

An Annual Homecoming

By Briana Hovendick
2006 UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival

Every year in the spring, Dr. Gene Aitken returns to the University of Northern Colorado, where he served for 26 years as the Director of the Jazz Studies program, for the festival he helped pioneer. As the conductor of the Jazz Festival All-Stars, Aitken has a special responsibility: to select music that is challenging, interesting and ready to go after only one rehearsal. For the adult and student audience, the selections also have to be new, exciting and on the cutting edge of what is being written today for large jazz ensembles, Aitken said.

Aitken's influence on the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival cannot be understated. During his 26-year tenure as the Director of Jazz Studies, the program received more *Down Beat* magazine awards and more National Endowment for the Arts grants than any other institution of higher education in the country. UNC became the only university in the United States to ever receive a Grammy Award nomination in vocal jazz. In Feb. 1997, Aitken was awarded the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, the state of Colorado's highest artistic honor.

During his tenure, Aitken produced 30 records and compact discs under a contract with Los Angeles-based United Jazz Artists Records. He has authored numerous articles on jazz education and computer technology, and has published several musical compositions through Kendor Music.

Following his retirement in 2002, Aitken moved to Asia and took a position as the director of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore. Prior to accepting that post, he was Advisor to the Dean of the College of Music at Mahidol University in Thailand. He is currently on the Singapore Symphony Orchestra Artistic and Public Relations Committee.

Aitken said his involvement with the Jazz Festival is essential to his work abroad. "Asia is a new frontier for jazz music. Jazz concerts by Dianne Reeves, James Moody, etc. are sold out weeks in advance. But as of this date, there are very few venues in Asia in which to learn jazz. This past December we started large jazz ensembles at Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in Shanghai, with music from UNC Jazz Press. It was absolutely astounding to hear these students play this music...basic jazz concepts were grasped in just a few hours. I have every reason to believe that within a few years, jazz education will be a reality in all of Asia," Aitken said.

With a cadre of world-class musicians that includes faculty from some of the top music programs in the country, Aitken's job as conductor of the All-Stars is rewarding. Sharing music with the audience in an excellent concert hall makes the festival finale special, Aitken said.

"An equally rewarding experience for me is to commission several original compositions each year for the All-Stars. This adds a new dimension in that the musicians are performing new literature by some of the most respected jazz composers/arrangers in the world. At the concert, the audience is hearing many works for the first time," Aitken said.

This year's All-Star lineup includes UNC professors Andrew Dahlke, Robert Murray, Nat Wickham, Dana Landry, Erik Applegate and Jim White; Steve Owen of the University of Oregon; Don Aliquo of Middle Tennessee State University; Dan Gailey of the University of Kansas; John Davis of the University of Colorado; Chuck Dotas of James Madison University; Vern Sielert of the University of Washington; Larry Engstrom of the University of Nevada at Reno; Paul McKee of the University of Missouri at Kansas City and Dave Glenn of Whitman College.

The Jazz Festival All-Stars, under the direction of Gene Aitken, perform at the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival on April 22.