

# GPFS Member Feature

## Meet John Savage

Interview by GPFS Member [Adam Eccleston](#)

Written by GPFS member BJ Nicoletti

Photo “On the Bench” by Jane Portnoff

“Standing Sax” photo by Meg Nana

Photo “John with Alto Flute,” taken at the Penofin Jazz Festival by Charles Smith



### A Little about John Savage

John is a classically trained, traditional and jazz flutist as well as a full-fledged extraordinary saxophonist who performs regularly in Oregon and nationally. He is a true instrumental “doubler” with a classical, jazz, rock and innovative spirit. He is also a composer and educator – [Reed College music faculty](#), and a private instructor for high school age and older students more established in their playing and interested in learning modern techniques and/or improvisation.

“John holds a Ph.D. from New York University in Flute Performance with emphases in improvisation and theory. Savage's dissertation, *A Phenomenology of Contemporary Flute Improvisation: Contextual Explications of Techniques, Aesthetics, and Performance Practices*, uses analytical techniques from the fields of ethnomusicology (ethnography) and music philosophy (phenomenology) in order to create a theory of flute performance and pedagogy for the twenty-first century.”

The flute was his first instrument. His father and uncle were flutists. His early teacher was Earle Minor, a saxophone and flute teacher, and “a true bebop player who used to refer to his flute playing as being a defensive player [laughter].” John was encouraged to move on to a different flute instructor. He then studied with George Anne Ries for a year at Jefferson High School and then PSU with Dr. Marilyn Shotola. He graduated in 1994 with a degree in flute performance from PSU. He then moved to NY and studied with Keith Underwood. “I was classically trained but always interested in jazz. I had a lot of friends that played rock music. I jammed with them.” John has pursued each of these genres side-by-side for a long time.

“If I had a saxophone in my mouth I’m a saxophonist. If I have a flute in my mouth I’m a flutist.” In graduate school he was playing jazz saxophone gigs and most in his flute studio did not know he even played saxophone. He wanted to keep that separate because he believed it would help him be taken more seriously as a classical flutist.

[Wil Offermans](#), a Dutch flutist-composer well regarded for promoting extended techniques on the flute, was a very influential artist and role model for John.



Last, but far from least, he is the husband and collaborative partner of spoken-word artist, Arab-American poet [Claudia Savage](#). They have an eight year old daughter and further collaboration through their duo [Thick in the Throat, Honey](#). “We’ve been trying for years how to wed woodwind playing and poetry without getting too close to a beat thing. She is not a lyricist, neither am I. We’re not song writers. The latest thing we’ve done is [Be About Love down at the Blackfish Gallery](#). It was a month-long festival that moved online. She’ll write original work and there is a lot of improvisation. She now improvises a lot more, crazy right, and not typical of a poet.”

## Performance Artist

The depth and range of John’s life as a performing artist, past and current, is overwhelming to fully report on in general, never mind for this humble publication. As a player, he has “been compared to Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Jean-Pierre Rampal, Herbie Mann, Noah Howard, Ian Anderson, and Colin Stetson.”

To get a feel for John’s current performance history, please visit his website’s [listing of performance events](#) and his [discography](#). Some highlights:

- [Thick in the Throat, Honey](#)
- [The Bundy Band](#)
- [Portland Jazz Composers Ensemble](#),

One of this writer’s favorites, for solo alto flute, “when it rains/the river stand still,” by [Lisa Bost-Sandberg](#). Recording: [performed by John Savage](#).

## On Staying Inspired, Especially Now

“I think it has been so long now. It feels like just yesterday I did a *Star Wars* release Christmas Party at Studio One G theatre in southeast (2019). Christmas carols ... and jazz standards with a bunch of people in stormtrooper costumes running around. There was the emotion of four months of spring work cancelled. I watch my daughter and do my work at Reed College. A busy spring was simply cancelled. That was profound. It hit me hard. I just tried to keep practicing and played whatever I wanted to do.”

