

Working artist, craftsman plays his heart out

Journeyman Jim Page talks about music, activism and today's political climate

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Hailing from the Bay area in California and making Seattle his home for the last four decades, Jim Page is an iconic storyteller with a heart that beats in time with a lyricism that is at once overtly political and in step with The People. Phillip Elwood of the San Francisco Examiner has likened his music to "... the Woody Guthrie I heard as a boy more than anyone I've listened to in the intervening years."

His music continues to influence many people: musicians, teachers, students, politicians, and a wide array of people involved in the social justice movement. A quick glance at his biography will tell you he has shared the stage with the likes of Bonnie Raitt, Emmylou Harris, Dan Bern, Michelle Shocked, Leftover Salmon, Mickey Hart, J.J. Cale, Robert Hunter, Chuck Brodsky, Artis the Spoonman and John Hammond.

Jim Page will play the 25th annual Winterfolk, a benefit concert for Sisters of the Road at the Aladdin Theater on Saturday, Feb. 2. He plays again on Thursday, Feb. 7, with Bill Oskay at the Edgefield in Troutdale.

Sue Zalokar: *Your bio doesn't address the hows and whys of the start of your interest in music and songwriting. What came first?*

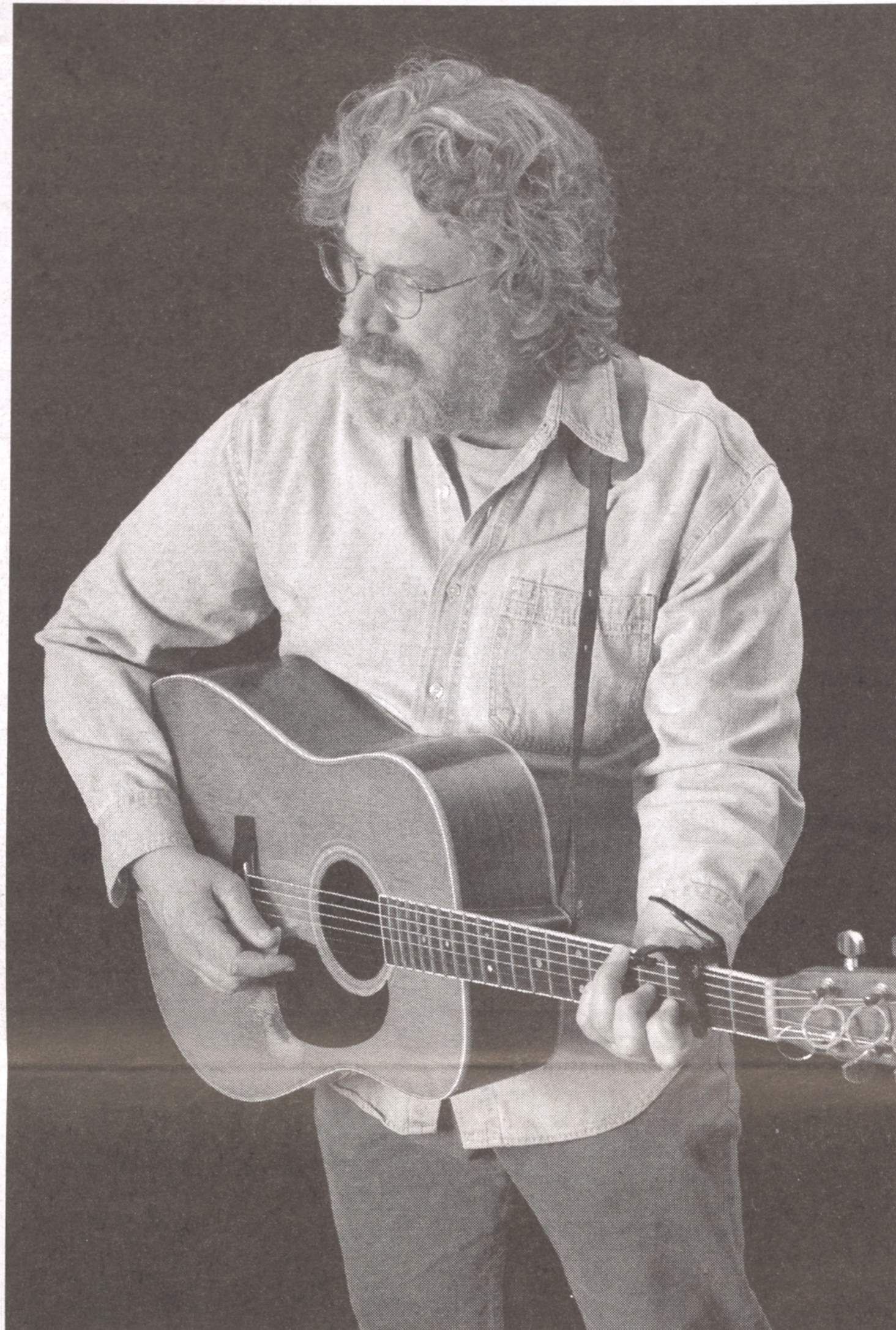
Jim Page: Those things are hard to explain sometimes, I was, I suppose a typically dysfunctional teenager all full of angst and self worth issues like most 14 year olds. One day I heard Lightnin' Hopkins for the first time and there was something about the way he sang. He was able to come out of himself and into the listener. It carried me away so that I was completely excited and consumed by the idea of learning to play the guitar and sing songs. To me, it was a life jacket. It was a way of completely swimming out of the drowning waters of rootlessness that a lot of teenagers have.

