



Straight Life: The Story Of Art Pepper

Art Pepper , Laurie Pepper

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Not for the faint-hearted, Art Pepper's autobiography is painfully honest as the great saxophonist describes a life of drugs, alcohol and the occasional foray into crime, having spent five of his best years incarcerated in San Quentin.

Straight Life: The Story Of Art Pepper Details

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From Reader Review Straight Life: The Story Of Art Pepper for online ebook

Ryan Van Runkle says

Wow. This book is so heavy. I tell everyone about this book, especially musicians and art people and entertainment people. The down side about this book is its 500+ pages, like a tome. It's also excruciatingly painful at times. Pepper uses people, pimps people, but also loves people. This book is just so human and powerful. It's a great insight into the jazz scene and the Hollywood LA scene. The jail scene's there too. Pepper walks the line between depression and a deep sense of life erring on the right side more often than not. There's nothing more pathetic than listening to someone obsessed with what he or she thinks makes them different. Peppers love of music, his straight no chaser honesty, his hilarious stories about 'the single life'- that all helped me put up with his narcissistic pathologies. Guy was a legend. No denying it.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAhMPPr...>

Rufussenex says

An amazing read - gritty, beautiful, sad, and pitchblack funny. You would have to go to Chandler to find an LA as simultaneously enchanting and repulsive.

Art is the ultimate charming asshole, spinning a story that soars and crashes thru a life wracked by self-doubt and bad choices, not the least of which was a heroin addiction that hobbled a brilliant career and left him spending most of the sixties in San Quentin.

But both God and the Devil are in the details. I am haunted by his descriptions of a line of musicians playing their instruments as they walk from a stranded bus in the snow, or a whiteknuckle recording session with the Miles Davis rhythm section (Coltrane era) after a months-long drug stupor, or him practicing alone in an empty prison yard.

His skills as a raconteur are evident, but so are Laurie Pepper's skills as editor. She was not afraid to juxtapose Art's boasts with contradictory comments from his friends and colleagues, making her husband out as less than a saint, and his life as far from a feel-good redemption story as possible. Art was Art, pretty and pretty fucked up, and his life was a struggle til the end. Which is why I like this book, I guess.

Barry Hammond says

Jazz saxophone player Art Pepper was a self-formed talent of rare skill and sensitivity. He played in Stan Kenton's big band and went on to numerous group and solo recordings as a player and composer. He was also a flat out junkie who did serious jail time in San Quentin and other prisons. This autobiography tells his story in his own words (with supplemental interviews with many of the people he knew on both sides of the law along with quotes from published interviews and magazine articles alongside for another perspective) in harrowing detail and honesty. Edited together by his third and final wife, Laurie, the book takes the reader on both a musical journey and an exploration of the living hell that was his inner life. One of the most honest portrayals of an addict in all literature. Jean Genet or William S. Burroughs haven't done it any better or honestly. This edition contains an introduction by jazz critic Gary Giddens, an extensive afterward by Laurie

Pepper about his final years after the first release of the book, and a discography by Todd Selbert. A tough document about a difficult subject. - BH.

Andrew Cartmel says

Harrowing and engrossing, Straight Life tells the life story of Art Pepper, based on tape recorded interviews made by his wife Laurie. Who is Art Pepper? The "greatest alto saxophone player in the world." He was also a junkie who tragically spent a huge portion of his life behind bars thanks to a legal system which destroys a musician of genius just because he's an addict. I channelled some of my anger about this into my Vinyl Detective novel Written in Dead Wax, where my account of 1950s LA cops persecuting jazz musicians was largely based on Art Pepper's experience. Because of Pepper's tormented life this book is as relevant to anyone who wants to know about the penal system in America as it is to jazz fans.

