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Gene Aitken

In April, more than 7,000 music students and jazz fans converged on Greeley, Colo., for the 37th Annual UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival to perform, attend master classes and concerts, and take part in jam sessions. Gene Aitken, the director of jazz studies at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) from 1976–2002, returned to the school, as he does every year, to direct the Jazz Festival All-Stars big band at the educational festival's closing night concert.

Back in Greeley, Aitken, who now calls Singapore his home base, also got a chance to reflect on one of his many accomplishments during his illustrious tenure at the school.

"When I got here, there was a collegiate jazz festival that involved UNC and Colorado State University, with about eight groups from the two schools," said Aitken, the 2007 inductee into the DownBeat Jazz Educator Hall of Fame. "We thought that there should also be a high school component, and did a separate festival for high schools. Initially, we had about 16 instrumental groups and eight vocal groups. We had about 350 groups participating by the time I left, and 120 of these were vocal."

Aitken developed the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival with a vision about its mission, one that reflects the inclusive and generous manner with which he approaches music education. "It's a noncompetitive festival," he said. "We make it completely educational. Competition is not an issue. This is unusual, as most festivals are competitive."

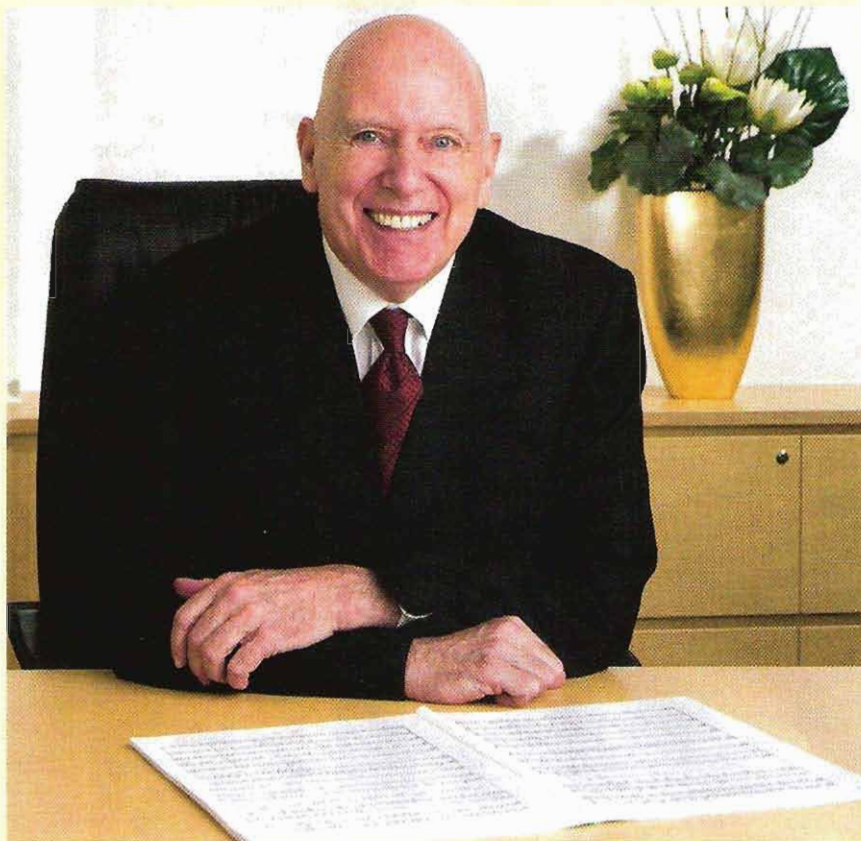
When Aitken came to Greeley in 1976, he took over a small jazz program that had been worked into the school's music curriculum by Buddy Baker. The school did not have a jazz major then, and when Aitken left in 2002, it still did not have a jazz major. Despite this, during Aitken's tenure—and to the present day, under the direction of Dana Landry—the school has been considered one of the premier places in the country to study jazz. Students can get a bachelor's or master's of music with a jazz emphasis, and there is a doctorate of arts with a secondary emphasis on jazz pedagogy.

"We had to teach students a style of music," said Aitken, 69. "I was brought up on the belief that if you learn to play your instrument well, you could learn any style of music. If their fundamental base is good—good chops, technique—I can teach them jazz. The jazz and classical programs worked hand in hand. Students understood that in order to be a great jazz musician, they had to have a classical basis."

One style of jazz that Aitken emphasized was vocal jazz. No vocal jazz program existed when he got to the school. He started a vocal jazz ensemble from scratch, with faculty and students participating. "Once we saw what the results could be, people got excited," Aitken said. "We started to add it to the curriculum. We had four vocal jazz groups going all the time."

Every year, Aitken would produce a recording of a jazz ensemble and a vocal group from the school. In 1986, the vocal group album received a Grammy nomination. "This had never happened before in the Grammys," Aitken said. "They were students. It shows the interest that the students had, and what they were willing to strive for."

Aitken assembled a dedicated faculty to lead these students. He credits the university's willingness to provide a budget for between 15 and 20 teaching assistants every year as a catalyst to create a fertile



learning environment. Also, bringing these TAs to the school had another effect: It turned UNC into a leading training ground for jazz educators. "We found a niche," Aitken said. "Nobody was really training teachers to become music educators at the college level. We focused on that. As a result, we had these great players like Dave Glenn and Michael Cox coming in. We laid a basic foundation for teaching jazz education. The TAs wound up teaching around the world and becoming successes on their own. While they were at UNC, we were able to adapt and change immediately to what the teachers brought to us."

Aitken also placed UNC at the forefront of incorporating technology into music education, using computers, the Internet, digital recording and video in the classroom. Aitken wrote a chapter about music technology and higher education in the 1997 book *Music In The 21st Century* from the National Education Association. In this book he explained: "Since there are no clear paths for integrating technology into the curriculum, the faculty incorporates technology into the classroom by both teaching and using the technology. As our dreams can far outpace the hardware or software we have at our fingertips, we find that with a little creativity and the involvement of our dedicated students and faculty, great things are possible."

When Aitken left UNC in 2002, he moved to Asia, where he became the director of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in Singapore. It was primarily a classical position. He retired from this job in 2006, and now he has the freedom to devote more time to teaching jazz throughout Asia. In May Aitken will do a residency at the Hong Kong International School and then go to Beijing to conduct the Military Band of the People's Liberation Army of China. With this concert band, he will take the best players and form a big band.

"In Asia, there's a real love of American jazz, but there are no teachers," said Aitken, who even in retirement is helping to fill another void in jazz education.

—Jason Koransky