

3rd Floor Groove

A grand piano. Shelves of CDs, hockey art, and children's drawings. And the deep "thung" of a big double bass.

Welcome to Steve Haines' office. He's just finished mentoring a bass player and is about to start a practice session for himself. "The bass is a jealous instrument. You can't turn your back, or there's a problem."

The music professor leans the big bass carefully against the wall and pulls out his new album – "Steve Haines and the Third Floor Orchestra."

It's a departure from his earlier works. It's not quite jazz, not quite folk, not quite singer-songwriter, he notes. He had certain songs in mind – and wanted to complement Brooklyn-based artist Becca Stevens' voice and UNCG faculty Chad Eby's saxophone with a full symphony orchestra.

The album sold 5,000 copies in its first month. Reviews were glowing. Japan's most popular jazz magazine called it "a masterpiece."

Selections range from Neil Young to Chopin to folk. Imagine the centuries-old "Fair and Tender Ladies" turned upside down, with an ethereal vocal, a lush, sometimes-syncopated string section, and saxophone break. Haines even wrote lyrics for two songs.

Sales plus funding from the Canada Council of the Arts, ArtsGreensboro, and UNCG supported the effort.

Haines has played across the globe, from China to the Czech Republic. He's conducted at Lincoln Center and performed at Lenox Lounge. And he's brought UNCG's Miles Davis Jazz Studies Program to a high spot. Up to 90 students audition each year. The chosen six to eight receive intensive mentoring.

He knows how inspiring moments can take students to another level. A jazz track on a friend's mixtape is what first hooked him, in high school. Oscar Peterson's "The Honeydripper."

"I just played along. I could not stop dancing." A year later, he sat in with the Duke Ellington rhythm section. Another inspiration.

Now he's a composer and a teacher. "My main identity is as a performer."

In 2012, that nearly ended.

Haines had a tumor in his right shoulder. After the mass was removed, he could barely move his arm. He thought he'd have to change careers, but a specialist believed he could transplant a key nerve in Haines' arm. Several months after that surgery, he started playing again. A thousand hours of practice brought him back.

The bass felt beautiful. "I fell in love with it again."

Artistically, he was transformed. "I learned less is more. The sound of one long note is more beautiful than I had known before."

His next two projects are a Tom Waits big band-type album and a swinging holiday album with UNCG jazz pianist Ariel Pockock.

A musician's life is improvisation, he explains. There are always new ways to approach those four strings.

By Mike Harris

Learn more at go.uncg.edu/haines

WHY THE "THIRD FLOOR ORCHESTRA"?

In the quiet days after the December 2017 exams, 41 performers gathered in UNCG Auditorium to record Haines' new album. Many were faculty, whose offices are on the third floor of the Music Building.

