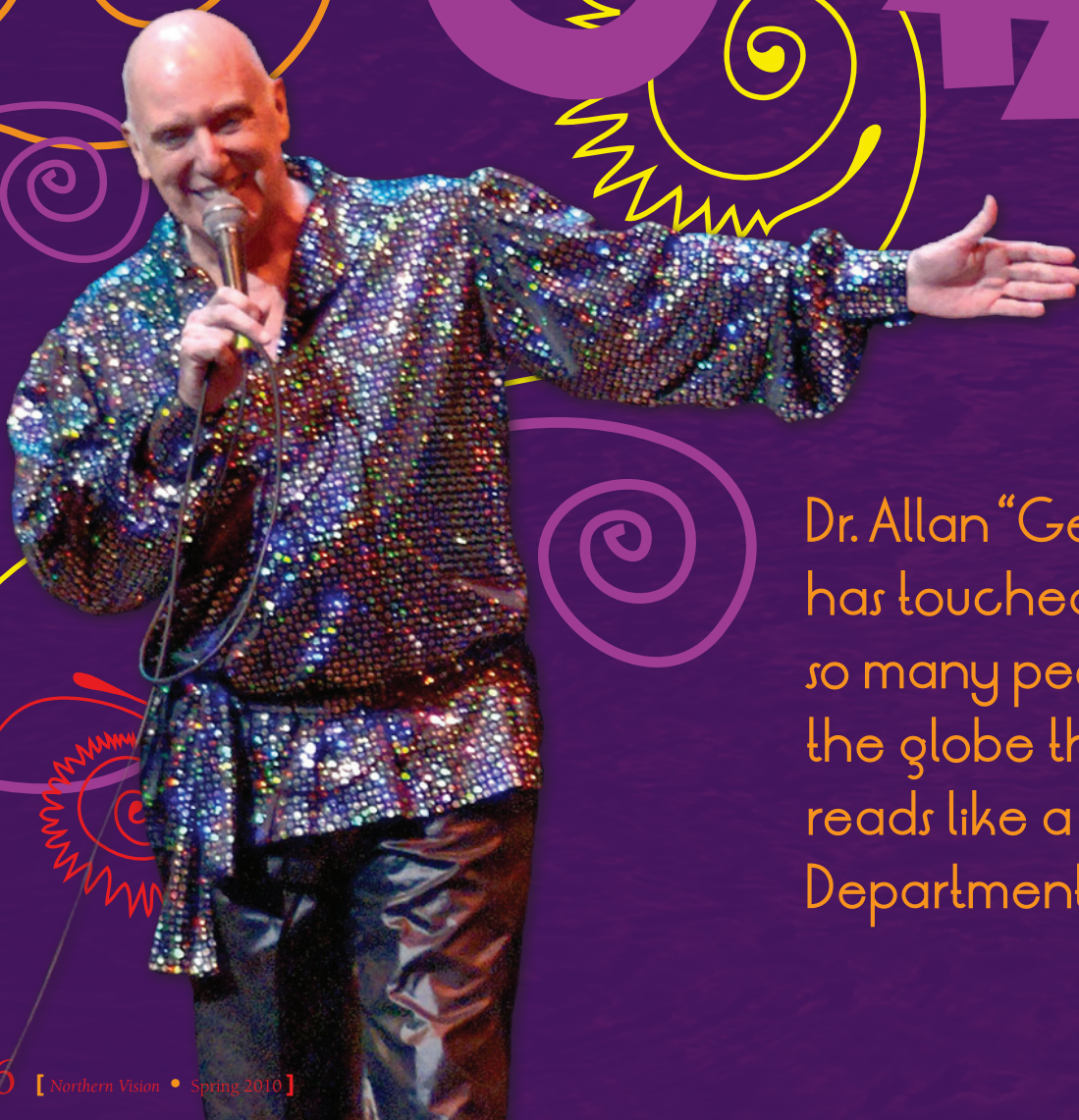


# An Ambassador of

# JOY

by Mary Sasaki



Dr. Allan "Gene" Aitken has touched the lives of so many people around the globe that his resume reads like a U.S. State Department briefing.





