

AMERICAN VOICES

NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER 2007

Executive Directors Update

Transforming Iraq into a Rhythm Nation

Greetings! It has been two years since our last newsletter, but I have a good reason: we have been engaging in some exciting new projects that are changing the face of cultural diplomacy.

The American Voices team is just back from Iraq where we have succeeded beyond our wildest imagination in our bold effort to bring cultural diplomacy to Iraq in the form of The Iraq National Unity Performing Arts Academy.

In a leap of the imagination supported by the State Department and the U.S. Embassy, Baghdad, our small not-for-profit organization, American Voices, created an oasis of free artistic expression and learning for Iraqi performing artists. Participants in the American Voices' Unity Performing Arts Academy came from Baghdad and the entire Kurdish region. They included four orchestras, jazz musicians, children's theater groups, and ballet, folk and traditional dancers. These 300 energetic Iraqi participants proved that Iraqi unity is not necessarily a myth and that cultural diplomacy can work wonders, even in conflict zones.

For 10 days in July, the city of Erbil in Northern Iraq was infused with the excitement and passion for the performing arts -- classical, jazz, theater, ballet, hip-hop, dance. These multiple genres came alive and culminated in historic performances, open to the public. In fact, the two gala concerts in Erbil were performed to standing-room-only. The events were also broadcast live throughout Iraq and internationally on [ABC Nightly News](#).

My hope is that American Voices may set a new standard for what is possible in the arena of cultural diplomacy. From Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" to orchestral arrangements of Duke Ellington and Broadway choreogra-



Special Edition: Iraq - The Rhythm Nation

phy of Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," nothing even close to this initiative has ever taken place in the history of Iraq and will hopefully become a model for other countries torn by civil strife and ethnic rivalries.

This newsletter issue also catches you up on other exciting moments in 2006 and 2007, from taking Jazz Bridges Afghanistan on tour in Western Europe to our Baghdad concert and HaviKoro's popping and locking around the globe.

We also will soon begin our first annual fundraising drive, and I hope you will join in the effort! Although American Voices is making great strides in our programming and visibility, we are finding that budget cuts at the State Department and the loss of several corporate sponsors to recent mergers is making

accomplishing our mission ever more challenging. As a result, we are turning to the private sector and people like you to make it possible for our American cultural diplomats to continue to work their magic around the world. You can make your gift [online](#) or look for a brochure and gift form coming to your mailbox soon. Thanks for your generosity!



Unity Academy Dance and Theatre Students Perform Janet Jackson's 'Rhythm Nation'

John Ferguson
Pianist and
Executive Director



Iraq Unity Academy: Bringing Hope and Goodwill to a Conflict-Weary Nation



Unity Orchestra Uniting Four Iraqi Orchestras

The idea for the Unity Academy germinated in Baghdad during discussions with the then Cultural Affairs Officer, Kim Dubois, about how to keep up the momentum of cultural diplomacy in Iraq after our 2007 February concert and workshops in Baghdad. American Voices’ suggested transporting a team of performing artists into Iraq and providing members of the country’s artistic community with a safe environment in which they could come together for a simple, common purpose – creative expression. Ultimately, the concept was a hit with Iraqis who came in droves from around the country to participate in Iraq’s first workshops ever in topics as diverse as Broadway, jazz, hip-hop, baroque performance practice, and the Suzuki method.

Baghdad participants included the Iraq National Symphony Orchestra, the National Folk Dancers, Butterfly Ballet Company of Baghdad, and students from the School of Music and Dance. From the Kurdish regions, the String Orchestras of Suleimaniya and Erbil joined musicians from the cities of Duhok and Rania. The Kurdish regions are blessed with a network of Institutes of Fine Arts, and students from these institutions in Suleimaniya and Erbil participated along with the White Lions Hip Hop group, the Suhand and Ajeen jazz groups, and children’s theater groups from these principal cities of the Kurdish regions.



