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## Legendary jazz educator has a new challenge: Iraq



Dan  
**ENGLAND**  
The Tribune

Gene Aitken had heard all about the fighting in Iraq. He had read the stories. But when American Voices asked if he'd be interested in helping to bring music to the country, he didn't hesitate.

"You didn't know what you were getting into," Aitken said. "But it didn't bother me at all."

That shouldn't surprise anyone who knows Aitken. If you don't know, he's built the University of Northern Colorado's jazz program into one of the most respected in the country and also made the

UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival into the largest of its kind in the country. You can see Aitken on Saturday directing the UNC Jazz All-Stars, an honorary gig he's held since he

retired from UNC a few years ago.



Aitken

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A9: Aitken

# Jazz instructor builds program from ground up

«AITKEN  
From A1

Aitken also helped bring music to part of Asia, especially Thailand and China, as a second career, after initially helping a former student establish a music program at Mahidol University in Bangkok.

When he was there, he also co-founded a youth orchestra and wind ensemble project that continues today.

Plus, Aitken has a talent for being sure of himself without appearing overtly arrogant. He was famous for wearing flashy (sparkly, really) outfits on stage, outfits that few could pull off as well as he does. He started a jazz major at UNC when many saw it as something to do when they weren't learning "real" music in an orchestra. He already had shown he had lots of guts. Traveling to Iraq wasn't any different.

Except Iraq *was* different, of course. When he went over the first time in 2007 with American Voices, which works to bring American music and culture to developing countries, he would have to work at a much different level than he was used to. He had built programs before, but there was always a good foundation, even in Asia, where music is appreciated and taught in schools.

There didn't appear to be any foundation at all in Iraq. There was no music at all, no instruction books or orchestra sheets or jazz charts. American Voices flew the Iraq National Symphony Orchestra and the ballet company up

to rehearsals, but there were other musicians who were beginners at best. They took everyone, from students to kids just leaving their toddler years to 90-year-olds.

"We take people who say they've played guitar, and it turns out they've played it for two weeks," Aitken said. "That's fine. We just match talents with all different levels of ability."

In fact, American Voices and music stores in Greeley, including Mills Music, and UNC now work to ship pallets of music, recordings and instruments to the Middle East and other places such as Nepal. Much of this operation comes directly from a warehouse in Greeley.

The music and instruction is important, Aitken said, and he takes it seriously, but the main goal is to bring people from all factions — the Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and many other cultures and religions — together. That's also why American Voices flew the orchestra and ballet company up. They wanted to mix all those cultures and religions.

"If we can get them to work together, then we're making progress," he said, "and the arts, especially music and dance, is the way to do that."

The first year he was out there, in 2007, they assigned all the players based on their talent level and formed an orchestra, so Shiites and Kurds and everyone else all had to sit next to each other.

"The first day was always tense," Aitken said, "but by the end of the 10 days, they were hugging each other, and there

## « SEE HIM IN ACTION

**Gene Aitken will direct the Jazz Festival All-Stars Big Band on Saturday**, the final night of the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival. That concert, as well as concerts Thursday and Friday, starts at 7:30 p.m. at the Union Colony Civic Center, 70110th Ave., Greeley.

Tickets are \$22-\$35 and are available by calling (800) 315-2787 or online at [www.ucstars.com](http://www.ucstars.com). A limited number of student discount tickets are available.

For more information, go to [www.uncjazzfest.com](http://www.uncjazzfest.com).

were tears when they were saying goodbye. They became and remain best friends."

There have been interesting moments. Last July he was in Erbil, the capitol of Kurdistan, and fighting shifted from Baghdad to Mosul, about two hours from Erbil. He had musicians from Mosul, and if their face appeared on TV while performing, they and their families were in immediate danger. In fact, because of the international coverage of the event, the Mosul musicians did have to skip the performances.

Even during the calmer times, he doesn't publicize the performances at the end of the workshops until the morning of the concert. That way he avoids extremists planning attacks against the

arts, which still aren't accepted in certain factions.

"Even then, though, we pack a 1,500-seat auditorium," Aitken said. "Word-of-mouth is an extremely efficient and effective way to communicate."

"We hear a lot about the extremists in the American media. We don't hear much about what goes on with the other 95 percent of the people."

Aitken's done his share to bring music to other parts of the world, too, including Nepal and conducting the first student jazz big band concert in China in October 2008 for the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. As a result, he was appointed as a visiting professor of music at the conservatory. He thinks he might be the first American to be given such an honor.

But he's looking forward to going back to Iraq in July. He's already getting e-mails on a daily basis from his former students, wondering when he's coming out again, talking about new bands they've formed.

The enthusiasm for music is there. They just needed someone like Aitken to believe in the 95 percent who want to enjoy it.

*Staff writer Dan England's column runs on Tuesday. If you have an idea for a column, call (970) 392-4418 or e-mail [dengland@greeleytribune.com](mailto:dengland@greeleytribune.com).*