

Christine

This podcast is produced on the ancestral homeland of the Nooksack and Lummi people. They have been its stewards since time immemorial, respecting the land, river and ocean with the understanding that everything is connected, related and alive. We acknowledge the elders and their collective and individual plights and achievements. We consider the legacies of violence, displacement, migration and settlement that bring us together today. And we pursue ongoing action to build lasting relationships and grow together so that all may prosper.

(Interlude music plays)

Neil

WCLS in Whatcom County presents Library stories, a podcast to open your eyes to all the ways your local public libraries matter. Join us as we reveal the power of sharing at the library. I'm your host Neil McKay, Online Experience Coordinator for the Whatcom County Library System, and today... we're here once again with my boss, Mary Vermillion. How are you doing, Mary?

Mary

I'm really great, Neil. It's been a fantastic summer with amazing music and books and events at the libraries. It's just been, it's been really fun.

Neil

So many events going on and we just last week had one of the great jazz performances that our Whatcom Grooves team has put together.

Mary

Yeah, it was amazing. So, thank you very much to the Friends of the South Whatcom, Ferndale and Blaine libraries who came together to create this new jazz series. So, it started in July at Glenhaven with the South Whatcom Library and then last Saturday, August 5th, we were at Ferndale Library. We think perhaps the first concert performance inside among the stacks there at Ferndale and it was fantastic with the Jerry Steinhilber Trio, Bilongo played at Glenhaven and then coming up here on Saturday, August 19 will be the final concert in the series, and that's with The Jazz Explosion, which is a sextet led again by Jerry Steinhilber, and that'll be Saturday, August 19th at the Blaine Performing Arts Center. So, thank you so much to the Friends of the South Whatcom, Blaine and Ferndale libraries and to everyone involved in putting together this fantastic jazz series, which really celebrated summer and jazz and libraries, it's been fantastic.

Neil

And this is probably a good time to kind of talk about who are the friends of the library and when we say Friends of the Library, it's not just a bunch of people who like the library. It's an organized group, right?

Mary

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're all friends of the library. We all love libraries.

Mary

So, at each library branch, there is a group of dedicated volunteers who form a nonprofit organization called the Friends of the Library. So, each of our branches has a Friends group and they all -- one thing they share in common is, of course, that they love libraries. And their goal is to get people to use their library to be aware of the wonderful services at their branch library. And the Friends also advocate for library services, you know, with local officials or during times when we may have a levy lid lift or other needs like that, so they're just always reminding people of the importance of libraries and advocating for library use and services. Each branch has different needs, so Friends groups do a bit of different things. At some libraries they have bookstores where they're selling at incredibly good prices, withdrawn books and donated books and materials, and all of the funds that they raise go in to support their local branch.

And they may do other things like holiday teas, concert series. The Friends of the Deming Library have been doing an amazing summer concert series in the backyard of the Deming Library. They host art exhibitions, a whole range of things just again based on the needs of the local branch and the needs of the library system.

And so, as I mentioned before, these three Friends groups last year actually identified this opportunity to continue a tradition that had started years ago at Sudden Valley, where Casey Sulkin started a jazz series in support of the South Whatcom Library. They wanted to bring that back and they wanted to make it bigger, so they asked for other friends groups to join them and we started this year with Ferndale, Blaine and South Whatcom. And it's just an example of the types of activities that friends groups do together. And the type of impact that they can have on our local libraries and on the people who love books and reading and the reading community.

Neil

The series of jazz concerts I didn't get to see the first one in South Whatcom, but I did go to the Ferndale concert with the Jerry Steinhilber Trio though and that was an amazing event.

Mary

What did you like about Neil? Like, I mean, I was there. I loved it too. What struck you the most?

Neil

Well, I mean, number one, it was in an unusual place. It was actually in the middle of the library among the shelves of books. So, it was this beautiful and if you've never been to the Ferndale Library, which I know you have. You know, it's a beautiful library with huge windows that look out on a beautiful...