Maestro David Handel Greets Fans in Erbil

For a detailed look at the Unity Academy, please look at the [ABC World News report](#) with correspondent Terry McCarthy. You may also want to visit his blog, “[Symphony of Hope](#)”



Unity Jazz Students at July 21st Gala Concert

Other good resources providing glimpses into daily life at the Unity Academy is faculty member Marc Thayer’s [blog](#) on the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra’s website. And a comprehensive article on the [All About Jazz](#) website.



Notes from the Unity Academy



We're Off to See the Wizard

Children's Theater

Carole McCann of Houston's venerable Broadway institution, Theater Under the Stars, worked magic with approximately 40 children from Erbil's various [youth theater programs](#). Watch them perform excerpts from [Grease](#).



Baghdad's Young Ballet Company

Ballet

Baltimore's Quae Simpson, worked closely with the [Baghdad Ballet](#). View their performances to music of [Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp](#).



Iraq's Budding Hip Hop Dancers in Performance

Hip Hop and Jazz Dance

Michael Parks Masterson turned Erbil on its ear with choreography of Janet's Jackson "[Rhythm Nation](#)" featuring nearly all of the 100 participants of the dance and theater program. [See why here](#).



Big Band Under Direction of Gene Aitken

Jazz

With a core group of approximately 40 students from around the country, jazz faculty [Gene Aitken](#) and American Voices veteran expert Werner Englert formed five different ensembles devoted to various styles of jazz music, from Big Band to an Arabic and Kurdish Jazz Bridges project. [Read more:](#) [Listen:](#)



Jazz Piano Class

Piano

Teaching piano in a city that owns a grand total of three instruments can be a challenge. In this case, the 12 participating pianists spent 10 days packed into one small room around a [dilapidated upright piano](#). However, the chance to study jazz, popular American piano styles, as well as the great masters and participate in chamber music compensated for the shortage of instruments. [Iraqi pianists rock!](#)

Symphonic

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the Unity Academy was the [Unity Orchestra](#), where we united all of Iraq's orchestras on one stage. [Listen](#) to the Unity Orchestra perform: [More performances:](#)



Demetrius Fuller Conducts the Unity Orchestra

Thank You to Our Supporters

It was heartening to see how many businesses, institutions, and individuals came together to donate a huge amount of materials, instruments, music scores, and method books to this project. Please visit our website for a [complete list](#).



Over 2000 Music Scores and Method Books Donated to Four Music Libraries

Future Plans

American Voices is currently planning for the future of both the Unity Academy and a series of highly focused follow-up projects aimed to support music, dance, and youth theater teacher training in Iraq. Of the nearly endless list of what is needed to improve arts education in Iraq, the most glaring is providing support to teachers and future teachers. In dance and theater, we want to help expand the horizons of the known and possible among the many dedicated teachers in this field. While encouraging teachers

to move beyond using only folk dance and folk tales, we hope to open students to the wider world by exposing them to many different styles of dance and theater. In music, we plan to support curriculum development and teacher training for strings, wind, brass instruments, and piano as well as provide materials and training for musicianship and theory classes. Our current immediate plans include workshops for string, wind and brass instrument teachers and future teachers, jazz education, children's theater, and hip-hop dance.

Please Help

We have created a special donation section on our website for those wishing to [donate](#) to the Unity Academy and future training and performance programs in Iraq.



Carole McCann and Michael Parks Masterson Celebrate with Dance Students

In Our Iraqi Student's Own Words:

Quotes from the Unity Performing Arts Academy in Erbil, Iraq:

"I just wanted to say that those few days that we spent with you were truly the best of our lives, and we won't forget this experience as long as we live...not only because we learned a lot from you but we had a good time doing that too...." **Amina, age 16, Baghdad**

"I want to thank you so much for what you are doing for us and what you have given to us. Thank you, too, for the mute which we do not have here in Iraq...." **Ahmad, Baghdad, French Horn**

