

Jazz Teacher Shares Honor Educator made UNC program one of the best

**Dan England, (Bio) dengland@greeleytribune.com
April 22, 2007**



Aitken

Gene Aitken bounded on stage as he had so many times in the past wearing the same black leather pants, shiny, almost metallic purple shirt and a smile that would delight toothpaste investors.

Aitken, 70, came to the University of Northern Colorado/Greeley Jazz Festival Saturday, an event he made what it is today, to direct a big band of professional artists, clinicians and judges who worked during the three-day weekend at the Union Colony Civic Center. He also came to share a special honor with the 1,100 in the audience.

Though Aitken directed jazz studies at UNC for decades before retiring a few years ago, with a flash and grace that he loved to display at the concerts, he spent the last couple of years with a suit and tie, directing classical musical groups in Asia and living in Singapore. He is taking a second retirement, this time in music administration at the University of Singapore.

A highlight was the SAYOWE project that he co-founded Thailand about three years ago, when he brought together top music students from nine countries to perform.

"That opened my eyes to the different cultures and religions," Aitken said. "The one common denominator was music. It was an amazing thing."

But Saturday he was honored for his jazz education. UNC continues to be one of the top jazz programs in the country, and Aitken was recognized for that Saturday by DownBeat Magazine, jazz's top publication. He will be inducted into the DownBeat Jazz Educator Hall of Fame. Only one receives that honor every year.

"This means he really is a legend in jazz education," said Jason Koransky, editor of DownBeat, in a phone interview. "We take a lot of time with this award, and he absolutely deserves this."

At one time UNC held more DownBeat music education awards than any other school in the country, and in the last two years the university's top big band was named the best in the country. Aitken was also honored for his work in developing music technology and music publishing, Koransky said.

Today, however, Aitken wasn't sticking around to revel in the award. He will be on a flight back overseas. Though his wife, Linda, had spent some early years in Hong Kong and was excited about the move, it took Aitken a year before he felt comfortable. But he fell in love.

The food, he said, is to die for, and a good meal costs 25 cents. He loved how much the government supported education (he wishes the U.S. supported it as much, he said). And the weather was humid, but he adjusted.

"Now when I come here, I freeze," he said with a laugh.

Now some of his students go to UNC, and some UNC graduates are working in Asia. He sees the cultures blending a bit.

But he's known and honored for his work in jazz, and that's where he'll start working again, helping to develop jazz programs all over China, after he conducts the top military band in China for the grand opening of its new concert hall. He wants to plant the seed of jazz everywhere he goes, now that at least one program, the one he retired from at UNC, continues to sprout into one of the country's best.

"There's such a love for jazz in Asia," he said, "but there are no teachers. It was a wonderful learning experience to have what I had in Singapore. It really was something special."

Just like his time at UNC.

For more

The June issue of DownBeat will feature an article on Gene Aitken and his induction into the DownBeat Jazz Education Hall of Fame. Past recipients include Jamey Aebersold, Gary Burton and David Baker.