

Robert E. Brown; brought world music to San Diego schools | The San Diego Union-Tribune

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OBITUARY

Robert E. Brown; brought world music to San Diego schools

By Jack Williams

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Robert E. Brown envisioned world music, a term he coined in the early 1960s, as an amalgam of performing arts designed to promote cultural harmony and understanding.

The ultimate world music experience, as he saw it, was to learn the dances and musical styles by performing them.

"It was a philosophic concept of understanding people by doing what they do," said Lewis E. Peterman, a longtime colleague of Dr. Brown's at San Diego State University. "Brown will be remembered as an ardent visionary for the advancement of world peace through music."

Dr. Brown, a retired SDSU music professor who introduced world music to San Diego elementary schools as president of the Center for World Music and Related Arts, died Nov. 29 at his home in La Mesa. He was 78.

The cause of death was complications from strokes he suffered after undergoing treatment for cancer, Peterman said.

Dr. Brown hatched the concept of world music at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where he developed undergraduate-to-doctoral programs in the discipline. To enhance the learning process, he invited more than a dozen visiting performers from Asia and Africa and launched a world music concert series.

In the 1970s and 1980s, he further promoted his concept by launching world music programs of study at SDSU and by producing works by musicians from Java and Bali.

"He was extremely charismatic," Peterman said. "He made a strong impact on anyone he met. He read extensively in anthropology and philosophy and was interested in languages and cuisine, which he felt were all connected with the performing arts."

In the summer of 2002, Dr. Brown started an annual world music festival in the village of Payangan, Bali, Indonesia. The festival features rare forms of Balinese music, dance and theater and includes music from Africa, India, the Middle East and Europe.

As part of the festival, Dr. Brown coordinated performing arts tours of Java and Bali and world music summer workshops that were attended by instructors and students from throughout the United States.

Beginning in 1997, through the Center for World Music, Dr. Brown introduced music and dance from African and Asian cultures to San Diego schools. Funding was provided by several sources, including the National Endowment for the Arts and the San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.

When renowned astronomer Carl Sagan decided to create the Voyager Golden Record, to be launched in 1977 on the Voyager spacecraft, he recruited Dr. Brown to select a variety of recorded music representative of humankind.

Attached to Voyager probes 1 and 2 were 12-inch gold-plated copper discs encased in a protective aluminum

jacket. The recording contained 90 minutes of music, ranging from Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" to Bach to a Zairian Pygmy girls' initiation song.

Dr. Brown, who was born April 18, 1927, in Utica, N.Y., received his early education in a one-room schoolhouse in Clinton, N.Y.

At age 2, he sang in his father's minstrel show, with his mother providing piano accompaniment.

Trained on the piano and organ from the age of 9, he received a scholarship as a high school freshman to study at the Utica Conservatory of Music. At 17, he formed his first musical group, a dance band he called The One Meatball.

After graduating from high school in 1945, Dr. Brown joined the Navy and served during World War II in New York and Washington, D.C. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree in piano and organ from Ithaca College. Then he studied music composition, French linguistics and piano at Cornell University.

Dr. Brown began his teaching career at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, and became a teaching assistant at the University of California Los Angeles in 1954.

In the late 1950s, he conducted field research on the music of India with Fulbright and Ford Foundation grants. This led to a dissertation on South Indian drumming and a doctorate from UCLA.

"When he returned from India, he wanted to change the way music education is taught in this country at the college level," Peterman said.

Dr. Brown joined the Wesleyan faculty in 1961. Seeking to spread his world music programs, he left in 1970 to join the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. Emphasizing South Indian and Indonesian music, he launched a world music series and directed a four-month field-study program in Indonesia.

After serving as a visiting lecturer at three universities, including the University of California San Diego, Dr. Brown joined the SDSU faculty as music department chairman in 1979.

Before retiring in 1993, he helped develop and teach a world music course for non-music majors. With about 1,000 students each semester, it became one of the most popular general education courses on campus.

Survivors include three nephews and a niece; seven great-nieces and nephews; and nine great-great nieces and nephews.

A memorial celebration at SDSU is pending.

■ Jack Williams: (619) 542-4587; jack.williams@uniontrib.com