

Bridge to the Future

A generation of Denver jazz stars has one thing in common: Neil Bridge.

Michael Roberts Thursday, Jun 20 2002

Mayor Wellington E. Webb's Music Festival at Red Rocks features a couple of big names in the jazz field -- veteran vocalist **Al Jarreau** and fast-fingered guitarist **Stanley Jordan** -- as well as soul/gospel singer **Yolanda Adams**. But those who've closely followed Denver's jazz scene over the years may be most excited to discover that the bill also sports a pair of the city's most talented alums: tenor saxophonist **Javon Jackson** and alto-sax whiz **Brad Leali**.

Since leaving Colorado, Jackson and Leali have made admirable careers for themselves. Jackson spent several years in **Art Blakey's** Jazz Messengers, going solo after Blakey's death; he's released several albums under his own name during the last decade or so, on labels such as **Criss Cross** and **Blue Note**. Leali, meanwhile, led the **Harry Connick Big Band** and was part of the **Count Basie Orchestra** before striking out on his own; his best-known CD is *Priority Soul!*, which the Orchard imprint issued in 2000. Both men are also sought-after sidemen: Jackson recently assisted **Cedar Walton**, **Donald Byrd**, **Freddie Hubbard** and **Richard Davis**;



Mark A. Manger

Leali regularly collaborates with **Cyrus Chestnut** and *Shaft* composer **Isaac Hayes**. Even so, neither Jackson nor Leali has forgotten that many of their formative musical experiences took place in Denver -- among them membership in the Denver Public Schools Career Education Center jazz combo.

They're hardly unique in this respect. Of the notable jazz figures who've emerged from Denver in the past quarter-century, an astonishing number played in the CEC combos of the '70s and '80s, including **Nelson Rangell**, **Ron Miles**, **Paul Taylor** and **Dotsero** members **Michael Friedman** and **Steve Watts**. As a result, these players and more -- even acclaimed actor **Don Cheadle** and mayoral spokesman/jazz lover **Andrew Hudson** -- came under the influence of Neil Bridge, the musician and educator who oversaw the combos during their glory years.

Appropriately, Bridge couldn't be more proud of his onetime charges, closely tracking the achievements of those he assisted in their youth -- like **Grammy-winning** warbler **Dianne Reeves**, who sang a Bridge-arranged version of the jazz chestnut "How High the Moon" during a long-ago concert at **George Washington High School**. But he's also modest about his own contributions, and is careful not to take credit for the success of former students. "I was just a guide," he says. "I presented the material to them, gave them some idea of how to develop it, listened to a lot of music, and that was about it."

Hardly, says Leali, who numbers Bridge among his most influential instructors. "He was like a sergeant in the military. He was a *bad* dude," Leali asserts, laughing. "But I think everybody who went through the program is that much better off. And now that we're older, we realize how much of a benefit it was for us. He's not a soft cat; he was hard on us, let us know what was up, told us the way it was. But he loved us, too, and we learned a lot."

Jackson agrees. "He definitely helped a lot of guys, and he was an inspiration for myself and a lot of other artists. It's nice to have the chance to say something about a guy while he's still here."

Bridge, 72, has no intention of leaving just yet. He retired from full-time teaching in 1987, but he continues to play piano in his band, the Neil Bridge 7+, and other configurations, on a more-than-regular basis. His upcoming schedule is typically busy: In addition to performing at 6 p.m. every Sunday at **Shakespeare's**, 2375 15th Street, he's slated to appear at a free concert on Thursday, June 27, at Park Lane Pavilion in Keystone, and is participating in a July 26-27 fundraiser at **Karen Lee Dance International**, 840 North Speer Boulevard, a studio owned by his wife, **Karen Lee** Bridge. "My calendar's really starting to fill up," Bridge says. "And that's the way I like it."

A Pennsylvania native, Bridge didn't cut his teeth on jazz. "My mother started me on piano lessons when I was eight years old," he notes, "and I did Chopin and **Beethoven**, because my mother wanted me to play **Carnegie Hall**. But my heart wasn't in it, since you couldn't make up your own music. You had to play exactly what was written, and that was hard for me. "Then, when I was in tenth or eleventh grade, I heard **Woody Herman** and **Duke Ellington** and **Count Basie** and **Charlie Parker**," Bridge continues. "And that was it. I had to say, 'Sorry, Mom. I love Chopin, but this is what I want to play.'"

