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“Stephen Owen, Jazz Musician”  
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## **Stephen Owen: Jazz Musician**

Stephen Owen, of the University of Colorado’s Jazz Department, finds his music in the area between improvisation and composition, freedom and structure.

When I phoned the University of Northern Colorado to set up this interview with musician and NEA grant recipient Stephen Owen, a voice on the other end answered, “Jazz Department.” I had to smile, as if I’d called for Biology and gotten the School of Sex instead. How could one build a department around an art form characterized by the risky, intuitive process of improvisation? More to the point, how does a talented jazz player and composer end up in such a department? I’d always enjoyed jazz, but imagined that years of soul-honing nights in smoky bars were prerequisites for the serious practitioner. In talking with Stephen a few weeks later, though, I discovered (among other things) that my notions about jazz and “the jazz scene” derive mostly from movies — and “B” movies at that.

Stephen and I met one evening in the music building on the Greeley campus. His office is one desk among four other desks in a garden-level room painted some neutral, institutional color

and crowded with bookcases, stacks of sheet music, and the litter of paperwork all bureaucracies seem to feed on. I asked what a guy like him was doing in a place like this.

“I came to Greeley from Fort Collins,” he said. “I’d been playing in a jazz fusion band called *Kinesis* since 1980, but in 1982 the group broke up. I took a hard look at my situation and realized I’d never make a living as a performer, so I got into this Masters Degree program in music theory, which involves composition in the classical idiom.”

It was Stephen’s second move into the academic side of jazz. Born in Cincinnati in 1956, he studied the clarinet and played it until 8<sup>th</sup> grade, when he quit music in favor of football. But a few years later the jazz bug bit him.

“There was a high school jazz band that needed a sax player,” he explained. “I didn’t play sax, but I thought it might be fun to learn. The band played Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller . . . stuff like that. So I started playing sax and listening to a lot of good records. But I didn’t get serious about the music until I’d spent a pretty terrible year in architecture.

Stephen ended up in the jazz program at North Texas State University in Denton, Texas. There were lots of good players and a pervasive interest in contemporary big band jazz. The program — which involved performing, arranging and composing — gave him the chance to play around with other people’s tunes and to create a few of his own. It also led, by and unforeseen route, to his involvement with *Kinesis*.

I’d gotten a job in the Disneyland band,” he said with a grin. “We played very commercial stuff — clean cut and all American. But it got me to Los Angeles, and that’s where I

met the *Kinesis* drummer. The band was finally pulled together in Fort Collins, so I quit Disneyland and came back to Colorado.”

Stephen played alto and soprano sax in the band, as well as a bit of flute, and he composed a number of songs for the group.

“It was great experience,” he said. “We played a lot of dates in Colorado, but we also played colleges all over the country. A sound-man and eight musicians packed in a van, doing the road thing. We hit jazz festivals in Toronto, L.A. and a few other places, and we played the World’s Fair in Tennessee. We also recorded two albums, one of which was actually released before the label went bankrupt.”

Listening to three of Stephen’s *Kinesis* compositions, I was struck by their verve and fluidity, their complicated playfulness. He explained that *Kinesis* was appealing to the same kind of audience as *Spirogyra*, but these compositions have a less glossy feel. He always seems on the lookout for subtle, even curious, musical twists.

“I tend to write one of two ways,” he told me. “Sometimes I write melodies that serve as vehicles for improvisers. That, along with pure improvisation, is the traditional approach to jazz. But there’s a trend away from that idea, and I guess I’m part of it. Because sometimes I have fun exerting a tighter control over the composition, so the improvising occurs within the confines of the overall design.”

It’s in his role as jazz composer that Stephen Owen was recently awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant to study composition at the Eastman School of Music in

Rochester, New York. The program, directed by Ray Wright, focuses on writing for a special brand of performing organization called the studio orchestra.

“A studio orchestra is simply a kind of jazz band with orchestral personnel,” Stephen said. “It’s what you’ll hear on TV or behind a film. You not only have the classical instruments, but you have a full jazz rhythm section, plus all the electronic instruments.

These orchestras aren’t a new idea to film studios, of course, but the unique compositional approaches they require are new to most educational institutions — which is why Stephen needs to study in New York. At Eastman, he hopes to refine his commercial jazz skills and develop the kind of expertise that could lead him into film scoring.

“For me,” he explained, “film composers like Jerry Goldsmith and Lalo Schifrin are the Beethovens and Mozarts of our era. They’re the innovators. Not that people in academia aren’t doing it, too — but the others are just as viable.”

