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Neil Bridge and wife Karen Lee. / **MaryLynn Gillaspie Photography**

Jazz Pianist Neil Bridge Celebrates His Ninetieth Birthday

JON SOLOMON | AUGUST 20, 2019 | 5:55AM

Stacks of blue folders sit on **Neil Bridge's** baby grand piano and a nearby table in his condo in the Cook Park neighborhood. Each folder is stuffed with handwritten sheet music of his arrangements for members of the three groups he heads up. On the inside cover is a quote from Beethoven: "To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable."

The quote is also Bridge's motto, words he's been living by for the eight-plus decades he's been playing piano. A longtime fixture on Denver's jazz scene, **Bridge will celebrate his ninetieth birthday with a four-hour concert at Dazzle on Saturday, August 24**, with his bands. The evening will include sets from his trio, his band Quintessence, and Neil Bridge 7+, both of which include singer Karen Lee, Bridge's wife of 27 years.

Bridge, who moved to Denver in 1958 from Boston, where he got a bachelor's degree in music education from the New England Conservatory of Music, spent nearly three decades teaching jazz in the Denver Public Schools. In 1978, he created and directed Denver's first-ever citywide high school jazz combo. Not long after, *DownBeat* magazine presented Bridge and one of his combos with an award for Best High School Combo in the United States. Ron Miles, Javon Jackson, Nelson Rangell and actor Don Cheadle were just a few of the musicians mentored by Bridge from the '60s through the late '80s in DPS.

Bridge remembers some of his students not wanting to learn jazz standards but wanting to play some of the jazz-funk fusion of the day, like the 1975 Brecker Brothers song "Some Skunk Funk." Bridge would tell them, "You think Bird started playing 'Donna Lee'? You think Coltrane started playing 'Giant Steps'? No, they were into old-type swings. Jay McShann – that's where Bird got started. Monk played in a church when he started. You'd better learn 'Cherokee' and 'All the Things You Are.'"

There were times during his stint with DPS when Bridge would pull double duty, performing six nights a week while having to teach a class at 7:30 the next morning. During the '60s and '70s, he'd perform at places like the Bandbox, where he was the house pianist who backed jazz greats like Johnny Smith, Anita O'Day, Charlie Ventura, June Christy and Frank Rosolino, sometimes playing until midnight and then having to get up at 6 a.m.

“I’d come in dragging my ass, and the kids would say, ‘Oh, Mr. Bridge had a gig last night,’” Bridge says with a laugh.

Bridge retired from DPS in 1987, and five years later, he met Karen Lee, who was running her own dance studio at the time. Shortly after they met, they discovered they were both from Pennsylvania – Lee from Scranton and Bridge from Kutztown.

“He starts telling me that as a teenager, he would hitchhike to these gigs,” Lee says. While still in high school in the ’40s, Bridge, who had been lured to jazz by hearing legends like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Woody Herman and Stan Kenton, hitched many a ride up and down the East Coast to play gigs at ballrooms, and it turned out that Lee’s grandfather, who started promoting shows in the ’20s with Guy Lombardo, was booking a lot of those gigs.



Neil Bridge celebrates his ninetieth birthday at Dazzle on Saturday, August 24. / **John Akai**

Not long after graduating from high school, Bridge moved to New York City in the late '40s and early '50s, when bebop was in full swing.

“Boy, that was something,” Bridge says of the city’s famed 52nd Street. “Within three or four blocks, you’d hear Art Tatum, [and] a few doors down, it would be Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. Later, it would be Lester Young and Dizzy Gillespie Big Band. Then some Dixieland on the other side. Just walking within these three blocks or so.”

Nearly six decades after seeing some of his favorite jazz players perform in New York and honing his chops, Bridge is gearing up to record a new album, **which is being paid for through GoFundMe** and an anonymous donor who will match each dollar up to \$5,000. Bridge is considering releasing an album of a dozen tracks, including three songs with his trio, which has been together for thirty years; three songs with Quintessence; and six tracks with his big band, Neil Bridge 7+, with Lee on vocals.

Bridge has written new songs and arrangements for both the album and his ninetieth-birthday concert. Lee says he has music going in his head most of the time, and he writes everything by hand – scores, parts and arrangements. Bridge doesn’t know exactly how many pieces of music he has, but guesses there are a few thousand of them.

“But I’m glad,” he says of songwriting and arranging as he heads into his ninth decade. “A lot of people unfortunately don’t have this, and they become couch potatoes, sit around watch TV. That would drive me crazy.”

Bridge uses some of his classical training to arrange tunes, which helps him get inside the music. A friend recently told him that he's playing with more depth than ever.

“I said, ‘I think it’s because I’m doing the arranging now,’” Bridge says. “I get more into the song. I’m not just looking at a bunch of changes and a melody.”

Lee says Bridge cuddles every note. “It’s as though every note had love in it,” she says. “He's finding the truth in every note.”

*Neil Bridge Ninetieth Birthday Celebration takes place at 6 p.m. Saturday, August 24, at **Dazzle**, 1512 Curtis Street, Tickets are \$20 and can be purchased at **Dazzle's website**.*

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