

eNEWS

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MUSICIANS' ASSOCIATION
OF OTTAWA-GATINEAU
INCLUDING SUDBURY AND HUNTSVILLE

LOCAL 180

General Meeting

Monday
March 9th
7:30 pm

280 Metcalfe St
5th floor



LIVE MUSIC WORKS

musiciansassociation180.org
MARCH 2015 VOL. 91



Dave Hildinger

A great musician, teacher, mentor and friend

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By Mark Ferguson,
edited by Ron Ferguson



"Quarta" playing the Ottawa Jazz festival (Left to Right: Dave Hildinger, John Geggie, Steve Fisk, Ian Mackie)

We all remember a teacher who made a difference in our lives. For me, and many other musicians in Ottawa, that teacher is Dave Hildinger. So, when I had the opportunity to write an article about him, I was delighted. With the help of my brother Ron, we gathered memories and put together a bit of Dave's story.

We sent email requests to some of the musicians who know Dave, and as a testament to their respect and affection for him, they responded quickly and eloquently to express their appreciation for the man. There isn't enough room in this article to include all the tributes and wonderful stories that poured in, but we've included some of them to show how important and loved Dave Hildinger is in Ottawa's music community. Dave Hildinger has graced us with his extraordinary musicianship, his teaching, his mentoring, and his friendship.

Dave's history

We contacted Dave's children to learn a bit about Dave's history, and this is what they told us. Dave Hildinger was born in 1928 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His parents owned a funeral home, which was in a three-story building. The funeral home was on the first floor, the family lived on the second floor, and the third floor was rented out. Dave had his first exposure to jazz, listening to the three jazz musicians who lived on the third floor.

The Hildinger funeral home had a grand piano, where Dave did his practicing. There was usually a deceased person on display in a coffin beside the piano, so Dave learned to deal with a tough audience at a young age.

At the age of 14 or 15, Dave started gigging in bars by lying about his age. In nearby Detroit, he gained a lot of

education by visiting bars where he saw Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, and others.

Dave received his Masters in Music Performance in 1951 from the University of Michigan, and that year he left to serve in Korea. His bad eyesight kept him out of action, but he spent the next two years playing for the troops.

When he returned from Korea, he moved to New York City, where he studied at the Manhattan School of Music and worked part time for the Radio City Orchestra. He played and recorded with the legendary Sauter-Finegan Orchestra, and also performed with the Baltimore, Cleveland, Kansas City, and Toledo symphony orchestras.

Because of his work with the Radio City Orchestra, Dave was hired to play with a radio band that was being formed in Baden-Baden, Germany. In 1957 he moved to Germany where he lived until 1970. He became well known in Europe as a composer, arranger, and pianist for TV, radio, records, films, and concerts. In 1967 he became the conductor of the RIAS-Berlin Radio Orchestra. On a trip back to the US in 1960, he proposed to Nancy, the love of his life. They were married and Nancy joined Dave in Germany.

When Dave and Nancy decided that they wanted to return to North America, Dave was offered work in LA, New York, and Ottawa. Because they wanted to raise their children in a small city, they chose Ottawa.

For the first two years in Ottawa, Dave worked as a music teacher at

Woodroffe High School. In 1972 he was offered a job at the University of Ottawa—that's where I met Dave. I was a student of his in the 1970s and 80s and eventually had the privilege of working with him on many professional gigs.

But Dave influenced me even before I started music school. When I was in my late teens, a big part of the Ottawa music scene was the trio of Dave, Roddy Elias, and Scott Alexander. I went to hear them whenever I could. I didn't have a full understanding of what was going on in the music, but I knew that I liked it and wanted to learn the musical language that Dave was speaking. As Dave played beautiful melodic and harmonic ideas, there was never any expression in his face or his body. There wasn't a trace of showmanship—he was all about the music.

Dave the musician

Everyone who responded to our email expressed an appreciation for Dave's musicianship. Dave Arthur wrote about how "a bunch of us would meet at a bar down in the Market called Holden's on Sunday afternoons to hear Dave and Hughie O'Connor play. We were stunned at the proficiency of these two fellows — and the biggest thing was that our teacher played piano like a god."

Rene Lavoie was in New York in 1987 studying with Joe Allard and Eddie Daniels. Rene says "Dave contacted me to let me know that he was going to be playing in New York city with the legendary Sauter-Finegan band. The concert, to be held at the Town Hall,

was a reunion of the remaining musicians and top jazz players in New York. Dave invited me as a guest to attend the rehearsal and concert. When I got to the rehearsal, I was stunned by the musicians present. Jim Hall was on guitar, Terry Clark on drums, Wayne André on trombone, Harvey Phillips on tuba. The sax section included all four members of the New York sax quartet headed by Wally Cane and Don Ashworth, the tenor player from the Tonight Show band. The trumpets included John Faddis and Lou Solof. The band rehearsed all afternoon with no complaints from anyone, and then they played the complete program that night. I had never heard the band before. It was a life-changing experience. Dave played piano and was absolutely beaming at the end of the gig. This was the last gig of this incredible band. I was privileged to be there."

Robin Moir wrote about how impressed she was by Dave's skill as an accompanist. She said, "Dave is the finest accompanist I've ever worked with. He listens intently and anticipates where the singer is going. I loved working with him. His work ethic was incredible, and he loved rehearsing, always making sure that everyone felt confident. What was always so wonderful was that no matter how many times a song had been rehearsed and performed, each time there were subtle differences. He made allowances when I changed up and went someplace new, and he felt free to do the same."