The Unity Academy was a very important event in my life because you taught me many good things which I will never forget. I will promise from now on I will be on that path you and Werner taught me. I just want to say I had a good benefit and built a strong base for my career as a jazz musician. All my wishes are to fly in that great sky of jazz music." **Pishko, Guitarist, Suleimanya, Iraq**





Phnom Penh Concert in Honor of new U.S. Embassy

Advocating Cultural Diplomacy

American Voices Executive Director John Ferguson was featured on the Op-Ed pages of the Christian Science Monitor in an article titled, “[Why Do They Love Us So Much](#)”. In this short article, he explores the nature of American Voices’ mission and the effectiveness and untapped potential of cultural diplomacy programs to counter misunderstandings across cultural divides.

2007 Was a Very Good Year....

In addition to the Unity Academy in Iraq, we engaged in many other inspiring projects in 2007:

Jazz Bridges Afghanistan Tours Europe

Our groundbreaking project uniting jazz with Afghan traditional music in early February was sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in London and the U.S. Consulate in Frankfurt. [More...](#)

Historic Concert and Workshops in Baghdad

In February 2007, American Voices was invited into the heart of Baghdad for a historic concert held at the Al Rashed Hotel and sponsored by the U.S. Embassy. The unlikely music and dance program was greeted by a standing ovation from the mostly Iraqi audience. [More...](#)

On Tour in Turkey

With generous support from Chevron Corporation, American Voices was invited to tour Turkey with a series of concerts and dance workshops highlighting Black History Month. [More...](#)

Concerts Across Western China

After two years of planning, our carefully laid plans with the U.S. Embassy in Beijing came to fruition with a unique tour of Kashgar and Urumchi in Western China. The Mike

Del Ferro Trio explored the furthest reaches of the Silk Road in a series of standing room only concerts to curious Chinese and eager Uighur audiences. [More...](#)
View You Tube videos: [Clip 1](#), [Clip 2](#), [Clip 3](#)

Broadway in Mexico

In May, American Voices performed excerpts from West Side Story in Guadalajara with young professional opera singers from the Jalisco region. [More...](#)

Belarusian Hiplomacy

HaviKoro of Houston was back on the road in May with a trip to Europe’s last remaining Soviet-style dictatorship, Belarus. On this project, HaviKoro tapped into the lively Belarusian hip-hop scene and gave joint performances with a talented group of Belarusian b-boys, b-girls, rappers, and dancers. [More...](#)

Touring Immigrant Communities in Denmark

HaviKoro’s Isaac Barron and hip-hop dance instructor Rosie Pichon spent three weeks touring Denmark working with youth from mainly immigrant communities. [More...](#)

Pakistan Jazz

Our Director of Jazz Programming, Mike Del Ferro, was back in Pakistan, where he performed a series of Jazz Bridges concerts with local traditional and rock musicians. [More...](#)

...And So Was 2006

American Voices accomplished many firsts during 2006:



CoCo York Jams with Students of the Royal Institute of Fine Arts

Khmer Blues

To assist with celebrations marking the opening of the new U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, vocalist CoCo York and pianist D.D. Jackson were invited to participate in a grand concert uniting close to 100 performers on the stage of the National Concert Hall, Chatumuk. Amid a rich display of Khmer culture, American Voices’ artists performed together with student vocalists from the Royal Institute of Fine

Arts and a huge cast of Cambodian traditional dancers and musicians. [More...](#)



*Country Musician Jesse Dayton Jams
with Kazakh Traditional Musicians*

Kazakhstan Goes Country

Jesse Dayton took the city of Aktau, Kazakhstan, by storm with its first live country music concerts. [More...](#)

Vietnam Goes Country, too

Jesse Dayton was back on the road for American Voices in April with a pioneering tour of the first live performances of country music in Vietnam in more than 30 years. [More...](#)

Belarus Jazz

The formidable BeBop diva, Deborah Brown, began to lend her talents to American Voices' efforts in 2006. Considered one of the world's foremost jazz vocalists, Deborah and Mike Del Ferro enriched the cultural life of Minsk with a series of sold-out performances at the Minsk Opera. [Listen to Deborah.](#) [Read more:](#)