Mary

The wetlands, yeah.

Neil

Wetlands and so it was a wonderful place to go. The music, the acoustics there in the middle of the library, I don't think they've ever been tested there. It's beautiful. It's wonderful. Big, tall ceilings that that just made the sound even more full. So, the sound quality was great. And of course, the band was

top notch. And just wonderful, energetic music going on there. And plus I got to see some people I hadn't seen in a long time who came down for the concert.

Neil

So 80 people, at least 80 people showed up at the concert.

Mary

Yeah, I loved the atmosphere for sure. That setting is just so beautiful and people were so attentive and smiling and engaging with the musicians and also getting up and like grabbing books and sitting back down and kind of flipping through and listening. And it was like you, we were all in the living room together, you know.

Neil

It really was.

Mary

Listening to this home concert, it was... It was incredible. And you mentioned you didn't get to go to Glenhaven, but that setting too was beautiful for a summer day. Now it was really hot that day, and so everyone kind of stuck to the trees. And so there was this big open grassy area in front of Bilongo, who plays this incredible Latin jazz that just really makes you want to dance. But there were, I think, 3 brave souls who went out into the sunshine and danced and the rest of us kind of nodded and clapped along from the shade trees, but it was again a beautiful setting. Now, of course, the bookmobile stops at Glenhaven, so it was a great way for us to further connect with that community and the South Whatcom Library, of course, also serves the Glenhaven and Sudden Valley community. So that was a really fun.

I love how this jazz series has kind of just organically happened north to south in Whatcom County. So, we started south at Glenhaven, we moved up i5 to Ferndale on August 5th, and now we're moving up at the concluding concert in Blaine on August 19th, and that concert will be at the Blaine Performing Arts Center because we just don't have the space at the Blaine Library.

But, these events have also had a Junior Groove, so a kids program that is associated with it. So, Blaine, on August 18th, there will be the kids jazz program on the Friday before and that is at the Blaine Library and right now, unless the weather changes, we're thinking about doing it around back outside, each child gets a tambourine that the Friends have provided, and there are three percussionists that lead them through different rhythms. And I attended this at Ferndale, and the minute the music starts all the kids are up and grooving and shaking and shimmying, and so are all the adults too. Like we're all moving in time with the beat.

Neil

Yeah, you can't help it.

Mary

You really can't. And you shouldn't. You can't and you shouldn't and so it was really fantastic. So, I really do hope people have enjoyed these concerts. And are putting August 19th and the 18th for the young folks on their calendars because it's really been a special thing. It's fun, it's free, which is amazing.

Thanks to grants from the Whatcom County Library Foundation and the Whatcom Community Foundations Project Neighborly. All of these concerts are free because, of course, it's at the library, so it should be free.

And I guess the last thing you know that I kind of want to say as we as we get into it -- I know you have this amazing interview with Jerry Steinhilber. That's what we want folks to hear, but as you're listening to Neil's conversation with Jerry, and you're thinking about all the wonderful things that the friends do for libraries, including creating the Summer of Jazz think about joining your local Friends group. They really could use your help.

You know folks come in and come out and they bring different talents and there's lots of different, very specific things you can do to help your Friends grow. So, I encourage you to go to your local branch and ask "Hey, how do I get involved with the Friends?" Or just go to our website and on the top menu there look for "Get Involved" and click that drag down menu and you'll see a way to connect with Friends of the Library there too. So please consider joining your Friends of the Library group. They would love to have you. We would love to have you. And you can really make some fun new connections and show and a new and deep and important way your love for local libraries.

Neil

Yeah, that's right. That's a beautiful way of putting it. You know, show your love for the libraries. There's a lot of ways to do that, but joining the Friends of the library is definitely something that would be appreciated by your library.

