invited me down to the sessions at his houseboat, the one I'm living in now, which I bought from him in 1972. Bob Graf became a friend and mentor ... Later I played trombone with the Great Excelsior Jazz Band ... Then I started getting into the guitar and piano, playing the blues."

Duffy and Skjelbred hosted "Classic Jazz," a record show on KRAB. They asked West to play some blues records. KRAB-founder Milam listened and liked what he heard. "The next Monday, he asked if I'd like to have my own radio show, and that's how I got on the air, February 14, 1967.

"I got to play Fred McDowell records, Blind Willie McTell, Son House – my favorites – and it gave me a chance to play some old traditional, real rough, great, New Orleans bands that played blues, like the Kid Thomas band, and other styles of blues that just weren't being played. Jazz people, traditional jazz people, put their noses up in the air at the Creole style of playing. And I included one or two electric blues records, too. I tried to cover the whole thing without getting into popular music and soul music."

It was through his show that West first met the legendary blues guitarists whose music he later preserved on recordings. "The Seattle Folklore Society brought blues musicians into town, and KRAB worked to promote their shows ... We heard that Booker White was coming into town, and Duffy and I interviewed Booker on KRAB with Folklore Society president John Ullman. During the course of the interview, Furry Lewis' name came up. Booker said Furry was alive and well in Memphis."

A year later, West flew to Memphis where he spent five days living with Lewis. "Luckily, I had decent gear ... Lorenzo knew I had an Ampex 601 tape recorder, and he set everything up for me with a mike

stand borrowed from Phil Williams and an RCA Model 77 microphone, one of the best mikes ever made, along with a little transformer in the line so it would be compatible with my Ampex."

It was a dangerous time for a white boy in Memphis. "This was a couple of months after Martin Luther King was assassinated," West said. "If I knew how bad things really were, I think I would have chickened out of it because all the buildings on Beale Street had been busted up, and plywood over all the windows ... Furry lived on the second floor of an old hotel on the corner of Fourth and Beale in the very historic area at the center of where all the old blues players had performed.

"I couldn't leave the house alone because Memphis was in such bad shape. Furry wouldn't let me do it. One night I tried to go over to Dewey Corley's house a block away, and 15 guys came up between two houses and tried to scare the wits out of me, and I went right back. So every time I went into Furry's house he had a big 2 × 4 he'd put up on the door, and he'd bring his pistol out in case the guys were going to try to come in."

On the trip, West recorded White, Lewis, and blues pianist Albino Red in Memphis, and guitarist Babe Stovall in New Orleans. When he returned to Seattle, he and Graf issued *Furry Lewis and Bukka White at Home with Friends* as a 12-inch LP on their Asp record label.

Over the years, West interviewed many artists as they passed through Seattle, including Johnny Shines, Pinetop Perkins, Fred McDowell, Mance Lipscomb, Son House, Sunnyland Slim, Big Joe Williams, Barbara Dane, and Robert Pete Williams. Often, Bob would cook up a week's supply of meals, stock the refrigerator, and vacate the houseboat so the musician would have a quiet place to stay during his engagement. White, Perkins, Sunnyland, Shines, and Pete Seeger enjoyed this brand of hospitality.

West worked at Boeing until the bottom fell out of the aircraft industry in the 1970s. With time on his hands, he increased his volunteer work for KRAB until he was hired as a program director, using his vacations for field trips to Louisiana in 1977, and St. Louis and Memphis in 1979. His recordings of Henry Townsend, Alvin Calhoun, Laura Dukes, and George and Bernadette McCoy from the latter trip, as well as others from the 1968 trip, were released on Arcola, the CD label he started in the 1990s.

After KRAB disbanded in 1984, West worked in quality control for the Stearns Co., a Boeing supplier. Known to fellow employees as "Jay," he remained in the aircraft industry until his retirement in 2007.

Bob lived in the houseboat on Wandesforde dock at Fairview Avenue for 47 years. Neighbors were accustomed to his late-night record-listening and jam sessions. His annual Fourth of July parties were memorable for their motley gatherings of musicians, radio volunteers, houseboat denizens, painters, glass-blowers, film buffs, and other interesting people who otherwise had no reason to mix.

West's thoughtfulness and generosity were legendary. A passing comment would lead later to an unsolicited gift of a book, a record, or a music- or video-tape or disc which often took hours to prepare. Even if he wasn't particularly interested himself, he kept an eye out for references to a topic in print or on TV if he knew someone who was. As a host or guest or to help a sick friend, he prepared special dishes, which he would either give to a departing visitor or deliver himself, as the situation dictated.

Bob's uncle, Tony West, was a midget-race-car driver in the 1930s, and Bob was as passionate about racing as music. Invariably, when he was not monitoring an educational show or an old movie, or recording programs and music for his friends, his television would be tuned to a car race.

Riding with West was a mini-lesson in race-car driving. Although careful to obey the rules of the road, he drove aggressively and was a stickler for taking the most efficient route to any destination. Once up to speed, he maintained a tachometer reading of at least 2500 rpms. "Most people don't know how to drive a stick shift," he'd say. "They go through the gears too quickly, and that's hard on the valves."

Bob was passionate about preserving the music of self-taught, agrarian-based musicians. He hoped their music might lead future musicians to learn their art in natural settings which would inspire more freedom and creativity than the formulaic pathway offered by today's popular culture and hide-bound systems of formal education. "I'm not a marketeer, and I am not concerned with business at all. I'd be tickled to death if I can communicate this material to 10 kids, and they carry it to the next generation.

"... Why do we preserve our knowledge of being a blacksmith? I think everything beautiful that man has produced should be protected and saved. We may have to use it again. People I've talked to that work in ethnic studies at the University of Washington, why do they go to these countries and study music and dance? It's to find out how and why they live and maybe find out if we're missing something – if we're forgetting about something."

In this regard, West walked the walk his entire life. Relying on records and his personal experience with the blues legends, Bob spurned formal instruction and taught himself to play the guitar, piano, trumpet, trombone, and the full gamut of "novelty" jug band and skiffle instruments. With fellow musicians, he could be stubborn and argumentative if they failed to adhere to the traditional style. Bands he formed were often short-lived, but always interesting. They included the Cornucopia Jazz Band, Peetie Wheatstraw and His Buddies, Mr. Cookie and the Crumbs, and the Acme Blues Band.

A lifelong humanitarian, West numbered the ACLU, Habitat for Humanity, Greenpeace, Public Citizen, KCTS Television, and the Smithsonian Institution among the organizations he supported.

West is survived by his sister Susan, of Seattle; his cousins Gary West and his wife Donna, of Seattle, and Matthew West and Michael West, both of Redmond; and his dear friend Rose Hedley, residing in Wales. A memorial is under consideration, but definite plans have not been made.