

The Clark Fork Valley Press
And The Paradise Center Present

Alek Sweeden

Thompson Falls High School
Spotlight On The Arts – April 2022



This is the first interview of “Spotlight” which is sponsored by the Paradise Center. It is designed to introduce our students involved and pursuing the arts. I had the pleasure of meeting Alek Sweeden, and his music teacher, Haile Ward. Below are the highlights of our conversation.

Alek Sweeden is a seventeen-year-old Junior at Thompson Falls High School. He started learning to play the trumpet in fifth grade. He has also acquired some knowledge and skill playing piano, electric bass, as well as other brass instruments. He is currently enrolled in band and is developing his craft both in performance and improvisation, with a favored focus on jazz.

Alek was inspired to pursue music through participation with other students. “Steve” was one student that really inspired him: “When I heard him play,” Alek said, “I thought to myself, someday I want to be like him and to play just like that!” Alek was introduced to other artists such as: Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, and Herb Alpert. The seeds for his future

love of jazz.

Alek grew to enjoy other styles of music. Interests developed in Big Band and Marches, often performed by marching bands and drum and bugle corps. But his enjoyment of jazz remained at the top, as he discovered other more contemporary artists such as Wynton Marsalis (trumpet), Duke Ellington (piano), John Coltrane (saxophone), and Herbie Hancock (piano). He lit up when I asked him about Jacob Collier. Alek regards Collier as an improv

genius, and is a big fan. I asked him what his favorite piece of music is, to which Alek responded: “Well, I don’t know if I could even pick one?!?” ‘Kind of Blue’ by Miles Davis, ‘Take the Coltrane’ by John Coltrane and Ellington, ‘Sheik of Araby’ by Marsalis. But, if I were to guess my favorite of all time, it would be Maynard Ferguson’s ‘Birdland’.”

While learning standard music for band, Alek has a great interest in developing modes of improvisation - a standard jazz technique. Though similar to composing music, he felt it was more akin to free exploration and expression. He finds improvisation allows him to better “express my music as based on a feeling.” He enjoys the pursuit of fluid creation which improvisation, the language of jazz, provides. Alek added: “Playing in context of a known piece, I enjoy taking a theme or melody line, explore its possibilities, to the point where I discover new themes and melodies ... this form of music is much more a form of process than instruction.” It is in this process of exploring that Alek develops his musical skills: “I learn by experience ... in the doing of music.” Though, he adds, that he still studies, researches, listens to many styles of music, and, of course, relies heavily on his current music teacher, Ms. Ward, to answer all his other questions.

Often, Alek “sits at the piano to discover new and varied intervals ... listening, finding out what works well together with this tone or that. I have a small process,” he continues, “determine the key, play around within that framework, and observe what comes out. Start with a melodic base - something predictable - and then begin to experiment with dissonances and other possibilities. Start with resolution, develop the emerging idea - no matter where it takes me - and then resolve it.”

Our conversation then moved to what he saw in his musical future. Alek responded that life can get really busy at times, and that he struggles to find enough time “to dedicate to it. Like just playing or composing music. Regardless of what my life shapes out to be in the future, I want to keep it as a part of my daily life. I’d love to make it a career if I can. Keeping connected with fellow artists, now, through college and beyond ... perhaps as a soloist, but definitely want to keep my options open to change and other experiences.”

Alek would like to get to know and collaborate with local musicians: “sitting down with a bunch of musicians to talk all things music, share ideas, and of course, to jam as a group. Any opportunity I could get to play with other people - this would be just amazing! The biggest thing though is that I learn from doing music with others - such as jamming. I was at a one-week music camp, where there were a lot of seasoned players whose high skill not only informed but inspired me. I saw a noticeable improvement in my own skill set, and it gave me something to strive for.”

Alek then concluded: “you can’t do genuine music from the head ... the best music comes from the heart. Being a musician is something that I want to be. Others can do it, and so can I.”