Harriett Milnes says

After reading about Art's rape of a woman that he met and drank with during World War II, I lost interest in his autobiography:

We talked and drank, and the time went by. She was pretty and I was very lonely. . . We started lying close and goofing around with each other, and time kept passing. . . And as we're walking, all of a sudden she says, "Well, it was nice meeting you. We'll have to get together again." I said, "What are you talking about?" Here I'd spent the whole day! We'd drunk almost the whole two quarts of Old Kuchenneimer! And I'd given her cigarettes! I said, "What do you mean? Yeah, naturally it's been nice, but where are we going?" So then she said, "Well, I've got to get home, and my parents are home. We can't go there." . . . We were way out in the country and hadn't passed anybody since we got off the subway. I said, "We're going to make it one way or another; either you're going to do it peaceable or . . . (i) dragged her to this cemetery and threw her down on the ground. . . It wasn't even enjoyable. I spread her legs and got my thing out, and as soon as I got it in her . . I hated her guts and I really despised myself. . . She walked off and I found my way back.

I skipped ahead and the parts about joining Synanon looked interesting, but "too many books, so little time" and I abandoned this book.

Jay Johnston says

I loved this book. At first I thought the writing style was going to be too simple, crude, straight-forward....whatever. But the STORY here is so gripping, so chilling, and yet so laugh-out-loud funny and ultimately, so very touching that I couldn't put it down. It's not for everyone.....if fact, it's probably not for most people. Summary - The book is broken into three or four sections. 1) An amazing historical view of early jazz from an insider. Art lost by just a handful of votes to Charlie Parker for Downbeat Magazine's Best Alto Saxophonist in the 40s. He played in Stan Kenton's Orchestra. He recorded a classic album with Miles Davis' first great quintet. He tells personal stories about Johnny Hodges, Lester Young, Sonny Stitt, Red Garland, John Coltrane, and the list goes on. Secondly (2) It's a tale of a man's terrifying descent into heroin addiction that makes Keith Richards' drug use look recreational/medicinal in comparison. This segues into (3) a jail-story that escalates into the hardest time imaginable served in San Quentin, and everything that goes with THAT. Finally it (4) talks about Art's three year stint in The Church of Synanon - an alternate

community in the 70s that started as a rehabilitation program but later (d)evolved into one of the most dangerous and violent cults America had ever seen. All of this is tied together somehow in a beautiful narrative that his wife pieced together through recorded interviews with him and those in his life. I came to see him as a complicated man and an artist in search of life's deepest truths - demanding the utmost honesty in his music of of himself. I learned about this book via Marc Maron's WTF podcast and am glad that I did. What a wild ride.

C. Michael says

Straight Life--The Story of Art Pepper

Art and Laurie Pepper

506 Pages

ISBN# 0306805588

Da Capo Press

1996

Writer's Note: *Straight Life--The Story of Art Pepper* is 35-years old and is a well-established piece of jazz reportage not requiring further comment, which has never stopped me. I have written this piece for a two-fold reason: one, to provide *All About Jazz* some commentary original to the magazine, and to anticipate Laurie Pepper's long awaited memoir, *ART: Why I Stuck with a Junkie Jazzman* (Art Pepper Music Corporation, 2014). These two books taken together provide a glimpse into jazz making in the latter half of the 20th Century, when it most rapidly evolved and how two desperate souls found one another and created something beautiful and forever.

Jazz autobiographies, like all autobiographies, are funny animals. Ostensibly, an autobiography could be expected to be an open and honest account of its subject's life: an objective appraisal. Okay, that is a bit pie-in-the-sky. But, all too often, autobiographies come off glib, aloof, and historically uninformative as {{m: Miles Davis = 6144}} did in *Miles: The Autobiography* (Simon & Schuster, 1989, with Quincy Troupe) or candidly evident that the author is revealing only what he or she wants the reader to know as in {{m: Eddie Condon = 5869}}'s *We Called it Music* (H. Holt, 1947, with Thomas Sugrue). Both are certainly entertaining and reveal much of their authors' personality and temperament: more in the vein of memoir than true biography. That said, both, in equal measure, fail to provide the academic rigor of the classical biography. Perhaps they were never supposed to.