Since his retirement from the University of Northern Colorado in 2002, Aitken has enriched the lives of young musicians in places such as Singapore, Bangkok, Beirut, Shanghai, Taipei, Baghdad and Islamabad. But the Northern Colorado emeritus professor of music hasn't forgotten his roots, returning each spring to Greeley to lift his baton for the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival, which celebrated its 40th anniversary, April 22-24.

Asked how his enthusiasm survived nearly four decades of teaching and inspiring young musicians, Aitken says, "Since I was very young, I've had the desire to do the best I can to see things flower and to see things move forward, to provide the best possible environment for students to learn and become better teachers." That desire drove Aitken to become an outstanding Northern Colorado professor and Jazz Studies Program director, and led to his current work with Asian and Middle Eastern students.

Just as he brought students from other schools to Northern Colorado's annual spring festival, he now unites people from Asia and the Middle East through the universal language of music. Working with programs that include the Youth Excellence on Stage Academy, and the Southeast Asian Youth Orchestra and Wind Ensemble, Aitken encourages young people to pool their talents and create a product that's far superior to the sum of its parts. "I've brought together people from many nations," Aitken says. "As they work together, they become a stronger unit."



Performance with the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Jazz Ensemble – Shanghai, China, November 2009.

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Jazz Drummers' Master Class at the  
Afghanistan National Institute of Music –  
Kabul, Afghanistan, June 2009

Woodwind Master Class at the  
Afghanistan National Institute of Music –  
Kabul, Afghanistan, June 2009

4th Annual China International Trumpet  
Convention at Nanchang University –  
Nanchang, China, May 2009

Aitken's international odyssey began in Thailand when Dr. Sugree Charensook, a former Northern Colorado graduate student in saxophone performance, sought Aitken's assistance at Mahidol University in Bangkok. After a trip to a beautiful Thai beach resort to think it over, and after all his requirements for the job were met, Aitken recalls, "I said I'd stay for a year, but I stayed two years."

He then completed a residency at the Singapore American School. "I fell in love with Singapore. Oh, my God, Singapore is beautiful," says Aitken, who maintains Singapore residency, a retirement visa for Thailand and a home in Greeley. He offered to work free for two weeks at the University of Singapore's Conservatory of Music, where he soon became director.

He was hooked. "I thought, maybe we could do the same thing in the Middle East," Aitken says. He traveled to Baghdad and Kurdistan where, he admits, "I forced the issue." He knew that uniting different religious factions and cultural backgrounds—Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, and many other cultures and religions—would be a challenge. "But each group brought a rich, proud heritage. They had no choice but to work for a common goal. After 10 days together, it was all hugs and tears when they left." And, Aitken proudly adds, "They remain the best of friends."

Does Aitken fear for his safety? Hardly. "I feel safer walking the street in the middle of the night in Middle Eastern countries than in some U.S. cities," he says.

The globe-trotting maestro explains his eagerness to return to Greeley for the annual UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival each year. "It's a chance to come back and visit with people at the School of Music, a chance to direct the faculty jazz ensemble (All-Star Big Band) and an opportunity to commission five new works for the Jazz Festival." And, he smiles, "It's a chance to stay in my house in Greeley."

The annual homecoming is also an opportunity for Aitken to thank Greeley residents who support the overseas programs that thrive on his passion. He applauds the generosity of the Greeley community for providing instruments, music and supplies along with corporate and government sponsors.

Ask former students to assess the influence of Gene Aitken, and the superlatives flow. "He was the reason I came to graduate school here," says Director of Jazz Studies Dana Landry, whom Aitken mentored after Landry graduated from Boston's Berklee College of Music. Under Aitken's tutelage, Landry participated in Lab Band I and the Axidentals while earning his master's degree. Aitken made him a teaching assistant and director of Lab Band VI.

Landry describes Aitken as a man of "extremely high standards" and "a visionary" who accurately predicts the future of music education. "He's a great administrator, an extremely dedicated and effective teacher and a hard worker with a lot of energy that energizes the students themselves." Landry says Aitken taught him everything – from running a jazz program to operating a video recorder.