Mary

Yep, and by the Friends who are currently volunteering. They, I mean, to be honest, they need help. Each group needs help. So please come out if you've been looking for a volunteer opportunity, and you listen to this podcast so I know you love libraries. If you've been looking for a volunteer opportunity, this is the one for you. You're truly needed. And we would love to hear from you.

Neil

All right, you heard it from Mary. I always do what Mary tells me to do so, she's my boss.

Mary

There you go.

Neil

OK, so with that said, let's move on to this interview. So at the Ferndale concert, it was Jerry Steinhilber and his trio. And at the end of the concert, I managed to snag him for this short interview. I actually had to help him tear down his equipment and bring it to his car first.

Mary

That seems like a fair trade, yeah.

Neil

It seemed like, yeah, and it made for a nice, relaxed conversation, so I enjoyed it and I hope that you all will enjoy it too.

Mary

Well, thanks, Neil and thanks Jerry. And all the Friends for this incredible concert series.

Neil

All right, well let's play a little bit of jazz to get you warmed up and then we'll jump right into Jerry and me chatting.

Mary

Sounds great.

(Jazz music playing)

Neil

OK, I'm here with Jerry Steinhilber.

Jerry

That's right.

Neil

So Jerry and his trio just finished a concert in the Ferndale Library. Jerry, how was that?

Jerry

It felt really good to us. I wasn't sure about how the acoustics were going to be, but it turned out to be wonderful. And we had a great time. The band played really well. The audience was along with us the whole time and really can't ask for more than that.

Neil

Yeah, there was something like 80 or more people in the audience

Jerry

Wow, that's great.

Neil

It sounded great in the back of the room. I can vouch for that.

Jerry

I'm glad you're telling me that. Yeah, you got to kind of play the room and the energy that was in the room was so strong and so vibrant that it made us play better and different and communicate to the audience.

Neil

I wanted to talk to you a little bit about, about your, about the jazz that you play. So you improvise so, and you had said in the performance that if you're doing your job, this is what I heard you say. If you're doing your job, then the music that we're hearing it's the first time you're hearing it too.

Jerry

That's right, yeah.

Neil

And what does that mean?

Jerry

Well, so we have certain guideposts in musical language. It would be certain ensemble moments where we all play together on certain things, certain rhythms or certain harmonic things. And then what happens in between those guideposts or those anchors as we're playing is completely improvised as you're watching it happen, it would be the equivalent of watching someone make a cake. And hopefully that when we get done, the cake tastes good.

Neil

But you don't really know until you've done it.

Jerry

Well, the thing is we've been doing it so long that I'm pretty good at not painting myself in a corner creatively, it's a part of being a jazz musician as far as I'm concerned, is being able to improvise. I use improvisation every day, all day long. I teach about 40 students a week at Bellinghome School of Music in Bellingham. And I use my improvisation skills all day long while I'm teaching because and I think it's really important that teachers have that skill because everybody learns differently and so I'm able to shift gears really quick.

If I can see that what I'm saying to a student is not being understood when we're playing, I know what I'm gonna try and do. But if I play a certain phrase \*improvisational sounds\* it's more question and answer is the best way to explain it, especially to people who don't really understand it, because if you hear \*improvisational sounds\* you're going to want to go \*improvisational sounds\*

Neil

Right, right.

So, it can be question and answer long form like your question can be 45 seconds long and your answer could be 5 seconds. And we haven't even talked about dynamics, louds and softs. You know, playing really bold, there's a reason for that and when you do it, you're playing bold because you want things that sound bold, and when then you bring it down to just a whisper, like if I'm playing brushes or something, I think it makes the audience lean in.

Neil

Yeah, I can see that. And I see, you know, as you're explaining this, I see some parallels with this podcast, with the way that I interview someone.

Jerry

I got that from you.

Neil

You can tell looking at my well-prepared notes that are about twenty words.

Jerry

Well, you don't want too many.

Neil

It's literally a question and answer and then I try to play off of your answer. And if we go down a different direction than I was planning, which we are right now, then it makes for a better radio, better podcasting.