Art and Laurie Pepper's *Straight Life--The Story of Art Pepper* exists as a classic biography within an autobiography, wrapped in a memoir. Published originally in 1979 and then again in 1994 with a new afterword, updating the alto saxophonist's story from 1979 until his death in 1982, *Straight Life* remains the touchstone of the post-bebop West Coast jazz life. Within is the open and honest account of the jazz life: the only American Romantic myth that can compare with its European equivalent, Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, the myth of beautiful and talent youth damned to self-destruction.

Laurie Pepper, then Laurie Miller, had met Pepper in 1968 while they were living at Synanon, a quasi-predecessor to what would become "rehab," chemical dependency treatment centers 15- years later. Synanon utilized the "honesty at all cost" rehab maxim without the 12- Step dogma. It was founded in 1958 by Charles E. "Chuck" Dederich, Sr. and boasted treatment successes in the face of conventional wisdom. Like many social movements (read that, "cults"), Synanon transmogrified into the Church of Synanon in the

1970s, and like many such organizations, permanently disbanding in 1989 in the shadow of alleged criminal activities, including attempted murder and Federal tax-evasion accusations.

It was during this period that Laurie Miller began a relationship with Pepper, with both leaving Synanon, seeking vocations outside of treatment. After having spent much time with Pepper, a master storyteller, Miller posited the idea of writing Pepper's story and in 1972 when her initial interviews with the saxophonist began. The two married in 1974 and after some fits and starts, the book was written. What resulted was a story assembled using interviews to flesh out Pepper's pre-Synanon life and Miller's being an active participant in the story after. In equal measures, Pepper's story exists as a grinding and lurid story of West Coast class distinctions, poverty and neglect out of which a singular talent emerged and finally prevailed. Pepper narrates with the flair of an exhibitionist, detailing his sexual coming of age, two failed marriages, his introduction to heroin and his multiple incarcerations, which make for many of the most gripping passages in the book.

Straight Life exists as a collection of books, a jazz bible, where many elements are given in- depth treatments. These often disparate elements include music and race on Los Angeles' Central Avenue in the 1940s, traveling with a big band (Stan Kenton) after World War II and then the small-group recordings that grew out of the East Coast Bebop movement as it moved West. Institutional life in San Quentin is provided in lurid detail, with Pepper detailing the measures required to live in prison, as well as, the stories of crime and larceny that existed between incarcerations. The Synanon sections illuminate the structures and conduct of the cult, which were well ahead of their time.

Necessarily, what is central to the book is the music. In the 1950s, Pepper recorded classic and near- classic LPs of the period, most notably *Meets the Rhythm Section* (Contemporary, 1957), made in a heroin fog brilliantly described in the book and *Art Pepper + Eleven: Modern Jazz Classics* (Contemporary, 1959). The album art of these LPs depicts a physically beautiful man, intense and smoldering. The music reveals an alto saxophonist and clarinetist with an empathic knack for ballads and burners, a knack that would transform into a battlefield in the latter part of Pepper's career.

In the recording chronology, after Pepper had recorded the sides which would become *Intensity* (Contemporary, 1960) on November 23- 25, 1960, it would be 15 years before Pepper would record again as a leader. The intervening time was occupied by prison, Synanon, and scuffling around before the now Laurie Pepper became more involved, guiding Pepper and his career back to music. In 1975, *Living Legend* (Contemporary) was recorded and a very different Pepper emerged, one that stood at stark contrast to the dry-ice cool of the late 1950s. An aural example of this is the comparison of Pepper's 1956 recording of "Blues In" from *Modern Art* (Blue Note, 1956) with its {{m: Paul Desmond = 6243}}-like tone made dirty with olive brine and *Samba Mom Mom* from *Living Legend* with its warm and searching timbre becoming molten in the solo sections. Pepper evolved through a 1960s {{m: John Coltrane = 5851}} phase into an incendiary performer out to prove himself anew each time he played.

