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## Alum Notes: Gene Aiken, '65

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### Gene Aiken, '65

It's one of the most important forms of American music, but in the 1950s, when Gene Aitken attended the University of Washington, playing jazz crossed an absolute boundary—it was grounds for expulsion. Aitken found a way around it then, and he continues to use his love of jazz to cross boundaries today.

Over the past few years, Aitken, '65, has become one of the world's leading ambassadors for jazz, bringing the distinctively American music to students and audiences across the globe, most recently in Iraq. Last summer, *DownBeat* magazine honored Aitken with its Jazz Educator of the Year award—widely recognized as the field's top honor.

Aitken has been to Iraq twice under the auspices of American Voices, a nonprofit aimed at uniting cultures through music. In mid-2007, American Voices put on a 10-day festival in Erbil, Iraq that provided free seminars for more than 300 musicians, dancers and actors of a variety of ages and backgrounds. Aitken conducted the American Voices Jazz Bridges Combo and Big Band, and rehearsed the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra brass section in preparation for a tour.

How does he get people from radically different cultures to play together in perfect harmony? More easily than one might think, Aitken says.

"Music is a mutual understanding and a high-level form of non-verbal communication," he explains. "Music has no boundaries—a sure way to open communication."

Aitken returned to Iraq with American Voices in March, this time traveling to several major cities to lead seminars in American jazz and Western piano.

Though he now resides in both Singapore and Thailand, Aitken got his start in music as a child in the Renton School District. There, under what he calls "one of the most active and outstanding programs in the state," Aitken learned to play the trumpet. By his junior year of high school, he was playing steady gigs two nights a week at the Rainbow Ballroom in Bellevue.

During the summers, Aitken attended the UW's summer music program, which made matriculating to the University an easy choice.

Staying at the University, however, proved more complicated. In the buttoned-down 1950s, jazz was widely



Photo by Tan Ngiap Heng.

associated with lifestyles far from the standards of the typical college campus. "Playing jazz music in most institutions of higher education was not allowed," Aitken recalls.

Aitken left the UW to pursue his calling, but maintained contact with a few professors. A few years later they would persuade him to come back and complete his degree, which he did in 1965.

Aitken went on to become the director of the world-renowned jazz studies program at the University of Northern Colorado, a position he held for 26 years. During that time he produced 36 jazz albums and collected numerous awards.

For Aitken, however, the most gratifying award has been seeing the impact of his work throughout the world.

For more information on American Voices, visit [www.americanvoices.org](http://www.americanvoices.org).—*Whitney Biaggi*

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