His concern for innovation, more than the remote possibility of a career in film, is what’s driving Stephen’s exploration of studio orchestra composition.

“As a performing organization,” he told me, “it lends itself to just about anything. I feel like I’ll be able to draw from any idiom — mix my favorite classical composers with the rock-&-roll styles I hear on the street corner. That’s why I’m going to have so much fun.”

There’s a broad range of artists Stephen feels close to musically, but his “influences” are firmly 20<sup>th</sup> century: Aaron Copland, John Coltrane, Herbie Hancock, Igor Stravinsky, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. He resists the tendency to ignore certain kinds of music because it doesn’t fit some preconceived notion of seriousness or quality.

“The best composers learn from everything,” he argued. “The best players do, too.”

The crossover between Stephen’s writing life and his performing life is extensive. At the moment, he does a lot of “casuals,” where he plays standards and top- 40 tunes. He’s also been working with two “straight-up” rhythm and blues groups, *The Chris Daniels Band* and *Gris Gris*.

“The R & B bands are a lot of fun,” he said. “The best part is I get to improvise, which is what I really enjoy. Improvising is like a game of chess. You concentrate like mad to get through it, then you either love what you did or you hate it.”

While Stephen loves the improvisational tradition in which jazz is rooted, he thinks improvisation itself is misunderstood, and perhaps even misrepresented by its most honored practitioners.

“There’s a funny way some improvisers have of talking about what they do.” He told me. “They’ll say, ‘It’s all from within.’ But somewhere in their lifetime they’ve spent hours and hours in a practice room getting certain sounds in their ears so they’ll know what they’re going to do when the tune opens up. The ear gets developed to the point that you can hear a musical idea coming in time to execute it. I think that’s what you work for as an improviser.”

Stephen’s taste for improvisational performance sometimes conflicts with the desire for tighter control that draws him to composition.

“I have to admit,” he said, “if I was a great player I might get away from writing. But I’m smart enough to know I’m a good player, not a great one. And one reason for that is I like writing too much.”

On the other hand, Stephen feels that he plays better because he writes, and vice versa: the two feed each other. Musical ideas occur during improvisation that he later finds himself working out on paper, and the exhilaration of immediate audience reaction to his music helps carry him through the periods of laborious and solitary composition.

“For the first half of a composition,” he explained, “I have a ball. It’s all imagining. And the end is wonderful. But the middle part is painstaking. It’s a matter of your theme sitting in the middle of the table, and you spend hours and hours walking around it and seeing if you can view it a little differently. I hope by the time I’m fifty or sixty I’ll be comfortable enough manipulating the material that my middles won’t be so difficult.

Stephen’s difficulties probably don’t spring from an excessive assertion of control (though he admits that he could redo his pieces over and over until he thought they were perfect) as much as they spring from his fondness for complexity and newness, his delight in well-timed surprises.

“I love Aaron Copland’s music because of the interplay between the simple and the complex,” he said, clearly describing one of his own ambitions. “Beautiful to nasty and back again. The nasty part’s what I’m struggling with right now in my own work, and it’s leading me into dissonance techniques like twelve tone composition. I may not be able to make it work of course, but it’s good practice if nothing else.”

Skill and imagination are healthy attributes for any young artist, but chances are they’ll be somewhat wasted if they’re not matched by a certain professionalism — that sense of the

audience that any artist needs to survive. The trick is to understand the limits professionalism can place on art.

“When you write for an audience,” Stephen told me, “you tend to throw in a little flash just to get their attention. In *Kinesis*, we had a trumpet player who could hit really high notes — so I’d throw those in. They were the hook. The shock factor weights heavily when you write for an audience. The problem, of course, is that whenever you do anything professionally, you do it differently. I know, as a writer and a player, there are certain things I do — certain jobs I play, certain pieces I write — that I do for someone else, or for money. But there are certain ideas you always keep in your back pocket, and those are the pieces that matter. You don’t want to let anything mess with them.”

For Stephen Owen, preserving his freedom not to compose differently to please an audience means a probable future of teaching and writing in one educational institution or another. Of course, he may also get a crack at the film scoring career he’d love to pursue. In any case, the crucial thing will continue to be maintaining a balance between professionalism and imagination, performance and composition, the audience and the inner life . . . all without losing the essential *esprit* that drew him to jazz in the first place.

“Somewhere along the line it’s got to be fun,” Stephen told me. “If it’s not fun, you ought to be doing something else.”