Pepper's tours of the East Coast, ending in *The Complete Village Vanguard Sessions* (Contemporary, 1977/1995) and then his tours of Japan and subsequent recordings on Galaxy Records round out the original book. Laurie Pepper, in her 1994 afterword, bring the reader to Pepper's end from a cerebral hemorrhage June 15, 1982 at the age of 56 years old. Laurie Pepper's part in the story increases in prominence as Pepper's reliance on her increases in the chronology and this is reflected in the writing without Laurie Pepper, in the role of editor, losing site of the story's subject. The picture of Art Pepper that takes shape is one of a brilliant artist with an ill-defined ego and superego, leaving only a dense limbic id doing its bidding. Laurie Pepper

never sugarcoats her challenges with the artist but nor does she judge him as anything other than a sublime artist with all of the evidence to support that claim.

Writer and Pepper historian Todd Selbert, author of *The Art Pepper Companion: Writings on a Jazz Original* (Cooper Square Press, 2000) provides an at-the-time exhaustive discography which he updates for the 1994 edition. Many recordings have been compiled and re-released quickly outstripping Seibert's original stellar account. The reader is encouraged to see the Art Pepper Discography at Jazz Discography Project.

If *Straight Life* lacks anything, it is a clearer picture of Laurie Pepper, who is Oz behind the curtain in this story. But then that was never her intention to be anything else. That said, Ms. Pepper rectifies this circumstance with the publication of her personal memoir *ART: Why I Stuck with a Junkie Jazzman*, revealing a complex personage who is at once warmly engaged and frankly spoken.

Allan MacDonell says

Art Pepper's *Straight Life* may be the rawest autobiography anyone ever needs to read, drenched in drugs, sex, suicides, cult fiends, prison, mom issues, spousal abuse and rape, with a dash of jazz history. Pepper seems to pin the source of his human alienation on being a white musician in the black world of jazz, and being rejected by many African Americans in that world due to the color of his skin. But maybe the black musicians simply didn't like Art because he made himself so unlikeable. Everyone who comes in contact with the man -- to hear the man's gutty, arrogant, harsh self-appraisal -- paid a price. This vivid one-person oral history (with occasional verifying chats coming from bit players who orbited within the Pepper universe) has the furious forward momentum of a hope-to-die junkie hurtling toward his next catastrophe and takes a searing deep dive into the soul's darkest, most conflicted chambers. Also, plenty of sly doper humor.

Buck says

Back in my jazzbo days, I had this one Art Pepper LP. At the time, I didn't know much about his life, but the album cover told a story in itself. There was Pepper: a shady-looking dude, his once-handsome features coarsened by years of hard living, a bare forearm displaying crude jailhouse tats. He looked more like an old carny than a jazz musician. Yet the music itself was in stark contrast to this rough exterior: unguardedly tender and deeply beautiful, it had no earthly business coming out of that man's horn. But that was Art Pepper: when he wasn't being a white-trash fuckup—shooting smack, stealing auto parts, going in and out of prison—he recorded some of the loveliest jazz in history.

Straight Life, Pepper's oral autobiography, doesn't shed much light on this dichotomy. Pepper himself seems as mystified as anyone by the source of his talent. It was always just there, apparently, and could be summoned at will. No matter how strung out he was, no matter how many months it had been since he'd picked up a saxophone, put a battered old horn in his mouth and imperishable sounds poured out of him.

Part of the book's magic is that, throughout, Pepper remains blithely unaware of his own assholery. He'll tell these completely insane stories as if they were the most natural things in the world, fully expecting the reader's sympathy and adoration, and the whole time your jaw's hanging open and you're thinking: "Holy. Fuck. I cannot believe you're telling me this. But don't stop now, you crazy son-of-a-bitch." What makes it even more insane is that all of this stuff was dictated to his *wife*. The chicks he "balled", the joys of heroin,

the hare-brained robberies he pulled to support his habit: nothing's off-limits, and everything's recounted with the same naïve gusto.

Laurie Pepper, the wife in question, made a crucial (and brave) editorial decision: she sought out dozens of her husband's colleagues and cronies, put them on tape, then interspersed Art's narrative with these other depositions, thus setting up a counterpoint to Pepper's self-mythologizing. So in one section you have Pepper reminiscing about his years in San Quentin, bragging about what a bad-ass he was and how he'd decided he needed to kill someone to cement his rep. And he totally would have done it, too—had the shiv made and everything! Then he got early parole. Bummer. A page or two later, one of the guys he was in the joint with—a *real* bad-ass—is laughing good-naturedly about what a “pathological physical coward” Art was. The book would've been amazing in any case, I think, but it's these choral interludes that make it the stone-cold masterpiece it is.

