

Pianist Neil Bridge on starting jazz combos programs in Denver Public Schools

By [Jon Solomon](#) Fri., Jul. 15 2011 at 10:12 AM Categories: **INTERVIEWS**

Local jazz veteran Neil Bridge has been a longtime fixture on Denver's jazz scene, both as a performer and as a teacher in the Denver Public Schools, where he also started jazz combo programs. In advance of [his show at Lannie's Clocktower Cabaret this Sunday](#), we spoke with Bridge about teaching jazz at DPS, living in New York during be-bop's heyday in the '50s and playing with jazz heavies like Johnny Smith and Anita O'Day.



Pianist Neil Bridge and wife Karen Lee Bridge

Westword: You started off playing classical, right?

Neil Bridge: When I was eight years old, my mom wanted me to play Carnegie Hall. I did the Chopin and the Beethoven. It's the best for technique. There's nothing that can compare with classical piano. But it wasn't the way I wanted to express myself, because with Chopin, Beethoven and Bach, you have to play the notes that they wrote. If you start improvising, the critics and the audience will boo you.

But then I heard jazz my sophomore year in high school. I come from a small town in Pennsylvania, and we didn't have any jazz in the town at all, but then over the radio -- in fact it was at the swimming pool -- they used to play.... There was a radio station in Redding, and then I heard Duke Ellington. I said, "Wow!" Then I heard Basie, and then I heard Woody Herman. I said, "That's the way I want to play. I want to play jazz."

What was it about Ellington and Basie that you liked?

It intrigued me because they swung like crazy. And the solos. I never play a tune the same way twice. We have a set introduction, an ending and maybe something in the middle. But I never play the same way twice. The way I feel that night, that's the way I want to feel. I couldn't do that with classical music. I have the Horowitz and the Rubenstein and all of that. I love to listen to it, but that's not the way I want to express myself. So then I got into jazz.

What did you do to get into jazz during that sophomore year in high school?

As best I could. Redding was the hippest city next to me, and we went to the music store there, and I just started working on my own. I'd find music and started studying chords, because there was no teacher in my small town. Then I went to New York after that. A couple of friends from my town had moved to New York, and they said, "Neil, if you want to get into jazz, move to New York." I was there in the heyday of 52nd Street. I'd hear Bird in one place. Go next door and hear Basie. A couple doors down, I'd hear Dizzy and his big band. Lester Young, Art Tatum, Bud Powell. Oh my god, that 52nd Street was something.

Then I went into the Air Force for four years. And I was fortunate because the alto sax player was a Bird fan. He wanted to play like Bird. That was his god. So, whenever we'd have time, we'd practice in the afternoon as a quartet and learn tunes.

Did you have any favorite tunes you like playing early on?

Oh yeah. "All the Things You Are," "How High the Moon," Cherokee"... those kind of standard things. I still play them. Bud Powell was my first piano influence. Of course, then I heard Art Tatum after.

You got to see Bud Powell when you were in New York?

One night they were at Birdland, the Bud Powell Trio. He was a big junkie. That's such a shame. But he must have had some good shit that night because he played his ass off. And the next group that followed was the Stan Getz Quartet. I'm sitting there and Stan Getz's piano player is sitting about three or four chairs away from me, and he won't go up on the stand. And Getz is saying, "Come on, man." The pianist said, "I'm not going to follow Bud Powell." And so the guy never played.

I'm sure he'd be a tough act to follow.

The only one could be Art Tatum, or maybe Oscar Peterson. But otherwise...

What was it about Bud's style that you really dug?

Just the way he played through changes. When he was on, god, he was a mother. I mean, he dug in and just played his rear end off. That excited me.

Is he still an influence?

Not anymore. Not as much. I still listen to him. Now it's more Oscar Peterson, Gene Harris -- I love the way Gene Harris plays. He always seems to have a good time. Bill Evans, harmonically especially. And maybe a piano player most people never heard of -- Wynton Kelly. He was with Miles for a while. God, he was a beautiful player. He never became really well known.