Jerry

Right. I don't stress about too much stuff.

Jerry

I have a date book and I keep it pretty good eye on my date book and the things that I have to do that I know I have to do, but I just feel like being able to improvise as much as I'm able to do even when I'm not playing the drums is a blessing.

Neil

It's kind of a lifestyle, right?

Jerry

Yeah, it really cuts back on the stress. Because there's a lot of things tonight that I tried that no one knows that I tried that maybe didn't work, but no one knows that except me. I made them work. That's a big --.

Neil

Or maybe your trio who recognize that you did something differently than you were doing.

Jerry

Well, differently is a better word, yeah, because Miles Davis was all about "there's no wrong notes" and if you really approach it that way, everything becomes super organic. Like the vibe in there tonight was so cordial and warm and people were smiling and when you're up there kind of baring your soul and you see people actually enticing you to move in that direction then it, you don't know what's going to come. Yeah, we had a really good night.

Neil

This crowd wanted to enjoy your music.

Jerry

Yeah, it was great.

Neil

They were ready and receptive.

Jerry

So nice.

Neil

So you're going to be playing again on, well, you're going to do another kids Junior Groove, which you had done yesterday here in Ferndale, right? And you're going to be doing that again in Blaine on August 18<sup>th</sup> and then on August, Saturday, August 19<sup>th</sup>, you'll be at the Blaine Performing Arts Center. Have you played there before?

Jerry

I haven't. I can't wait.

Neil

Yeah, it's designed for music, where this library wasn't designed for music. I think, like you said in your introduction that this is the first.

Jerry

That's what they me. They said first music.

Neil

First music at all.

Jerry

So that's an honor for me. Yeah, as far as I'm concerned, it's in the rafters and it's gonna stay there.

Neil

Ohh, definitely. So, just to clarify because our audience is not seeing us, the performance was among the books, among the bookshelves.

Jerry

Yes, in the stacks, yes, that's right.

Neil



We do have a large meeting room, conference room, I guess. But that's a different sound in there. And this, it turned out to be an amazing, beautiful full sound.

Jerry

Well, I'll tell you a big part of that is the players in the band. Josh Cook has a giant sound on his tenor, on his saxophone. And when you when you hook up with someone like that, who's – he has a masters degree in jazz performance from NYU. He's a diamond in the rough. You know, it was just happenstance that I met him five years ago. It's a funny story. I called him up when I first moved to town, to Bellingham, and I said "Listen man and people been telling me I should call you so we can get together and play." And he's like "Yeah, man, I'd love to do that." And so we did. And I went over to his house and I knocked on the door. When he opened the door, he had my CD. And he's wanting me to sign it and I said, "Ohh, you're the guy that bought it." You know. Anyway, we became a really close friendship with Josh and I don't know if I could do it with too many other tenor players with just the trio because it's a cordless trio, there's no piano, there's no guitar, so you have to have strong players.

King Doll on bass. King and I have been playing since we were 18 together. We've had some years, five years, eight years, stretches where we weren't playing together, but we were always playing and he's the biggest reason that I moved to Bellingham because I was in Nashville and I'd been in Nashville for almost 15 years and came to Bellingham and really didn't expect to do much more than teach. I had already talked to Nick Taylor at Bellinghome School of Music and I knew I had a teaching job and all of a sudden here I am playing again. Playing all the time, it's a blessing, beautiful.

Neil

So, the teaching the junior groups tell me about what happens there?

Jerry

It's so much fun. So, John Butoric and Steve Jones are great percussionists. And so, I show up with my drum set. John and Steve bring a set of congas, they bring bongos, they bring all of the Latin instruments on the Güiro. They bring a cowbell, they bring a shekere. And well, basically what happens is we play 4 different grooves, yesterday I think we played a CHA-CHA and we played something in 6-8, more of an African groove, and then we played a samba and then we played a mambo. And it's the craziest thing with that music. If you've heard that music, and I'm sure you have, it's almost impossible to sit still.