In fairness to Pepper, it must be said that almost everybody liked him, even those who knew better than to trust him. They couldn't help it. Like a lot of weak people, he had an insatiable need for love and a cunning ability to extort it.

The thing that fascinates and horrifies me about the man is that, while he experienced enough pleasure and pain for ten lifetimes, he never really learned anything, never repented, never changed. He wasn't a malicious person, by any means, just incredibly selfish—one of those charming rogues who blunder their way through life, leaving broken hearts and ruination in their wake. If his talent exempted him from normal accountability to some degree, his physical beauty did the rest (everyone remarks on how hot he was, including Art himself). Men wanted to be his buddy and give him free drugs, and women wanted to take care of him. What chance did he have? Poor bastard. I don't envy him one bit. But it must have been a freaky trip while it lasted.

Rick Barnes says

As brutal, as honest, and as alive as Art's playing. I met Art in L.A. in 1972 or 73, but I didn't know who he was. I knew he played jazz, but I didn't really know what jazz was. A mutual friend had brought him over to hear a few of my stupid little folky-ass tunes. Art didn't appear to be very impressed. After he left my friend put on the album, "Art Pepper Meets The Rhythm Section". I said, "Holy Shit! THAT'S the guy that was just listening to my tunes? Why on earth did you do that to me?" I'm pretty sure that, as he was listening to my stuff, Art was thinking the same thing. Read the book! It's the next best thing to having met him.

Tuck says

pg 222, Art Pepper has just got out of prison for the 2nd time. though he has yet to commit a crime (they send you to federal prison for marks in 1957, no dope even needed). i've read some pretty incredible books and bios about musicians, some standouts are joe strummers book, and miles davis' and frank zappas and etta james and john coltrane and bob marley and warren zevon and many others. all have some very special things about them, most forefront is artistry, drugs and outsider life, fucked up relationships....and music. this is by far the best music book i have read so far. (well for what it is] plus art pepper played saxophone (AND clarinet) better than most anyone ever has ever. Art gets busted a 3rd time, and goes back to san quentin again. its more horrible than anyone can ever imagine, still is frankly.

he gets out again and starts doping again, and finally, after destroying his body, mind, and fiends and lovers art pepper checks into synanon, another complete mindfuck, but he DOES meet Laurie and they eventually write this book together. This has about a 30 page comprehensive discography. So while Art Pepper took most every drug available, and way way beyond excess, he was still making lots and lots of the most incredible jazz ever played. Some said it was a gift from God, his talent and art. Art said it was his life, God didn't have anything to do with it.

Leah Polcar says

I read a review in *Harper's* about another book written by Laurie Pepper (co-author of *Straight Life*) about Art Pepper and at least 3/4 of this review was dedicated to discussing how amazing *Straight Life* was. I still have no sense at all how good the new book is, but a flat out advertisement encouraging one to read *Straight Life* could not have been more persuasive. I found it impossible not to be intrigued by the selected excerpts discussing Art Pepper's hideous childhood and introduction to heroin and descriptions about his participation in a cult and as an inmate at San Quentin. Not to mention that Pepper was probably the one of (if not the) best alto sax players ever (I'll take the testimony presented in *Straight Life* as fact here since I know nothing about jazz). So I came to *Straight Life* not as a Pepper fan, but curious about how an autobiography as lauded as this one, with such ardent fans (at least given the discussion in *Harper's*), had escaped my attention. I can't answer that question, but I can say this is an amazing book and I understand exactly why everyone was well, so, jazzed.

The story can't be beat -- Pepper had some unbelievable experiences -- but it is the way it is told that makes this work such a triumph. Spoken by Art; taped, transcribed, and edited by Laurie, this reads like you have a junkie jazzman sitting on your couch telling you about "that one time when...". Yet there are no tall tales here. No matter how morally bankrupt or desperate, Art is relentlessly honest and what he reveals about himself is shocking.