Ian Mackie wrote about the experience of playing in a quartet with Dave. "I was in awe of Dave at the time and



Dave in the U of O Gamelan



Dave Arthur and Dave Hildinger

felt a little out of my league, but Dave is such an affable easy-going person that he always made me feel comfortable. I was aware and a little self-conscious then that I had very limited jazz knowledge and experience and that he was "the real deal." He had great stories of living in the back of a drafty old theatre in New York and playing with some real jazz legends. It was without a doubt an honour to play with him. As soulful as Dave's feel is, he also has a beautifully cerebral approach to music. He was always deeply curious about the complexities of harmonic language and new forms. Every time I saw him, he was talking about some personal project he was working on whether it was analysis, revisiting works from the common practice period, or improving his keyboard technique."

Dave the teacher

Dave Hildinger is now retired from teaching, but his influence continues. It is passed on by his students who are now teaching others.

One of the things that impressed me about Dave as a teacher was the interest that he had in his students. For example, when I brought an original composition to Dave's ensemble, we read through the tune, and the next week Dave had it memorized and didn't require a chart. I was greatly encouraged by his interest in my work and the respect that he showed to me by putting time into learning my tune. And now that I'm a teacher, I try to apply the lessons in teaching that I learned from Dave.

Garry Elliott wrote that, *"Dave has been a tremendous inspiration as a teacher, mentor, player and friend. When I was a student at Ottawa U, Dave taught me so much about music. He really had the music bug and passed it on to so many of us. He had a child-like enthusiasm that really resonated with me. He helped me establish the confidence to make a living as a musician. I owe a lot to this wonderful man."*

Dave Arthur wrote that *"Dave Hildinger was a no-nonsense professor who demanded one's best efforts while in his class. It became clear that he not only talked the talk, but he most certainly walked the walk. We would attend his classes and do all of the school type studies. He got his points across well—his pre-prof life made for many references, examples, proof, and anecdotes. Admittedly, us*

young things were a bit afraid of him, mostly because he suffered fools and slackers poorly and would let one know that he felt that way if one was exercising said slackery."

John Geggie wrote that Dave Hildinger was more than his teacher—Dave was his mentor. *"He started a jazz improv course and so many of us signed up— it was amazing. Roddy Ellias helped, and I got to know him well that way. Later on, I ended up working with Dave on gigs, and it was a big deal for me to get asked by either Dave or Roddy to play with them. I remember rehearsing at Dave's house in Old Ottawa South. Nancy seemed to keep the Hildinger household on an even keel. I learned so many tunes thanks to Dave, and I learned how to learn tunes. He was one of the first people to show me how jazz tunes or standards were based on formulae. At U of O, I was in the jazz ensemble. Dave did almost all the arrangements, writing for whoever was in the band—maybe alto, tenor, baritone sax, French horn, three trumpets, two or three bones, rhythm section, and percussion. And then the next year, it might be different.*

Dave influenced me in terms of how to improvise and how to organize thoughts. I learned about musicians and the jazz tradition. He loved Bill Evans, Miles, Airto, Hermeto Pascoal, Art Farmer, and the list goes on .He turned me on to lots of jazz musicians who were completely new to me. I still have handouts from the courses he taught—commercial arranging, orchestration, and jazz improvisation. His approach was practical and useful. He mentored and helped me in so many ways."

Dave the friend

Musicians who responded to our emails talked about the importance of Dave's friendship. Dave Arthur wrote that *"during my first year at Ottawa U, my dad passed away. Dave took me under his wing for the next few years, putting up with my youthful silliness while taking the time to set me straight on a few life-important things along the way. It was occasionally a "tough love" chastising type of deal, but there was also a lot of encouragement, many pearls of wisdom, and laughter."*

Roddy Ellias talks fondly about a bicycle trip that he and Dave took. *"We decided to take a bike trip together to Kingston but to take our time (a week to get there!)*

through the back roads. The idea was to ride in the morning, stop at a small town for lunch, hang out there the rest of the day, and then head off the next day to a new town. One of the special things about our duo was that we were, and still are, good friends. Somehow, the music is better that way—there's more connection. Anyway, on the first morning, we had planned to meet at a specific time at the corner of Fallowfield Road and some other cross road. As it happened, I managed to be about an hour late. (Did I mention that Dave is very organized and always on time and that I'm not?) When I arrived, Dave didn't even look at me, he put on his helmet, looked in the direction we were heading and proceeded to cycle. We stopped about three hours later in our first happy town for lunch and a well-deserved beverage. I can't remember when exactly it was but Dave did eventually start speaking to me again."

Roddy goes on to say that, *"Dave is a mentor, colleague, and a good friend. Because of him I went back to school at age 30 to pursue studies in classical music at U of O. His theory courses were inspiring, and he introduced me to the wonderful music of Steven Gellman, who was teaching composition. Dave and I played together in a duo for about ten years. We played original music and often got together just to play and improvise freely. This helped us connect on many levels. Dave played on my first recording in 1979, with Scott Alexander, Kevan MacKenzie, Hugh Marsh, Robin Moir and Joe Turner. I was a regular fixture at Dave and Nancy's house for supper in those days. It was a very happy and musical time."*

Dave's wife, Nancy, passed away in 2012, and he misses her greatly. His daughters, Jean and Nina, told me that Dave is well looked after in the retirement community where he lives. He has access to two pianos, one of which is right next to his room. Much to the delight of the other residents, he still plays most days for an hour or so. Roddy wrote that, *"Rene Lavoie and I recently went to the home where Dave's daughters and Colin Mack organized a night of music. At 86 Dave still has that magic touch on the piano."*