

## Redemption Songs



*Gene Aitken conducting the Iraqi Jazz Bridges Combo*

he'd seen something extraordinary: the unifying power of music. Setting aside their differences, the student musicians were interacting, collaborating, and urging one another on as they played jazz together.

Aitken hoped this magic would work as well in strife-torn Iraq. And indeed, by the second day of rehearsal, the students began to loosen up and intermix. "Everybody forgot what the borders were and began to work together toward a common end," Aitken says.

An inveterate globetrotter with a home in Thailand and an office in Singapore, Aitken has come to believe that countries generally have three kinds of music: their homegrown traditional music, European classical music, and American jazz. Why not mix and match?

"We were able to take a Kurdistan folk song and meld that with the jazz medium and we came up with something that was new—an Iraqi folk tune with a jazz influence," he says.

American Voices was the first program of its kind presented by westerners in this isolated region of northern Iraq. "There were no music books; there were no music recordings. Most of the students' knowledge about music came from television. They still think that Michael Jackson is the king of pop," Aitken says.

While the experience was exhilarating and satisfying for Aitken, it demonstrably struck a chord with his students. Sixteen-year-old Boran M. Aziz, a gifted pianist at the Fine Arts Institute in Erbil, Iraq, described the program as "a life-changing experience. Thanks to this academy . . . musicians in Iraq now are in touch with each other. I have friends in Baghdad and Sulaimaniyah and Dohuk, and I know that

In a region where machine guns and patrolling soldiers are a part of daily life, tension was palpable on the first day of rehearsal last summer at the American Voices' Unity Performing Arts Academy in Iraqi Kurdistan. One of ten international instructors there to teach 300 students jazz, hip-hop dance, theater, and orchestra, Gene Aitken, M.M. '69, Ph.D. '75, wasn't sure what to expect. His forty or so jazz students were a mix of Kurds, Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians—and, reflective of the society from which they came, they huddled around the

classroom in self-segregated pods.

Years earlier, Aitken had witnessed—and learned from—a similar situation. In 2003 he'd cofounded a project that brought together Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and people of other faiths from nine Asian countries to play jazz in Thailand. "An hour flight either way from Bangkok resulted in not only a different language, but a difference in culture, a difference in religion, a different set of values, and a difference in political views," he says. But as he'd worked with those students,

a lot of people in Iraq share my dream. We all have the same passion: music," she says. "If you look at the previous generation of musicians in Erbil, I think they didn't really get their chance. I have a bright look to the future now."

For Mustafa Pishko, a talented guitar player and composer, the workshops opened his eyes to new possibilities. He now teaches jazz at Sulaimaniyah Fine Arts Institute. "Dr. Gene sunk me in the American jazz music ocean and jazz music now moves through my nerves and blood," he says.

"The younger generations of Iraqi people have experienced wars throughout their entire lifetime," says Aitken. "This younger

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generation is saying, 'No, we are the new voices, we do not want war! We do not want to fight, but to live in peace.'"

Pishko echoed his mentor. "For the first time, this project showed that music does not care about ethnic differences," he says. "We showed a beautiful example to Iraq and the world that we as artists have a message of brotherhood and peace." Pishko's hope is that Iraq's often-contentious government officials will one day be able to set their differences aside as the musicians in Erbil did.


Since Aitken's days as a graduate student at the UO, music has been both passion and a career. For twenty-seven years he was director of jazz studies at the University of Northern Colorado, where he and his students produced thirty record albums and received a Grammy nomination. Among his many honors, he was inducted into *Down*

*Beat* magazine's Hall of Fame, named the magazine's 2007 Jazz Educator of the Year, and received the 2003 UO School of Music Distinguished Alumnus Award.

With all that behind him, Aitken could easily rest on his laurels. But though he's retired three times, interesting new projects keep coming up, opportunities so laden with possibility, he just can't resist.

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What motivates and inspires him, he

says, is participating in the positive changes music brings to people—the thrill of seeing "in a child's eyes, or a teacher's expression, the glimmer of excitement when they discover they really have the creative abilities." Aitken knows that in Iraq it is hard to predict what the program will mean for his students over the long run. For some, the change may be personal, with music becoming a bigger and more meaningful part of their lives. Others, such as Pishko and Aziz, may find a vocation in music, and pass on what they have learned to more and more Iraqis. 

—Sharleen Nelson '06



## Prom Dress Queen

Before leaving home to begin studies at the UO, Abby Egland '07 and her mother Sally Egland cleaned out Abby's bedroom closet and found a number of dresses she had worn to high school formals. What a pity they couldn't be worn by other young women for proms and on other Big Nights, they thought. Such was the genesis of Abby's Closet, now a four-year-old nonprofit organization that offers donated dresses and accessories to young women who might otherwise not be able to afford satin and lace. This year, Abby's Closet offered some 3,500 donated dresses at a Portland event that matched girls and gowns, just in time for the prom. 

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