Highly highly recommended.

Andy says

One of the hardest of hard-core junkies, Art Pepper would supplement his brilliant jazz career by stealing, lying and cheating to keep up an unstoppable drug habit. Even after incarceration he would bounce out and score again, get busted again and score some more!

The book has oodles of pictures of him loaded and looking ready for death. You've never seen so many torn-up addict pictures in your life. What gives his book three stars instead of five is his whiny tone all through the book. Typical punk drug addict to the end.

Michael Finocchiaro says

I was talking about the Giddins book and my renewed interest in jazz to several friends and new acquaintances and all of them told me that I HAD to read Art Pepper's fascinating autobiography (co-written with his last wife Laurie), *Straight Life*. They were so right! I blew through the 400 pages like Art blowing through his alto on Art+11 and loved it. It is dark and scary but a good reminder of all the reasons NOT to go anywhere near heroin if you have any issues or hangups around self-confidence or self-image in general. The

writing is interesting and offers unique views into prison life (he did TWO terms in San Quentin!) and the music business in the 50s and 60s. I have since started listening to his music (honestly I had never listened to him before reading the book) and have been more than pleasantly surprised. Highly recommended even if you are not a jazz fan.

Louise says

This is an oral history with Art Pepper telling his story in short chronological segments with interviews of friends and associates spliced in. While Pepper is famous for his jazz and jazz is part of the story, there is more about the drug and prison culture of California at the time. As Art speaks (you know this because the margins are justified) you adjust to his point of view which is best summarized on p. 424: "I'd known him in jail. He was a real criminal and dopefiend, so I trusted him."

There are many remarkable things about Pepper's life such as his loving but distant father who spots his talent, his stint in the Army in WWII where a last minute change in orders probably saved his life, his relationships with women, his adapting to prison life and his experience of Synanon. Most amazing is that he survived an incredible amount of drug and alcohol abuse until his mid- 40's before his body gave out and he found someone who could love him despite his baggage and his habit.

Pepper's life defined the wisdom of "Just say no". Once hooked, his time was devoted to acquiring the resources to fix (boosting = stealing, begging "friends", or playing a gig), "copping", coming down (very unpleasant when lasting too long) and acquiring the resources again. He hides with stolen goods in rough neighborhoods and alleys and panics at the hint of a patrol. After a 5 day binge with pills he can't stand up while wife attempts suicide. There are pages and pages of this and the people in this world seem to accept it as normal.

Synanon was a very curious place. I checked Wikipedia, and, it was (and still is in Germany) a "new religious movement". It is said to run on donations. (Maintaining this residential campus for what seems like hundreds of adults with buses and its own private beach implies a huge donor base.) Treatment seemed to be separation from society and peer supervision. There were some unorthodox practices such as changing schedules, rooms and policies without notice, having 24+ hours of non-stop activities and "the game". Synanon seemed to be a "rest cure" for Pepper, and a place where he learned social norms other than those of the street. Once his body was healed methadone and Laurie (who became his third wife) protected him from the worst aspects of addiction which he never did kick.

The reader is back in the "Mad Men" era which shows in Pepper's attitude toward women. He gives a description of the breasts of each woman he meets. He learns, but shows no understanding of, basic courtship etiquette. In one of the Synanon games he re-enacts the one thing he feels sorry for. He does not say he feels sorry about the sadness he brought to Patti or the tragedy to Diane or Christine.

As you follow Pepper you can't help but think of the thousands of addicts who live as Pepper did and worse. While Pepper almost killed himself and spent what should have been productive years in the worst prisons in the country, he had his talent, his father, and the women he used to cushion the blows.

The book is riveting through its full 500 pages and enables the reader to visit a dangerous world in the safety of an arm chair. There are good photos and a very good discography. In the "Afterward" Laurie Pepper discusses the difficulties in assembling the material. Its value is beyond the satisfaction it brought her husband, the Peppers have assembled an important historical record.

