

9-1-2011

Making music and more on the last frontier

Jim Stewart
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim (2011) "Making music and more on the last frontier," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 54 : Iss. 3 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol54/iss3/21>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.

MAKING MUSIC AND MORE ON THE LAST FRONTIER.....

WHEN FOLKS IN

Anchorage, Alaska, and surrounding environs need their pianos tuned or rebuilt, they know the man to call: Dan McElrath.

When they want to listen to some smooth jazz riffs, they know what to dial up on their iPods: the Dan Mac Sextet, featuring Dan McElrath and friends.

And when they have a dream to play a grand piano atop a glacier while wearing — we are not making this up — a “Yeti”

suit, they now know who can help make it happen: Dan McElrath.

Since moving to Anchorage in the late 1980s, McElrath, a 1985 Furman graduate, has established a statewide name for himself as a businessman, composer and performer. He is a certified piano technician whose company, Alaska Piano, is the largest piano services business in Alaska. It has given him, he says, “the financial security to explore my art without boundaries.”

Which he has done with the Dan Mac Sextet. “We’re blessed to have the Air Force Band of the Pacific stationed in Anchorage,” he says, “and a number of exceptional musicians have retired in Alaska. They’ve provided a wealth of talented band members that I make use of on a regular basis.” Since 2005 he and his friends have toured the state, built a strong following and produced seven CDs, the most recent being “Ajazzka” and “An Alyeskan Christmas.”

But how does a Greenville boy, son of a jazz pianist, wind up tuning pianos in Alaska? Or arranging for a concert on an icy mountain?

McElrath says he learned the basics of piano tuning (and playing, by ear) from his father, and as a teenager he landed a job with a piano restorer. The work helped him develop his mechanical craftsmanship, although he was more interested in playing the piano than helping others play theirs. In the late 1970s he enrolled at North Greenville, then a junior college, but his sight-reading



Dan McElrath (far right) orchestrated a scenic, one-of-a-kind concert April 18 atop an Alaskan icefield.

COURTESY DAN MCEL RATH

was so bad that, he says, “I was advised to find an occupation that didn’t involve playing the piano — which only made me more determined to succeed at it.”

Looking to improve his musicianship and earn money for his education, he decided to join the Air Force — and was able to do both. While stationed for three and a half years in Rapid City, S.D., he studied with James MacInnes, a Juilliard graduate. When McElrath left military service in 1982, he returned to Greenville with a wife and adopted daughter, and enrolled at Furman as a music education major.

After graduating he worked for a year at a church in California before being offered a similar position in Anchorage. The failure of his marriage, he says, required him to make a new career choice, so he called on old skills and began tuning pianos again.

His big break came in 1994, when high-profile pianist George Winston hired him as his personal technician during a three-week tour of Alaska. The gig helped McElrath establish his name, and he went on to do further study at Steinway and Yamaha factories. By 2000 his work was known throughout the state.

As for the concert on the glacier, McElrath helped make it happen last spring for Peter Halstead, a businessman and pianist. A representative of Halstead’s production company, Wind Over the Earth Productions, called to explain the idea, right down to the Yeti

suit. McElrath would be in charge of arranging for a helicopter, finding a grand piano, and ironing out such technical challenges as how to safely transport the 1,000-pound instrument to the edge of a snowy cliff.

It took a month and a half to finalize the plans, but on April 18, despite a few tense moments, a well-insured, well-protected Steinway grand traveled more than 40 miles into the Chugach Mountains, to a height of 6,000 feet. There, Halstead had his moment.

For McElrath, the project was another chapter in a musical odyssey that has brought him financial and artistic success on the Last Frontier. He says, “There’s always a tug between my business and creative side, but that tension gives my life balance, variety and energy. I joke that I tune pianos to support my addiction to playing, but both bring great rewards and often complement each other.

“Many communities couldn’t afford to bring in a performer like me, but there are always pianos to tune to augment the bottom line and make it more feasible. That way I not only leave them with a memorable musical experience, but a well-tuned piano.”

— JIM STEWART

Visit www.danmacjazz.net to sample the Dan Mac Sextet’s music. For more on the mountaintop adventure, visit www.alaskapiano.net and www.pianistlost.com.