Neil

Yeah.

Jerry

So as soon as we start, there's these, I mean, they weren't infants, I would say like between 3 and 7 year olds, as soon as we started they started dancing and they didn't know why. You know, it was infectious and it gets -- they've got no baggage like we do so.

Neil

Right. No inhibitions.

Jerry

Yeah, they're a blank page. But then we had moms out there mamboing. It was awesome. I think we had like 15 or 16 kids. Same thing at South Whatcom when we did it at out in Sudden Valley. And I hope that a lot of people in Blaine bring their kids out for the Junior Grooves because it's the joy that we get out of this, John and Steve and I. I can't compare it to anything.

Neil

Yeah, that's great. That sounds fun. And that's Friday the 18th. OK, so everyone needs to get out to.

Jerry

Blaine library.

Neil

That's at the library, so the concert is at the Blaine Performing Arts Center, which is at the high -- at the school district I believe.

Jerry

It's supposed to be gorgeous.

Neil

That's what I hear.

Jerry

OK, well, I talked to the stage manager, and it's just like talking to any big room or big performance center that I've ever played. I mean, he's talking the talk, so I'm guessing it's going to be great.

Neil

And it's certainly a different show than this, right?

Jerry

Yeah, that'll be my six-piece band that I have. So that'll be piano, percussion, bass, 2 tenor saxophones and drums. So, there's six of us. And the program that we've put together with that band I think the people are going to love.

Neil

OK. And so, what I want to ask, I know you're short for time, so I'm gonna make it --.

Jerry

I'm good.

Neil

OK, well, maybe we'll stretch out later, but I do want to get this in here, usually on my podcast I'm interviewing an author or a library person, and I tend to ask them what book recommendations they

have or what books they have, but I would stretch it for you to say, as a jazz aficionado who should I be listening to?

Jerry

Wow.

Neil

And I know Jazz is a broad thing and I feel like you...tell me if this is true, do you follow along like Bebop lines?

Jerry

It comes from that, but if you're doing it right as far as I'm concerned you're using everything that's come before you and you've spent hours listening. I've spent hours and hours and hours and hours, and I enjoyed every minute of it, just listening to the masters. The quote that we use with our trio is "Not seeking to be like the masters, but seeking what the masters sought."

Neil

Oh, wow.

Jerry

So that kind of takes it takes us off, it pretty much gives us, I feel like it gives you a little more free rein to be yourself because you're not trying to be John Coltrane. You're not trying to be Miles Davis, you're just using some of the vehicles that they used. And seeing what you do on it, does that make sense?

Neil

Yeah, ohh yeah, it's like...what I'm hearing is kind of like...I'm not a painter at all, but I'm really interested in art and I like to read about Van Gogh and what he did and why he did it and how he did it and it's like... it's the why and the how I think you can use. I'll never paint like Van Gogh. You won't ever be Miles Davis, although I don't know how he sounded on drums. He was probably really good, I imagine.

Jerry

Probably, they all played drums.

Neil

But, you can do the same. You can find the same path.

Jerry

Yeah, there's another quote. It's the same kind of quote. It's like "Walking in the footsteps of the masters." So, you're kind of like least... It's what I said when we started tonight. It's summoning the spirits basically when you're up there and this music is so ingrained in me. So, it's so deep inside me that these pieces, this music that we play, it is so important to me that when it starts, if you notice my eyes

are closed pretty much the whole time when I'm playing because I am just grooving with these songs that I've been listening to my whole life, but I'm playing them. I'm not trying to be Elvin Jones and I'm not trying to be Jimmy Cobb. I'm just trying to see what I can do on it. It makes things a lot --. For me that's the way I want to do things and you can do the same thing with Van Gogh. I know so much history about Miles Davis and Coltrane and Thelonious Monk and how they lived and their experiences and all I've read as many books as I can about all those guys. I think that finding out as much as you can about your heroes or about people who are doing something that you aspire to do. I don't think there's any other way to go at it.

