

Campbell Coe, 1924-2005

By Scott Hambly, November 2005



Campbell Coe, probably in the 1970s. Scott says there was no credit accompanying the photo. It came directly from a file cabinet in Campbell's apartment, courtesy of Annie Johnston (of the Cleanliness and Godliness Skiffle Band and Down Home Music) who borrowed it for copying years before he moved to Seattle in 1981. "It's possible Campbell set up a camera and then mugged for his own shoot!"

Campbell Coe, legendary resident of Berkeley and Seattle, Washington, died in his sleep at 4 p.m. on October 2, 2005. Campbell's six-year battle with prostate cancer ended in Honeydew Home, a hospice, in Renton, Wash. He was 81.

Campbell was born Jan. 15, 1924 to Herbert E. Coe, the pioneer pediatric surgeon in the Northwest, and Lucy Coe of Seattle.

Campbell appears to have started his working career in broadcast journalism during the 1940s, specializing in reading the news on the radio. About 1951 he enrolled as an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley, graduating with the class in 1955. He then became a graduate student in biochemistry at UC Berkeley.

An exceptionally skilled craftsman, he spent several years in the mid-1950s engineering and manufacturing custom-cast and -machined models of live-steam locomotives. He also began performing country and western music by playing guitar, singing, and learning the patois of masters of ceremonies. During this same period Campbell taught himself stringed musical instrument repair, and was in business by May 1956, on a part-time basis.

The folk music revival bloomed in the mid-to-late 1950s, and the value of old musical instruments was being rediscovered. Before Campbell's entry into instrument sales and repair, the sole East Bay craftsman was a violin repair expert, John Aschow of Oakland. Campbell's repair skills filled an important niche for myriad banjo, mandolin, and guitar owners. He initially repaired fretted instruments out of his third-floor apartment at 2419 Haste Street. Then he also became a supplier of fretted instrument accouterments (picks, strings, capos, cases, etc.) to individuals and some regional music merchants.

When Jon and Deirdre Lundberg came to Berkeley in 1960 to open a music store, Campbell helped them found Jon and Deirdre Lundberg Fretted Instruments. Lundberg's developed into the preeminent acoustic repair and sales store on the West Coast in the 1960s and 1970s, specializing in instruments constructed before World War II.

Campbell's business success soon outgrew his apartment, which prompted him in 1961 to open the Campus Music Shop at 2506 Haste Street near Telegraph Avenue. Business at the Campus Music Shop began to wane in the early 1970s. As the 1970s wore on, transactions diminished incrementally until Campbell finally sold or packed his equipment prior to returning to Seattle.

Because Campbell inspired younger men to enter the field, the legacy of his craftsmanship endures. Examples are Hideo Kamimoto, for three years his part-time apprentice and sales representative, who in 1967 founded H. Kamimoto String Instruments in Oakland (now in San Jose); Mike Stevens, of Alpine, Texas; Richard Johnston, of Gryphon Music, Palo Alto; and Larry Blom of Oregon.

Campbell was a stellar guitarist, exceptionally versatile and extemporaneous, who played country music (e.g., country swing and Hank Snow lead guitar styles), blues, and Django Rinehardt acoustic jazz stylings, using both right-hand plectrum and finger methods. He was the bandleader of the Country Cousins.

In his role as a musical mentor and supporter of developing musicians in the East Bay, he inspired such musicians as Sandy Rothman, Betty Montana (later a.k.a. Betty Mann), and Rick Shubb. Campbell also influenced select members of local bands, for example, the Redwood Canyon Ramblers, Country Joe & The Fish, the Cleanliness and Godliness Skiffle Band, Asleep at the Wheel, Commander Cody and the Lost Planet Airmen, and Don Burnham's Lost Weekend.

Further, Campbell was proprietor of Aeromarine Photography, specializing in photographing ships and related maritime subjects in San Francisco Bay. He also performed freelance photography of crime scenes and events of civil disobedience in Berkeley. An avid collector of disc recordings, especially 78 r.p.m. singles, he was also a recording engineer, for example taping a private session at his apartment with Roland and Clarence White in 1964.

Campbell was exceptionally articulate and a consummate conversationalist — occasionally to a fault. His diction and eloquence were precise, doubtless polished by his days in radio, and his manner of speech was irresistibly engaging. He was widely known as a raconteur who could speak knowledgeably about a kaleidoscope of subjects, not limited to his acknowledged specialties. Frequently his stories were so elaborate and far-fetched that they seemed at the moment of telling to be incredible,

only later to be confirmed as accurate.

Campbell enjoyed attention and confidently excelled in communications in the context of small groups. Despite his self-confidence, he paradoxically did not seem especially comfortable in front of large groups. His conversational arts thrived among friends. The smaller the group, the closer the friend, the more focused his conversation became. It was here his command of rhetoric, verbal nuances, and paralinguistics came to the fore. It was difficult to resist Campbell's blandishments.

He was well known to many as an iconoclastic, eccentric character, enjoying an improvised life of intellectual individualism in a town well known as a haven for liberals and individualists. He personified the adventurous, ad hoc spirit of Berkeley and seldom took life seriously. At times his free-wheeling spirit became irreverent, critically cynical, even impish as he perfected puns and performed as a learned jester among his coterie of friends, occasionally testing his own limits — and those of others, as well. His gregariousness and enthusiasm generously embraced those who knew him well or those whom he thought needed his support.

His many friends held Campbell in high regard and were spellbound by his mellifluous voice, loquaciousness, and bonhomie. We all learned a lot about life, music, performing arts, and musical instruments from him. We will remember his confidence, optimism, and irrepressible spirit.

On June 30, 1981, Campbell left Berkeley to return to Seattle in order to be closer to his mother. In Seattle he completed the marine diesel engineering class at Seattle Community College. He became well versed in wooden boat restoration, culminating in wooden tug boat refitting. He also helped to refurbish Hidden Valley Ranch, the family spread outside Cle Elum, Washington, that became the premier dude ranch in the state by 2003.

Campbell's surviving kin include his brother and sister-in-law, Bob and Bobby Coe of Mercer Island, Washington; nephews Bruce Coe of Cle Elum, Washington; Matt Coe; and niece Virginia Coe Garland of San Francisco.

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