Also – “The Bundy Band *was* playing monthly at the Skyline Tavern. My buddy created this New Orleans style band with a Pacific Northwest twist... some other Americana too... originals in that vein. Now we’ve been doing a remote recording for the last ten months. I’ve been working on getting my tech game up. We’ve all been separately recording tracks. He’s been mixing them.”

## On Teaching and Learning

“I like having adult conversations about why do you play the flute, why do you play music? Let’s get into that and see what we can find in the music for you with that in mind... what that driving thing is that makes you want to do it. I have older students that move from being classically trained to something else they thought they would never do.”

A recommended book – [Ali Ryerson’s](#) etude book, [Jazz Flute Practice Method](#). He is also working on his own etude book, reporting he is – thanks in part to pandemic quarantine - one musical example away from getting a draft finished. “I’m proud of what it is. I am situating jazz exercises within some classical repertoire that all flutists know.” This book will be geared toward advanced high school, college, professional and adult flutists who have played classical music all their lives and want to try something else.



Finding himself at a new stage of musical interest and learning, Adam Eccleston, the interviewer, was very excited to hear this news and readily made an enthusiastic, collegial offer - “Whatever you might need, you let me know how I can be helpful with that!”

“I think [inspiring] is my thing with people and students. I want to inspire people to find those connections that they thought there was a wall between them... I’m always asking myself how I can move beyond that threshold of what is holding me in place as a musician. For me, I went to NYU and there was a lot of opportunity to do music technology, but at the time I was dead set on doing as much with the flute as I could, just becoming more solid with my classical chops, studying with Keith Underwood, and then getting into new music and very contemporary

### A recommended book?

- “[Jazz Flute Practice Method](#),” by [Ali Ryerson](#)

### A recommended flute composition?

- His own, “[Impromptu for Solo Flute](#)”

### A recommended musician or recording?

- Roscoe Mitchell, “Nonaah,” [Original](#).
- [Distant Radio Transmission released by Rosco](#), with Ostravska Banda. “It has [Noonah Trio] on it... very proud of my flute playing and the trio’s performance. It is elegant, beautiful fear to play. It’s a whole world. Roscoe originally played “Noonah” as a saxophone solo back in the 70’s and it’s evolved. Direct link to [performance with John on flute](#), Noonah Trio.

### If you could meet anyone who would it be and why?

- “Wow. That’s a big question! It’s Christmas, so Jesus Christ? President Obama, of course. A musician? I’ve been fortunate enough to meet a lot of great musicians – Andrew Hill, Roscoe Mitchell, Wil Offermans, Robert Dick. There are always more people you want to understand more about.



music as much as I could. There was a lot of pressure to get into more computer music like synthesis and stuff, but it just wasn't my time. Now, with the pandemic, I'm just really enjoying working with Cubase, digital audio, making myself crazy. I had some background using this stuff, but now it is a need. So, the stuff with my friend and the Bundy Band, I now sit at night and read the technology tutorials!"

### **Was there a piece you wrote for flute that you would like to mention?**

"Yes, I wrote *Impromptu for Solo Flute*, a commission for the National Flute Association convention in NY, 2009. It has the most boring title, but it seemed like the best choice at the time. It was a high school soloist's competition piece. The piece has really held up. It's really good. I really like playing it." It is available directly from John as well as from GPFS supporters [Flute World](#) and [Carolyn Nussbaum Music Company](#). [John performing Impromptu for Solo Flute](#).



John Savage - [Website](#) and  
YouTube channel [Savage Flute](#)

John really wanted to make sure that people reading this profile for GPFS would learn about and come to appreciate the following unique and robust Portland area organizations. Please, consider visiting their websites and maybe subscribing to their newsletter, Instagram or YouTube channels.

- [Blackfish Gallery](#)
- [The Creative Music Guild](#) - John served on the board for a number of years and helped with fundraising and development in addition to performing in numerous events and ensembles.
- [Portland Jazz Composers Ensemble](#)

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