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Denver Jazz Music Examiner

Interview with legendary jazz piano player, Neil Bridge



Denver is home to legendary Jazz piano player, composer, arranger, and bandleader, Neil Bridge. Neil, a New England Conservatory Graduate, taught music in Denver Public Schools for 28 years. In 1978, he formed the first citywide high school jazz combo. This talented combo was recognized by Downbeat magazine as being the best high school jazz combo in the country. Many of his former students went on to have successful careers in the entertainment business, such as actor Don Cheadle, smooth jazz musician Nelson Rangell, saxophonist Javon Jackson, Latin percussionist Gary Sosias, and pianist David Pearl, among many others. In 2008, the Denver School of the Arts dedicated the Neil Bridge Jazz Room to him. His wife, Karen, tells me that while at the ceremony, when it was announced that a room was being dedicated to him, he stood up and said, “I hope it’s not the men’s room!”

Neil was a pianist with the Denver Symphony and has performed with musicians such as Henry Mancini and Rich Little. He has accompanied Mel Tome, Nancy Wilson, Johnny Smith and many others. I had the opportunity to talk to Neil about his passion for music, and all of the extraordinary experiences he has experienced.

At 8 years old, his mother wanted him to play at Carnegie Hall, and she wanted him to play classical music; however, Neil said that he “did not love classical the way I love jazz.” When he was a sophomore in high school, he discovered influential musicians such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie. This time in his life was a turning point for him as a musician. Neil said the reason he loves jazz is because “you never play the same song the same way twice.”

Neil has currently written over 150 musical arrangements for his nine-piece band, Neil Bridge 7+. The band consists of piano, bass, drums, congas, trumpet, saxophone and trombone, as well as a male and female vocalist. His wife of 18 years, Karen Lee, is the lead female vocalist. I asked him about his songwriting process, he tells me “at two or three in the morning, I get an idea.” He will immediately go to his piano. Neil said “I only get about four hours of sleep at a time because of the music going through my head.”

In 2009, the band played to a sold out crowd at Dazzle Restaurant and Lounge for their CD release. The CD, *Yes, I Am Still Here*, can be heard on Jazz 89.3 KUVU. The CD features 12 of Neil's original compositions.

His wife, Karen, tells me that he is the "Clint Eastwood of Denver, because he is always continuing to do new things, constantly creating fresh arrangements, and is very happening right now." At the age of 81, Neil has led a fascinating life, and he remains as dedicated to music as ever. Neil is an inspiration and will always be a part of Denver's musical heritage.

The Neil Bridge 7+ will be performing at Dazzle tomorrow night at 7 p.m. Not only will Dazzle present Neil Bridge 7+, but they will also feature Neil Bridge and Steven Denny as the Keyboard CounterPointe. For ticket information: <http://www.dazzlejazz.com/>

For more information about Neil Bridge 7+: <http://www.neilbridge7.info> and

Be sure and check out their upcoming shows:

The Neil Bridge 7+:

- June 29th - Dazzle Restaurant and Lounge, 7:00 p.m.
- July 2nd - Heritage Square, 4:30 p.m.
- July 16th - The Longmont Jazz Festival, 12:30 p.m.
- July 17th - Lannie's Clocktower Cabaret, 7:30 p.m.
- July 31st - The Little Bear, 5:00 p.m.
- August 7th - Crestone Music Festival, 3:45 p.m.
- August 21st - Nissi's, 7:30 p.m.
- August 27th - Avalon Ballroom, 8:00 p.m.
- September 25th - Mercury Café, 8:00 p.m.

The Neil Bridge Trio with Karen Lee on vocals:

- July 3rd - St. Julien's, 6:30 p.m.
- August 19th - Mercury Café, 7:00 p.m. (Neil's Birthday Celebration)
- September 13th - St. Julien's, 6:30 p.m.