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Beirut/NTSC (Never Twice Same City)

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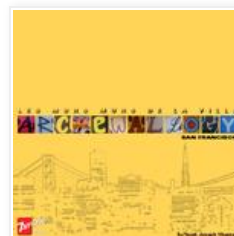
SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 2009

Gene Aitken: On the sunny side of the street



Pictures do little justice to Dr. Gene Aitken, because my first impression of him is an affable person who looks barely in his late fifties, actually, he is 72. "I work out every day," he clarified, which is but one indicator of the man's focus, determination, contagious energy and enthusiasm. Dr. Aitken was passing through Lebanon as one of the teachers of the YES (Youth Excellence on Stage) which took place in Lebanon between August 1st and 15th through an initiative by the Huston-Based American Voices which is tirelessly orchestrated by professional musician John Ferguson. One of the first things I asked what how the YES teachers were able to get the Lebanese students – notorious for their lateness as is the case with the general population – to come on time and be rigorous in their training. Aitken said that "once you lay the ground rules and the parameters and stick to them, it is easy to make other people follow them. Besides, I am used to the "Thai time" thing." "Thai time? As in Thailand time?" I inquire. Aitken elucidated the mystery by explaining that he currently resides in Thailand, in Bangkok, "I left the US in 2002, and joined Mahidol University where a former graduate student of mine was the music chairperson, and taught there for a couple of years." Dr. Aitken's summary of his experience at Mahidol is nothing but a reflection of his overall humbleness. Actually, in his capacity of advisor to the Director of the College of Music at Mahidol University in Bangkok, he established the Wind Ensemble, Symphonic Band, and Choral programs as well as helping to design curriculum for the Recording Engineering and Jazz Studies Programs and assisted in the building design of the new Multimedia Center, Music Museum, and 300-seat auditorium. Aitken goes on: "Then eventually I went to Singapore for a residency. Fell in love with it, contacted the authorities behind the new conservatory and told them I was at their disposal should they need anything." As fate would have it, "there was an open position as Deputy Director of the Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore (NUS) which had been open for 18 months. So after much discussion as administration was not my usual interest, I agreed to fill the position and within a year I was appointed as Director of the Conservatory of Music and continued to move the Conservatory forward in terms of developing the program and overseeing and setting the direction for the construction and completion of the \$45-million state-of-the art music building for 200 music students."

"Throughout this Asian experience" continues Aitken, "I kept thinking, wouldn't it be