I've heard some of the stuff he did with Joe Henderson and Wes Montgomery...

He was a great player. One of the best albums... Wes Montgomery and Wynton Kelly played at a club in Cleveland, I think, and it was a fucking monster. They just played their asses off.

So, how long were you in New York?

Four years. Then I went into the Air Force for four years.

How did you end up out here?

My first wife was from Roswell. I had a chance on the G.I. Bill of going to any college I wanted to. One of the guys in the Air Force band lived in Boston, and he said, "Neil, come to Boston, and I'll help you get work, and you can go to the New England Conservatory." So I did. I could have never afforded a private school. So I spent four years in Boston and got my music education degree and played in Boston six nights a week. But my wife at the time didn't really like Boston. She wanted to move back west. I thought the only city I'd probably find work was in Denver. So I moved here in '58 and I've been here ever since -- sixty-three years. I was with the Denver Public Schools for 25 years.

You were the first to get the jazz programs going in the schools, right?

At that time, we had one of the best music programs in the whole country. I'm not kidding. When I formed the first Denver All-Citywide Jazz Combo, we would go to different places like Mobile, Alabama, Albuquerque -- we played in California and Chicago. And everyone says, "You're from Denver aren't you? You've got one of the best high school music programs in the country."

We did at the time because of the director of music education at that time was John Roberts. He was great. He wouldn't take any bullshit. You know, they always try to cut out the music. As soon as the budget comes in, there goes music and all the arts. Not John. Every high school had a jazz band, but they didn't have combos.

So I went to Dick Culver, who, at that time, was the head of the music department, and said, "We have all these talented kids, but how many gigs when they get out of high school will be with a big band?" And most of these big bands play for free. I said, "Why don't we start a high school jazz combo? That's where we're going to find work." So he went along with it. I went to all the high schools and auditioned the kids and picked out the best of them. And it was usually around eight kids.

We won a Downbeat award for the best high school jazz combo in the country. We won it a couple of years. Nelson Rangell was in it. Steve Watts, who plays with Dotsero, and his bass player Mike Friedman was in it, but he's not with him anymore. Javon Jackson and Don Cheadle, the actor, was singing in one of the bands. And David Pearl, a great piano player in New York now. Gary Sosias, who played congas and timbales. Andy Hudson and Brad Leali, who's teaching somewhere in Texas. Paul Taylor.

The thing about... I don't want to get in trouble with English, math and science teachers, but how many of those teachers, once the kids leave high school, do they do anything with the kids? My kids sometimes call me for a gig. Do you believe that? Gary Sosias, head of Conjunto Colores, he's calling

the old man for a gig. Javon Jackson, when he came into town, he said, "Why don't you sit in with the band, Neil?" That's great. Music has that, and then they want to cut it out.

Did you have any important lessons you tried to instill in the kids?

They've got to listen. When you're in a big band, most of the time you're sitting there reading notes. But for the most part, with these jazz combos you've got to memorize the tunes. And you've got to be able to improvise and make things up. That's the first thing I told the kids.... and they said, "Mr. Bridge, we don't want to learn those funky old tunes." I said, "I don't give a shit."

This was after school, and that's the way I talked to them. I said, "I don't give a shit. You're going to learn 'Cherokee.' You're going to learn 'Stella By Starlight.' You're going to learn 'Billie's Bounce.' Blues, all kinds of blues." And once they got it... Now, every once in a while, I'll hear Nelson Rangell, and he'll play one of these tunes. You know what they wanted to play? The Brecker Brothers' "Funk Skunk."

I said, "Man, that's great, but you go into a new town and you want to get known, and you go to a jam session, I can tell you what they're going to call up: They're going to say, 'See if this little mother can get through the bridge on 'Cherokee,'" because that's a bitch. It changes keys all over. I said, "Do you think Coltrane started off with 'Giant Steps'? No, he played in a rhythm and blues band. You better learn the basics." I taught them how to set a tempo, how to end a tune, how to do fours and eights, all that kind of stuff. There was no text. I just gave them the tune.