S.Z.: *This month is the 150 year anniversary of Lincoln's signing the Emancipation Proclamation. Today was also the inauguration of President Obama. What do you think we Americans, and the world at large can expect from the President in his second term?*

J.P.: I would like to think that he would be more adventurous since he doesn't have to worry about reelection. There were some things he stumbled on. Maybe the Republican-packed Congress was just such a stonewall that he couldn't do anything. I don't expect a lot out of Presidents because they are basically just a hood ornament on the machinery of the state. They don't have that much power. Most of the left-wing people got all excited when he got elected, and then they kind of changed their minds. They spend their time dissecting American politics and talking about how the President is just a puppet in the face of the real power. And then when Obama gets elected, they expect something else.

As a political populace, we've been neutered. It happened slowly and we have actually gotten to enjoy it. We enjoy our powerlessness. We go to movies and we know all about the batting averages and the football scores, but we don't know a damn thing about politics, or care for the most part. It's very frustrating.

S.Z.: *There is a quote by David Ackert that making its way around social media sites. He says, "Singers and musicians are some of the most driven, courageous people on the face of*



COURTESY JIM PAGE

Being a musician is a job. It's a trade. It is also an art, but if you blow that way out of proportion, you'll get lousy tradesmanship. You have to show up and know your material. You have to have social skills to deal with your employer and to talk with the people in the audience. It's a trade. You have to get good at it, then you have to go do it.

the earth. They deal with more day-to-day rejection in one year than most people do in a lifetime." He goes on to talk about the risks that musicians take. His conclusion is that at the end of the day, "to dedicate oneself to that moment (when an artist pours out their creative spirit and touches another's heart) is worth a thousand lifetimes. Do you agree?

J.P.: No. I think that's way overblown. If all the musicians went on strike, nobody would notice. When the garbage collectors go on strike, everybody notices. Being a musician is nowhere near as important as being a nurse. I've been a guitar player since 1965. The rejection I deal with is nowhere near the rejection that a salesperson or a fundraiser deals with. Doing cold calls or raising money for anything, that is rejection.

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people in the audience. It's a trade. You have to get good at it, then you have to go do it.

Artist's have an obligation. If we are going to be supported by the people that we perform for, then we have an obligation to support them in return. To give them songs, stories, plays, movies that reflect their lives and enrich their experience and give them feelings of hope and self worth as they experience the art that we've made.

S.Z.: *How many songs do you think you have written?*

J.P.: I actually don't know. I stopped even caring years ago. Way back in '71 or something, I counted them up and there were like 250. A lot of the songs you write only last a couple of days.

S.Z.: *What do you mean by that?*

J.P.: Because they are about something that is very immediate, right now and is not going on anymore and so the song doesn't

have any punch. Or you wrote it and then you hear it a few years later and you think oh geez, that's embarrassing. That's really bad. I made myself write two songs a week, even if there was nothing to write about. And they sounded like that. You can write a lot, but it doesn't mean you should.

S.Z.: *Busking, or street singing, is alive and well in the urban areas of our country. You have played a big part in that. In 1974 you were integral in changing street singing laws in Seattle. Tell me about that.*

J.P.: It was illegal to perform with a receptacle for receiving donations without a permit in Seattle. And there were no permits. I spent the summer dealing with city council people and the mayor's office and so on. I got a lot of help from the media. We had a city council meeting. I made posters. We packed the place. It was easy. Everybody came out in favor of it except the Musician's Union. It is now part of the municipal code. I don't know, but I have a hunch that if I hadn't done that back in '74 it would be really hard to do now.

S.Z.: *Tell me about your friendship with Artis the Spoonman.*

J.P.: I first met him in 1971 when I first got here. He picked me up hitchhiking somewhere. The way he tells it, the first time he was ever on stage playing with anybody was with me. I played at a little tavern called the Medicine Show and there he was and he asked if he could play with me. I just kind of looked at him and I made a snap judgement because he looked like he would be really interesting to play with. I didn't know what that meant, but it would not be boring and it would not be laid back. It would be really interesting. And it was.

S.Z.: *You have said, "Every song has an ending." As a metaphor for the human race, how do you think our song ends?*

J.P.: Population is a really big issue. The mythological handicap says that certain core important things never change. And we all know that there is nothing that never changes. We need to be able to implement family planning. We need to empower women to not have children if they don't want to. And when religion comes out, as a mythological ball and chain and says that is against God's plan, that is very dangerous.

Obama mentioned nonbelievers in his first inaugural speech. He mentioned them again just a couple of days ago. This has never happened before. nonbelievers are the largest growing sector of the so called religious paradigm. People who either don't believe at all in God or are not aligned or say, "I don't know, it sounds kinda fishy to me." That is very important. It takes the power away from clergy. It takes the power away from fear. It takes the power away from the things that keep us from moving forward.

The Martin Luther Kings of this world are everywhere. He was a great speaker and he knew how to make people think and how to get them riled up and get them excited about themselves. And he used the Bible and religious stories to charge people up and to give them the courage to do things and that's the right thing to do.

We can be equally powerful, equally charged, equally positive, equally constructive - without depending on magic.

We have a right - by virtue of the fact that we are alive on this planet - we have the right to a better life.