

Influential jazz pianist Neil Bridge hits Dazzle stage

By Bret Saunders

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As a pianist, Neil Bridge supported some of the icons of jazz: Mel Torme, Anita O'Day, Sonny Stitt and Johnny Smith all looked to him for some Denver-based inspiration going back more than 50 years. But as successful as his collaborations have been with the headliners, Bridge has left his greatest impact on the hundreds of high school students he guided as a music educator in Denver Public Schools from the '60s to the '80s.

The list of Bridge alumni includes trumpeter Ron Miles, saxophonists Javon Jackson and Nelson Rangell, members of Dotsero and even the Oscar-nominated actor Don Cheadle, who once sang in one of Bridge's ensembles.

Bridge retired from DPS in 1987 but remains active as a performer; maybe even more so than when he was juggling teaching with club gigs. On Wednesday he'll alternate between piano duos with Steven Denny, who is 55 years Bridge's junior (Bridge is 81) and his long-running Neil Bridge 7+ group, which features his wife, Karen, on vocals, at Dazzle.

"When I first moved to Denver (from Boston, where he studied, around 1958) there were three or four piano players in town, and we were all friendly," Bridge says. "But then every place had a piano. Even the crummiest joint had one. But now, how many places even have a piano?"

Bridge sticks mostly to standards in his repertoire and plays fluent, engaging solos. I ask him about pianists who continue to influence him. It turns out that the past masters still speak to him creatively.

"Art Tatum," he fires back. "Bill Evans, too. And Gene Harris; he always seemed to be having a good time." At this point in his career, having a good time on stage seems to be as important as exploring harmony.

We talk about his long-running club collaborations with guitarist Johnny Smith, composer of the '60s instrumental hit "Walk, Don't Run" and a profoundly influential artist who is still in Colorado but no longer plays. Bridge laughs at the memories of the Denver club called Shaner's and says, "His (Smith's) martinis were awesome."

Bridge spends a good deal of time in the world of jazz. When he isn't performing or rehearsing, he's writing arrangements. He tells me that Quincy Jones played some of his charts when he was a student at Boston's Berklee School of Music in the '50s. His clever and subtle arrangements are a big part of his life's work.

"I just finished two new ones," he says. "I do it all by hand. Don't use a computer. I'm not a 21st-century person."

And if he's found peace and joy at this juncture of his life, why should he try to be?

("Keyboard Counterpointe" with Neil Bridge and Steven Denny and the Neil Bridge 7+, 7 p.m. Wednesday, Dazzle Restaurant and Lounge, 930 Lincoln St. Tickets are \$10. Call 303-839-5100.)



Neil Bridge's greatest impact has been on the hundreds of high school students he guided as a music educator in Denver Public Schools from the '60s to the '80s. (Karl Gehring, Denver Post file)