How did you go about teaching the kids to improvise?

Well, they had to learn the chords, the scales and the notes that go with it. But most of these kids were so talented, that they knew had to do that. They all had to know that when they auditioned. I gave them the tunes, and they had to play the melody and then improvise. So they had to know the chords and the form of the song.

How long did you teach in DPS?

28 years total. Three out at Sheridan High School, when I first came to Denver, and then I went on the road with Dakota Staton, and that was a trip. I don't want to get into that. Anita O'Day asked me to go on the road with her, but she was such a flake. She didn't have business manager, and she'd get stoned. Then I came back to Denver and taught for 25 years, 1962-87.

I didn't like the road: Sleeping in a Chevy with a bass between us, going from one gig to the next. Now if you're big time and you have your own plane or your own bus, like Willie Nelson -- he has like an indoor moving house -- that's one thing, but not sleeping in the car.

You got a chance to play with some pretty big players over the years, right?

When I was the house pianist at Emerson Street East -- that was right up by East High School and it's now Annie's Café -- I worked there six nights a week. We opened with Johnny Smith, the guitar player, then we had Charlie Ventura, the tenor player, come here for a whole summer. Anita O'Day. Nancy Wilson, when she was first starting. I didn't even know who she was. Sonny Stitt. That was a trip.

How so?

He was very hard to get along with. And he wouldn't rehearse. He'd say, "Neil, you're not playing the right changes." You know, he's played with Bud Powell and all. I said, "Well, let's get together." He didn't want to. So one time I played a tune, and I wasn't sure of the tune. He said, "Neil, you didn't know the changes of that one either." I said, "Fuck you, Sonny." After that, he was cool. I just got tired of it. I said that right on stage! [laughs] And Frank Rosolino, the trombone player, that was a trip.

When was that?

I'd just come off the road with Dakota. It would be in the mid '60s. Then there was Terry Gibbs. It was funny because he was a Jewish guy, and I'm German. Damn, imagine a German and a Jew getting along?

How was the jazz scene in Denver back then?

It was great. At one time there were at least ten to twelve clubs that would maybe just have jazz on weekends. But they were having jazz. The '60s were good. The best time for music in Denver was in the '70s and '80s, when the oil companies were here and the banks. There was one December where I had something like 28 gigs. I'd play a luncheon some days on weekends, then I'd play a cocktail party, and then I'd play a dance or a private party afterwards. Three gigs a day sometimes.

Do you have any favorite albums that you keep coming back to?

Bud Powell's solo album. Bill Evans' Conversations With Myself. Miles Davis Kind of Blue. Almost any Art Tatum. Stan Getz with the Oscar Peterson Trio. Almost any Basie. Duke Ellington. The old Woody Herman with the First Herd. I heard that band, personally. It's the best white band I've ever heard. And Carmen McRae's American Songbook, and Ella In Berlin, where she's scating on "How High the Moon" and "Lady Be Good." Bird With Strings or almost any Bird.

How long did you play with Johnny Smith?

Over thirty years. I started with him in the '60s until the '90s. We'd play at Shaner's. The other night, somebody came up to me and said they used to see the Neil Bridge Trio at Shaner's, and that was in '60s. Thirty-forty years ago, and they still talk about it. On the weekends we'd go out on break for a smoke and people would be waiting around the corner. After midnight, between the Denver Symphony members and guys gigging, you'd see all these musicians come in. It was great. A symphony man would say, "Neil, this is the best music in Denver."

[Neil Bridge 7+, 7:30 p.m., Sunday, July 17, Lannie's Clocktower Cabaret, 1601 Arapahoe Street, \\$12, 303-293-0075.](#)

[Lannie's Clocktower Cabaret](#)

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