HaviKoro and the Turkmenbashi

Hiplomacy in India, Turkey, and Turkmenistan

The Turkmenbashi may be gone, but Turkmen citizen's memories of HaviKoro's Hiplomacy tour of South and Central Asia still endure. We hope this photo of HaviKoro's DJ did not hasten the demise of the Turkmenbashi. [More...](#)

B-Boys in Tango-stan: HaviKoro in Argentina and Venezuela

The hip-hop scene has taken root everywhere, even in the land of the tango where HaviKoro gave a hugely successful tour, including performances on Argentinian TV that you can view on [You Tube](#). Read more about [Argentina](#). About [Venezuela](#)

Taiwan Jazz and Broadway

The International Jazz and Broadway Academies in Taiwan continued to draw huge audiences and enthusiastic students. Please see photos of our performances of excerpts from Grease with over forty Taiwanese Broadway students. Though we took a break from these academies in 2007 due to the demands of the Unity Academy, we plan to return in 2008 with a slightly different focus and new name, American Broadway Academy of Taiwan. [More...](#)



*BeBop Queen Deborah Brown Takes
Kazakh Musicians to the Blues*

Jazz Bridges with Deborah Brown in Kazakhstan

With support from ExxonMobil in Astana and KBM in Aktau, we returned to Kazakhstan for an exciting 10 days of Jazz Bridges programming with traditional musicians in those two cities. Highlights of the tour included Deborah's duets with Kazakhstan's young singing sensation, Nursultan, who, it turned out could sing a mean Blues. [More...](#)

Christmas in Japan and Taiwan

The Japanese love Christmas! Soprano Jacquelyn Culpepper joined John Ferguson on a 17-day concert tour of the country from Sapporo to Okinawa in a fun concert designed for a wide public. We confess to having done sing-alongs with Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer. [More...](#)

Upcoming Tours



Hiplomacy

HaviKoro will tour Georgia, Bulgaria, Italy, and Greece from September 24 to October 14.

Broadway and Dance in Sri Lanka

In November, Michael Parks Masterson and Unity Academy Faculty Alum, Quae Simpson, will take hip-hop and Broadway dance to Sri Lanka and the Maldives (Nice work if you can get it.....).

Turkey

Plans are being laid for a full-length musical in Ankara with students of the National Conservatory to Haciattepe University.

Arts for Iraq

As outlined earlier, we are planning a series of teacher training projects in the fields of classical music, hip-hop and jazz dance, and jazz education. As of this writing, these projects will be implemented in the Kurdish regions of Northern Iraq but made available to any interested Iraqis from around the country.

American Voices in Profile

Michael Parks Masterson

The excellent Broadway staging and choreography work of Michael was brought to John Ferguson's attention during a March 2006 visit to Japan. This introduction came at the time American Voices was expanding the American Broad-



Michael Teaching Hip Hop Dance in Iraq

way Academy in Taiwan to include a choreographer. After a gleeful week culminating in some tremendously choreographed excerpts from Grease, we began to lay plans for Michael's deeper involvement with American Voices. Though he insists he is being punished for something that must have happened in Taiwan, Michael has actually been invited to Iraq two times with American Voices purely for reasons of professional excellence! His positive energy and good humor are potent teaching tools in war-scarred countries, and the outstanding results of his efforts can be seen in this video of "Rhythm Nation" from the Unity Academy. [Read more...](#)

Kudos to our Corporate Sponsors!

Among the many sponsors who step forward in the course of a season, there are always a few who stand out. In the past two years, several of our most ardent corporate friends have been snapped up in mergers and acquisitions. One of those is KBM (Karazhanbasmunai) of Aktau, Kazakhstan, which will soon to be acquired by a Chinese oil company. KBM's director, Mike Long, has been a pillar of support since 1994. We would like to thank Mike Long not only for his support for our projects in Kazakhstan but also for his ardent appreciation of the artistic content of American Voices' programming.