After graduating from high school, Bridge joined the Air Force and played in the service's band while stationed in **Roswell, New Mexico**. Once his four-year stint was over, he attended Boston's New England Conservatory of Music under the auspices of the G.I. Bill before

moving to the Denver area, where he earned a master's degree in music education at the University of Colorado. He subsequently held a string of teaching jobs that supplemented the income he made on musical pursuits. As a pianist with the Denver Symphony, he played alongside personalities as disparate as **Henry Mancini** and **Rich Little**. On top of that, he backed up a seemingly endless list of touring performers: **Mel Tormé**, **Anita O'Day**, **Dakota Stanton**, **Clark Terry**, **Sonny Stitt**, the Mills Brothers, **Red Norvo**, **Nancy Wilson** and many more. "It's hard for me to remember all of them," Bridge says. He has an easier time recalling how he came to instruct so many future luminaries. In the late '70s, he was teaching at the Career Education Center, which traditionally sponsored a student big band. But in his view, participating in such a sprawling ensemble didn't adequately prepare players who wanted to make music for a living. "There weren't that many gigs for big bands at that time. So I said to **Dick Culver**, who was the director of music education for DPS at the time, 'Why don't we set up a high school jazz combo? Because that's where most of the gigs are.' And Dick went along with it fine."

In 1978, Bridge sent letters to all the band directors in the DPS system, asking them for lists of students who might be interested in trying out for the jazz combo. This was followed by a series of auditions at high schools throughout the area, with Bridge eventually selecting only the most promising or gifted instrumentalists. Getting past the selection process wasn't easy. Jackson, who attended Montbello, initially tried out on alto, but finished second to Leali, from **George Washington**. The next year, Jackson was selected after auditioning on tenor -- which has been his primary horn ever since. During the various combos' practice sessions, Bridge emphasized the basics. "When I was first starting, the kids wanted to do all these far-out tunes, like that Brecker Brothers skunk-funk, and I wouldn't do that. I said, 'You guys have to learn standards.' You know: 'Green Dolphin Street,' 'Stella by Starlight,' 'Cherokee,' the good Gershwin tunes. They didn't like that very much. They said, 'We don't want to learn those crummy old standards.' But I told them, 'You wait and see. If you're in a new town and you go to a jam session and they're playing those tunes, I'll say I told you so.' And even now, they'll come back to me and say, 'You were right.'" "He *was* right," Leali maintains. "He really emphasized learning those standards, and that's a big reason why I'm working so much today."

Other lessons included rigorous dedication to practicing and an emphasis on punctuality that, for Leali, was reinforced at the beginning of his combo membership. "It was the very first gig of my life," he points out. "The CEC combo was playing somewhere in downtown Denver, and before the gig, **Melvin Bell**, who was in the band, and my friend Charlie, who wasn't but was always with us, and I decided to get something to eat. We started walking around, and because

there was a lot of construction, we forgot where we were and got lost. If the gig wasn't over by the time we got back, it was almost over, and Neil was *mad*. He had this look where he would just look at you with disgust. That look would say everything that needed to be said." Leali adds, "To this day, I always show up a half-hour or 45 minutes before I need to, just to make sure I'm not late." Messages about responsibility came through clearly to Jackson, as well. "One thing about him from my perspective is that he always brought a very professional approach. And because he was a real musician, and he worked in Denver and throughout the area, when he came in and said, 'This is what the serious guys are doing,' that definitely held weight."

This insistence upon excellence paid dividends. *Down Beat* magazine held annual competitions to determine the best high school jazz combo in the country, and, Bridge says, "we won a couple of times. And we were picked to play this big jazz educators' convention in Chicago. So word started getting around."

Granted, such plaudits couldn't be used as calling cards in the jazz bastions of New York City. But Leali still thinks they made a difference for him. "In New York, cats really don't respect Denver. They think, 'You don't have any jazz in Denver, right?' So you have to prove yourself every time. But when you get up and play, and you do it at a high level, they're like, 'Oh, okay.' So that's why the CEC combo was such a great thing. It helped prepare me for that."

Today, those who Bridge tutored continue to pay him respect, often to a degree that amuses him. "A lot of them still call me 'Mr. Bridge,'" he allows. "I just did something with Ron Miles recently, and he was still calling me 'Mr. Bridge.' I said, 'Ron, you don't have to do that.' And he said, 'Yes, *Ido*.'"

Press secretary Hudson, who plays bass in assorted settings during his free time, feels just as warmly toward Bridge. "What he taught us about things like responsibility don't just apply to music," he says. "They apply to the rest of your life, too."

Maybe so -- but as practiced by Jackson, Leali and their fellow CEC combo graduates, responsibility never sounded so good.