Neil

And it makes me wonder who is Miles Davis studying?

Jerry

Charlie Parker.

Neil

Who is Charlie Parker studying?

Jerry

That's the way it always works.

Neil

Yeah.

Jerry

It's the whole the way the thing works.

Neil

Standing on the shoulders of giants, right?

Jerry

That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Neil

Well, that's awesome. But that doesn't answer the question that I asked, which is who would you recommend a jazz fan listening to you?

Jerry

I think the best way to start would be to get the best-selling jazz record bar none in the world called *Kind of Blue*. It's a Miles Davis record called *Kind of Blue*. Jimmy Cobb on drums, Paul Chambers on bass. No rock -- Paul Chambers on. John Coltrane on tenor, Cannonball Adderley on alto, Miles on trumpet, and Bill Evans on piano. So, it's all these giants and Miles as any smart band leader will do got the best

players in the world to be in his band. So that right there is the best place to start, go out and get *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis and you'll be hooked.

Neil

Well, interesting enough and you may not be aware of this, but one of the things that the library offers is a streaming and downloadable audio service called Freegal.

Jerry

Music? Really?!

Neil

And it allows you to stream, it's Spotify-ish.

Jerry

With ads?

Neil

No, there's no ads. There's playlists. I'm going to actually look it up because I'm interested to see if *Kind of Blue* is there. It allows you to download like 5 songs, 5 pieces a week.

Jerry

And then it's gone and you can do more?

Neil

To keep.

Jerry

You can keep them! Oh, wow.

Neil

So, I'm showing you right now. So, it's an app, but it's also on the web. And I have to type my library card in which is there. But so, this is what it looks like and you can do a search and say, let's just say Miles Davis because I'm pretty sure that'll pop up first that so it's like there's artists Miles Davis, of course and then other stuff where he's collaborating with someone, but then also the songs that you can see and then the albums and so.

Jerry

OK, go over a little bit. That's the one.

Neil

OK, so it's available on Freegal for free through the library.

Jerry

Please check it out.

Neil

You can download each individual song.

Jerry

Please check it out, it's the best way to start.

Neil

OK, that's a great recommendation there. Is there anything else that you would want to say to the library public?

Jerry

Just that books like music are very important and if you can find the kind of books that really takes you on a journey, just like the kind of songs -- or songs that take you on a journey, I think it's good for your well-being. And I think it keeps people... it gives people joy.

Neil

Hang on to that. Thank you so much for questions. That was a great interview.

Jerry

My pleasure.

(jazz music and clapping)

Neil

Well that's our show. I want to thank Jerry Steinhilber for the music and the conversation.

If you are hearing this before August 18 and 19, you still have time to attend the last Whatcom Grooves and Junior Grooves events. The Junior Grooves event for kids K through fifth grade will be in the Blaine Library on Friday August 18 at four PM and the final concert of the Friends of the Library Summer Jazz series will be Saturday August 19 at 7 pm at the Blaine Performing Arts Center - that's on the Blaine School District campus at 975 H Street. It's a free concert featuring Jerry and his 6-piece Jazz Explosion. It's going to be an amazing show, and did I mention it's free?

The Whatcom Grooves Summer Jazz Series is generously supported by grants from Whatcom Community Foundation and Whatcom County Library Foundation. Financial donations to support local libraries are gratefully accepted at the concerts.

Finally, thanks once again to my boss Mary Vermillion who does such an amazing job juggling all the things and all the events and all the puzzle pieces.

"If you go out and make some things happen, you will fill the world with hope."

Let me know what you think of this episode. Send me an email at [neil.mckay@wcls.org](mailto:neil.mckay@wcls.org). Or stop by and say hi. If you know me, you know where to find me.

Until next time, this is Neil McKay for the Whatcom County Library System.