great if musicians from Burma, Thailand, China, Viet Nam and other Asian nations assembled to play together and be able to communicate musically and otherwise? So in 2003, the SAYOWE (South Asian Youth Orchestra and Wind Ensemble) was born as musicians from these countries auditioned and those chosen got flown to Thailand." This concept not only furthered positive relations between the Southeast Asian countries, but also identified outstanding musicians in Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. From over 500 students who auditioned in their home countries, 146 were selected and brought together in Thailand where they rehearsed and performed with a final concert at the Thailand Cultural Center in Bangkok. The experience, according to Aitken, "proved that different religious beliefs, cultural disparities, and variances in socio-economic backgrounds all disappeared as these musicians the majority of whom had never worked with someone from a different culture, gathered together to play." The SAYOWE program is still funded by the Thai government to this day. "They are the leaders of tomorrow," assures Aitken. One of the other major discoveries of the program, according to Aitken, "was this need for a commonality of language, not just in the musical sense, but in the pure linguistic one. In that case, it was predominately Chinese, and sometimes English. This is because at some point, as friendships were flourishing, people wanted to express thoughts that could only be expressed verbally. And so a common language was a must. For the YES academy in Lebanon this is Arabic, and I see this need for a commonality of language everywhere I go and wherever people from different cultures or backgrounds meet." "Indeed, the social background is of no relevance whatsoever for the YES academy in Lebanon," assures Aitken. "We take students for what they are as individuals and only choose them on the basis of talent and merit. And it has been my experience that whenever these meetings are repeated, we go back to see these same people, now devoid of their prejudices and all differences of wealth disappear and they go back again together." "All these musicians talk of positive experiences they have shared throughout the program, be it SAYOWE or the American Voices and if they cannot participate once more, at least they encourage other people they know to join the experience." Dr. Aitken retired in October 2006 as Director of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore and the subsequent meeting with John Ferguson took place in Bangkok in 2007. "I had left the conservatory and a few months later called him to say I was interested to be on board of American Voices since the idea of getting musicians from different cultures was something I was already very familiar with through the SAYOWE program." The first assignment was in Iraq where the main goal of the performing arts festival was uniting the Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, and many other cultures and religions. "The musicians," says Aitken, "could have been killed for participating, not only because some people see participation in art forms as not compatible with their religious beliefs but also because they were collaborating with Americans. So it took a lot of courage to participate." In addition to working with the Jazz Bridges ensembles, he rehearsed the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra brass section for an upcoming tour. "I always make sure to initiate contact with Army Brass Bands" said Aitken, "as it is always good to get the military involved in such projects. In Nepal, there was a heavy interest from the Police in our project and upon investigation, it turned out they have a full-fledged musical academy where people 400 people were training how to be policemen in the morning and musicians in the afternoon." In 2007, Dr. Aitken conducted China's top military band, the Military Band of the Peoples' Liberation Army of China, in Beijing, for the opening of their new Concert Hall. It is the Central Government of China's own military band. In addition, he conducted master classes for over 100 Chinese wind ensemble directors on how to build and strengthen their wind ensemble programs. On 25 July of that same year, Dr. Aitken appeared on ABC World News direct from Erbil, Iraq, conducting the American Voices Jazz Bridges Combo and Big Band as part of the 10-day festival in the performing arts as part of the American Voices event this first-ever Iraqi Performing Arts Academy with funding from the US State Department. Iraq, being the thorny issue that it is in American policy, begs to open the topic of "cultural diplomacy" which is one of the main drives of American Voices. Pressed as to whether the United States is capable of "winning the hearts and mind of the natives" through culture rather than military might, Aitken is only too enthusiastic to reply: "Absolutely!" He then goes on to say, "the US is capable of showing its might, and the saying that Rock music contributed more than anything else to the fall of communism is not devoid of truth. The US is very advanced in the arts world and music is a form of self-expression where we can provide expertise. It is not just



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about building buildings, it is about helping people to help themselves, and the arts play a major role in this aspect." But, as with anything that is closely or remotely associated with development, the "helping the people help themselves" is a concept which "locals" might associate with a condescending behavior. "It is so easy to circumvent the idea of such a behavior" assures Aitken, "we learn from them as much as they learn from us. People understand that their contribution helps bettering the programs we are offering. And most of the time you have musicians having a take on our music, giving it a local flavor or twist, which we later on say: Hey, I am going to steal this idea and implement it elsewhere!" As the US navigates low opinion rates in many countries, Aitken warns that "one must differentiate between the people and the official government stance. Just like American people were different from the stand point of their government, same applies to Iran. When we look at the overall value system, and when we notice as to how much the family is concerned about the education of the child, the US must now draw from other cultures to help us help them better. The US in itself, musically speaking, has become a giant melting pot. What is currently heard is not orchestra or jazz but more like world music borrowing from major influences from outside cultures." Jazz, being the only form of music to have originated in the US, is Aitken's specialty, and to his chagrin, "is much more popular in the Europe than it is in the US. And it is so stimulating to hear a musician from a different culture giving his contribution to jazz." Dr. Aitken is no stranger to jazz teaching though, as a matter of fact he received the United States top jazz education honor by being awarded the 2007 Jazz Educator of the Year by DownBeat magazine and the seventh inductee into the DownBeat Magazine Jazz Educator Hall of Fame. Prior to that, in January 1995, he was the 32nd individual inducted into the International Association of Jazz Educators' Hall of Fame along with Doc Severinson and Ella Fitzgerald, joining others such as Count Basie, Woody Herman, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington. With a minor in anthropology, Dr. Aitken is an excellent candidate to exploring different cultures, "I try to get as many local recordings from the countries I visit." So, I inquire, "Are you going to watch any concert in the festivals going on in Lebanon?" "No, tonight, I am going to hear jazz at the Bar Louie in Gemmayze."

Posted by Tarek Chemaly at 11:50 PM 

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