KBM's Mike Long Opens the Evening in Aktau, Kazakhstan

It is always uplifting to meet a corporate supporter who not only appreciates what our programs can do for their company's image, but who also appreciates the artistic content of the programs we create.

We would also like to take a moment to thank Austrian Airlines, not only for providing a reliable and comfortable service to Erbil, Iraq, but also for their support of our Unity Performing Arts Academy this summer. Not only did they support the transport of our faculty but also provided the means to get more than 30 boxes of donated materials to Erbil in time for the Unity Academy opening. Servus!

For a [complete listing](#) of our sponsors and donors:

Two AV Recordings Now Available

Since our last newsletter, American Voices has issued two new recordings have been issued



Jazz Mugham Bridges CD is a live recording of Mike Del Ferro's and Stian Carstensen's historic encounter with Azerbaijani traditional musicians in Baku in June 2005. [Listen](#)



Jazz Bridges Afghanistan DVD documents our jazz encounters with Afghan traditional musicians and live concerts in Kabul. [See more...](#)

And recordings coming soon:

American Voices Around the World - Encore! is a re-release of our 2004 CD with important new tracks from our concerts at Rachmaninoff Hall with the Moscow Conservatory Choir and Iraq's Unity Academy Orchestral and Jazz performances.

Unity Academy DVD includes highlights from the jazz, dance and orchestral concerts.

All recordings are available to Friends of American Voices. [Join today](#) to receive DVDs/CDs of these historic performances.



American Voices Now on You Tube

In an initiative to reach new audiences around the world, American Voices has begun to post videos of our performances and workshops on You Tube. Please check us out!

Jazz Bridges Projects

Jazz Bridges Afghanistan: Video of rehearsal from this groundbreaking project.

[Kazakhstan](#)

[Burma](#)

[Eritrea](#)

Western China: [Clip 1](#), [Clip 2](#), [Clip 3](#)

HaviKoro Break Dancers

[Venezuela](#)

Buenos Aires: [Clip 1](#), [Clip 2](#), [Clip 3](#), [Clip 4](#)

In Memoriam: Anthony Stallone

We were saddened to lose one of our most dynamic young volunteers, Anthony Stallone, at the age of 34 to heart failure in March 2006. An IT specialist and long-time resident of Bangkok, Tony was an ardent amateur pianist and travel enthusiast and was deeply involved in the plight of Burmese refugees. He volunteered to re-vamp our website in 2005 with an easy to manage Plone system, which we are still using today and for which we remain deeply thankful.



Houston's Carole McCann Working with Iraqi Children

Join Friends of American Voices

With diminishing funds available from the U.S. government for cultural diplomacy, American Voices is now turning to U.S. foundations, corporations, and individuals to support our life-changing programs. We have created the Friends of American Voices, where friends and fellow performing arts aficionados can be recognized for supporting American Voices each year through a tax-deductible donation.

You should be receiving more information about our first-ever annual fund drive in the mail soon. Or you can [make your gift now](#) with the attached membership form or online with a credit card or PayPal on our website. We thank you for your generosity in helping us bring American performing arts to countries emerging from conflict or isolation!



All Iraq photos by Michael Luongo www.michaelluongo.com

Contact Information

Asian Office :
(Correspondence Address)

34/15 Soi Sribumpen, Rama 4 Rd.
Thungmahamek, Sathorn,
Bangkok 10120 Thailand

Tel/Fax: + 66 2286 8156
Mobile: + 66 81 923 5410
Skype: + 1 281 668 4664
john.ferguson@americanvoices.org

United States Office :
404 Cordell,
Houston, Texas 77009
USA
Tel/Fax +1 713 862 7125

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All members will be recognized in our newsletter and on our Web site.

I would like to make a special donation to one of the following projects:

- Unity Performing Arts Academy in Northern Iraq
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- Jazz Bridges Middle East

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