

**A Tribute to Leon Knopoff** *May 5, 2011*

by Mark Harrison, Director, Institute of Geophysics and Planetary Physics,  
Professor of Geochemistry, UCLA

Leon's history with the Institute is essentially the history of the Institute. He arrived as a research associate only four years after its founding to work with its founder, Louis Slichter. Slichter, recognizing the brilliance of his young colleague, appointed Leon to the Institute faculty where he served until his retirement in 1994 and where he continued to contribute scientifically virtually to his last moments. Leon's great intellect and extraordinarily broad interests led to affiliations with Physics and Ethnomusicology but his true home was in the IGPP. He led the Institute for 14 highly productive but challenging years beginning in 1972 – challenging largely as the reporting structure for the Institute was in near constant flux, evolving from the desk of the President to the UCLA campus. The files are replete with Leon's carefully argued memos warning administrators that the contradictions they sowed with each temporized reorganization could ultimately deal the Institute an irreparable blow. Leon's prescience was sadly realized, as the same year in which he ceased making fundamental contributions to geophysics, so too will his beloved Institute.

I had not met Leon prior to arriving at UCLA in 1989 but was somehow aware of his reputation among at least some east coast geophysicists as a powerful but fearsome intellect. Thus it was with some trepidation when I first took the seat next to him on the Colina Way shuttle, beginning a years-long episodic dialogue riding up and down the hill. I was delighted but surprised to find him to be a gentle soul able to converse across the spectrum of scientific ideas and beyond . . . although I can't say I fully followed everything he told me he was up to. I understood later that I had read meaning into the words of those east coast geophysicists that was not intended. My confusion was that virtually all the brilliant geochemists of Leon's generation came equipped with monstrous egos, and I had not been prepared for the possibility that this behavior didn't translate across disciplines.

Leon's memory will live on at UCLA in many forms but notably through the Leon and Joanne VC Knopoff Career Development Chair in Physics and Geophysics. How fitting it would be for it to attract a uniquely brilliant young polymath ready to change the face of geophysics. Leon's legacy will be forever.