"His impact is so far-reaching," Landry concludes. "He cares deeply about people who were students here. He's helped them with their careers and touched them in so many positive ways." Even after working all over the world and receiving many accolades, including a Grammy Award nomination and the Colorado Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, Landry says "he's still the same person – very grounded."

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Thanks to Aitken's leadership and foresight, Landry says, Northern Colorado bands and vocal jazz groups were regularly invited to perform for the International Association of Jazz Educators, which later inducted Aitken into its prestigious Hall of Fame. Landry credits Aitken for transforming the annual UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival from a local event attracting Colorado schools to an internationally known festival. Also under Aitken's leadership, the UNC Jazz Press gave students and former students the opportunity to be published and became one of the largest jazz publishing companies in the world with more than 3,000 copyrights.

"He helped put this school on the map in many ways," Landry adds. He aggressively encouraged students to enter competitions, and "he was a visionary when it came to technology," working with former School of Music Director Dr. Shirley Howell to obtain a major National Endowment for the Arts grant to build the School of Music's technology wing, which houses what Landry describes as "one of the best university recording studios."

Aitken was indeed a pioneer in computer-assisted education. His fascination with technology began in 1968 while a student at the University of Oregon. "I thought we could help students learn better through computer technology and the computers' ability to recognize tones," Aitken explains. He envisioned desktop computers while working on one "the size of this room."

Aitken's greatest contribution to the university, in his own words, was "providing students with the knowledge and good foundation to go out into the world and be great teachers." He says students would probably describe him as "demanding, enthusiastic, supportive, thinking years ahead, trying to share everything I've learned from my experiences as a teacher and traveler, and believing in their future."

Additional information about Aitken is available on his website, [www.geneaitken.com](http://www.geneaitken.com), which includes links to his publications, presentations, workshops and international projects. **NV**

## 40th Annual UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival

Something old and something new welcomed jazz aficionados to the 40th annual UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival, held April 22-24 at the Union Colony Civic Center and other downtown Greeley venues.

Since 1970, the University of Northern Colorado School of Music has combined the extraordinary talents of prominent jazz artists, clinicians and school jazz groups with students in the university's Jazz Studies Program for its annual spring celebration of jazz, the largest event of its kind in the United States.

The most visible innovation for this year's festival was the fiery new logo and slogan, "40 years and still burnin,'" which greeted fans on the festival website and on publications with a flaming base in vibrant reds and yellows. "We actually set fire to an old base (in a rural setting) and took pictures to create a poster and logo" to create a fresh new look for the festival's historical burning saxophone logo, says Director of Jazz Studies Dana Landry.

Forty years ago the festival was somewhat local, Landry says, featuring groups from several Colorado campuses. Over the past 40 years, the festival has attracted groups from an ever-widening geographical area. This year, more than 275 college, high school and middle school jazz groups from across the United States joined headliners and award-winning clinicians for three days of some of the best jazz sounds heard anywhere.

The festival strolled down memory lane on Thursday, April 22, with a concert by Patti Austin, UNC Jazz Lab Band I and Northern Colorado Voices, highlighted by a tribute to legends Ella Fitzgerald and George Gershwin.

Another nostalgic tribute on Friday, April 23, featured the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra, which performed at the festival in 2007 and "back by popular demand," Landry says. Members of the orchestra have played with Woody Herman and Count Basie, plus many other jazz greats and popular groups over the years. The UNC Vanguard Combo also performed on the Friday concert stage.

Adding to the nostalgia on Saturday, April 24, was a concert featuring a Woody Herman Tribute and Drum Summit. The Saturday concert also introduced new works commissioned for the festival performed by the Jazz Festival All-Star Big Band under the baton of Northern Colorado Emeritus Professor Dr. Gene Aitken, who directed the university's Jazz Studies Program from 1976 until his retirement in 2002. The band featured Northern Colorado faculty members and festival clinicians.

Additional information about the 2010 UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival is available on the festival website, [www.uncjazzfest.com](http://www.uncjazzfest.com). **NV**