

arts and entertainment

Technology revives piano man Neil Bridge's career

Still busy at 80, jazz veteran grudgingly adapts

By Lynette Zilio

The Denver Post

Sitting behind his Baldwin grand piano, ignoring the world around him, Neil Bridge was finishing the tenor saxophone arrangement for Morgan Lewis' "How High the Moon." He was copying the notes onto music paper with his ballpoint pen, a writing tool he used only after he had completed the original copy in pencil. Every so often he would hum while tickling the black and whites.

"It makes it more human when you hand-write," said Bridge, 80.

The Denver-based musician is the lead arranger, pianist and composer for his nine-piece ensemble, Neil Bridge 7+, a jazz, Latin, swing and funk band. He was preparing for a performance the following day for the Pikes Peak Jazz and Swing Society.

It was his fifth gig that week.



Neil Bridge and his band, the Neil Bridge 7+, at the Little Bear. Their next gig is Aug. 26 at Dazzle. (Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

A few feet away from his piano sat a blue case that held 150 of his original arrangements, including Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing," Jerome Kern's "The Way You Look Tonight" and Consuelo Velázquez's "Besame Mucho." Each songbook was held together by tape.

Bridge is a product of the pre- tech era, a time when all that musicians needed to book gigs was positive word-of-mouth. Today, he faces a world of technology- driven pop music, iTunes and YouTube. Not wanting to fade into obscurity, he is opting to reinvent himself.

"I'm not into computers and all that, but I guess that's the way you have to go nowadays," he said.

The jazzman has been performing professionally since he was 21, but he hit the Denver music scene in 1959, playing piano alongside drummer Derryl Goes. For 30 years, he accompanied jazz guitarist Johnny Smith and played piano in the Denver Broncos band. He later served as the house pianist at the Band Box, a former Denver night club, backing national acts such as Cab Calloway. Fans often saw him sipping a Dewar's on the rocks with a lemon twist, pipe in hand.



Vocalist Chazz Bowles sings with the Neil Bridge 7 at the Little Bear in Evergreen in July. (Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

By night he made music, but by day, he taught.

Taught in Denver schools

For 28 years, the graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music taught music to students at various middle and high schools in Denver.

Knowing full well from personal experience that the chances of high school students landing a job playing in a professional band after graduation were slim, he formed the first citywide high school jazz combo in 1978. The audition-based combo was later recognized by Downbeat magazine as being the best high school jazz combo in the country.

The early morning program took place weekly at the Career Education Center.

Former student David Pearl still remembers how Bridge, tired from a gig the night before, would often come in late and sneak in the back door.

"He would have to sit for a few minutes to get his head together," he reminisced. "He wasn't the nurturing type, but he knew what the jazz style was and was quick to point out when what we were doing wasn't in the jazz style." Pearl, now a pianist and arranger in New York, and many of his Denver peers, including smooth-jazz musician and composer Nelson Rangell, actor Don Cheadle and tenor saxophonist Javon Jackson, have gone on to have careers in the entertainment business.

Gary Sosias, a former CEC student, went on to form a salsa band, Conjunto Colores, in which Bridge guested as a pianist on and off for 10 years. Sosias also played in Bridge's quintet every once in a while.

"We called him 'El Puente Grande' (the Big Bridge)," he said. "He's not a true Latin piano player, but he definitely knew how to make his style and Latin work."

Although he was by no means rich from his work at the CEC, looking back, Bridge considers it to be one of the most rewarding experiences of his life.

"How many English teachers have anything to do with their students after graduation?" he asked. "Music is one of the few subjects in which teachers have a relationship with their students after they graduate."

After Bridge retired in 1987, gigs at local clubs became less frequent.



Bridge credits his wife, Karen Lee Bridge, with keeping him involved in playing. (Karl Gehring)

"In his prime, he was it," said his wife, Karen Lee Bridge, 54, who's also the lead female vocalist for his band. "But all of a sudden you step into your senior years, and a young jazz singer comes along, and they're the main act."

But Bridge never stopped performing. His wife made sure that he was always playing. In fact, Bridge says he likes to divide his musical career into two halves, "B.K." and "A.K.," before and after his wife of 17 years came along.

With her help, he concentrated on playing private parties and performing with his five-piece band at her former downtown Denver dance studio, Karen Lee Dance International. He did so until he felt the call to do something more.

"He started hearing these charts that were for a bigger band," his wife said.

And that was the beginning of the Neil Bridge 7+. The band features three horns — a saxophone, trumpet and trombone — a piano, bass, drums, congas and a male and female vocalist.

CD spurred rejuvenation

But without an album to showcase their work, the idea of performing could never become a reality for the band.

"We'd try to get gigs, and people would ask for his CD," said his wife. "They'd say, 'We don't care if he's a legendary piano player. How do we know what he sounds like?' "

After battling financial obstacles, the band put out a CD in March 2009. Titled "Yes, I Am Still Here," it features 12 of Bridge's original arrangements. The band performed for a sold-out crowd at Dazzle the night of its CD release party.

Since getting more up to speed with the world of technology, Bridge has had a much easier time booking gigs. This summer alone, the band has been booked by Nissi's in Lafayette, the Little Bear in Evergreen, Dazzle in Denver and Gabriel's Restaurant in Sedalia.

He and his band remain current by playing tunes that his audience will recognize, including Carlos Santana's "Smooth" and Tito Puente's "Oye Como Va," also made popular by Santana.

"He knows what he wants and knows how to get it," said the band's bass player, 22-year-old Dave Weinand. "I want to still be gigging when I'm 80."

Despite his 60-plus years in the music business, Bridge remains just as determined and animated as he was when he was 21.

"I hope to keep going until I'm cremated," he said.

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