



- CPVA Home
- Welcome to CPVA
- About the College
- Community Resources
- Making a Contribution
- Partners in Excellence
- Alumni
- International Connections
- School of Art & Design
- School of Music
- School of Theatre & Dance

Gene Aitken, Emeritus Director of UNC Jazz Studies, Headed To Iraq for Historic Performing Arts Academy



by Michael Luongo

Gene Aitken headed to northern Iraq in July '07 as a member of a 10-day intensive training program for Iraqi musicians, dancer, and actors.

The first-ever Iraqi Performing Arts Academy, organized by Houston-based American Voices with funding from the U.S. State Department, will unite over 350 artists from all parts of Iraq, including the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra. Dr. Aitken along with German jazz-musician/educator Warner Englert will work with the

Iraqi All-Stars Big Band, a band made up of 18 outstanding musicians from throughout the entire country; Jazz Bridges Iraq, a fusion of jazz with Iraqi traditional music and dance; and all interested participants, in an Introduction to Jazz Improvisation. Many thanks to those who have supported the Iraqi Performing Arts Academy with instruments, jazz education materials, and music: The Trumpet Trader, Greeley, CO; University of Northern Colorado Jazz Press, Greeley, CO; Jamey Aebersold, Inc, New Albany, IN and DownBeat Magazine, Elmhurst, IL.

Gene wrote:

Just returned from Iraq and where I had one of the exciting and wonderful experiences of a lifetime. There's something about making a significant difference in the lives of very deserving and wonderful people that makes one think of how very fortunate we are in America and how much more we need to do to help musicians in other countries.

American Voices (and our staff of 10 teachers from Europe, South America, and America) was able to pull off a nearly impossible feat under very unusual and sometimes difficult circumstances. The jazz area had great support from Jamey Aebersold, UNC Jazz Press, DownBeat magazine, and the Trumpet Trader. Many, many thanks.

Although the soldiers and security people with machine guns and assault rifles were everywhere as a fact of daily life, it still took some adjusting. And, there was not a time in Kurdistan in which we felt threatened in any way.

Our jazz students were from Erbil, Sulimaniya, and Ranya, all cities located in the northern part of Kurdistan. Most students had never seen method books, Jamey's materials, or had CDs of any jazz artist. Most of the students learned about jazz from what they were able to see on television. Some very talented musicians.

We took a television crew of three from the US, so there will soon be a documentary of our work. ABC World News joined us for the last few days of our rehearsals and performances. Last night ABC aired a short story which can be viewed at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=3418287>

Thanks, and hope you enjoy the short video clip. Also, attached a picture of the Jazz Bridges All-Star Combo saying 'Thank you, America!'



Best to everyone always,
Gene
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Note: Gene Aitken is the 2007 inductee into the DownBeat Jazz Educator Hall of Fame

Photos of Gene at work <http://www.americanvoices.org/projects/2007/unity/>