



PHILIP AABERG

'A BEAUTIFUL LIFE'



THOM BRIDGE PHOTOS, INDEPENDENT RECORD

Pianist Philip Aaberg rehearses for a concert at the Helena Civic Center in November 2017.

Renowned Montana composer whose music evoked the beauty of the West dies at 77

PHIL DRAKE
For the Independent Record

Philip Aaberg, a Grammy- and Emmy-nominated composer known for writing music that observers said evoked the spaciousness and beauty of the West, has died.

The Montana native who for years composed music in a converted grain bin next to his Chester home was 77.

According to his Sweetgrass Music Facebook page, Aaberg died "peacefully (May 23) surrounded by Patty, his sons Jake and Michael and his brother Steve."

"A beautiful life well lived through family, friends and music. And of course fly fishing," the post states.

A celebration of life will be held in August in Helena, said Patty Aaberg.

Sweetgrass posted earlier that Aaberg was hospitalized in Minneapolis in mid-May and had "pneumonia in both lungs and a host of other issues."

A GoFundMe page for him started on May 16 stated he had been diagnosed with a very aggressive form of intraductal prostate cancer. The page had raised \$53,714 of its \$60,000 goal.

Havre Democratic state Rep. Paul Tuss wrote on Facebook he was friends with Aaberg for years.

"While the music will be softer now, the sounds of Montana's high plains will always best be represented by the magic that flowed from any keyboard he touched," Tuss said. "The genuineness and authenticity of this Hi-Line native will live on forever through the beautiful music he produced, his welcoming spirit and his fundamental goodness. Rest in peace, friend!"

Aaberg produced music that consistently translated Montana's farms, ranches and native cultures into "musical concepts" and has "forged a unique keyboard style that paints an audible portrait of his home state," Sweetgrass Music said on its website.

Aaberg told the University of Montana in a feature story that he tried to "capture things that are important to me such as the quality of the sound."

"On the prairie, sound carries a long way. The sense of vision is important, too," he said. "On a clear day, you can see the Rockies a hundred miles away. I try to communicate that sense of distance and loneliness."

He received several honors, including the Montana Governor's Award for the Arts, Montana Arts Council Artists Innovation Award, an honorary doctorate in music from Montana State University in 2013, the Montana Governor's Humanities Award, and he was named Montana's Treasured Artist in 2016. Aaberg's radio program, "Of the West: Creativity & Sense of Place," can be heard at www.ofthewest.net.

Aaberg was born April 8, 1949, in Havre, but was raised in Chester, according to social media.

His mother first noticed his musical talent early on, Sweetgrass Music noted. He began playing music at age 4.

By the time he was 15, he traveled on the train 12 hours one way every two weeks from Chester to Spokane, Washington, to study with Margaret Saunders Ott, a Juilliard-trained pianist and teacher who was chair of the piano department at Whitworth College.

Please see **AABERG**, Page A2



Pianist and Grammy-nominated composer Phil Aaberg, seen in this 2017 file photo, has died. He was 77.

Gianforte visits new reentry facility

MICAH DREW
Daily Montanan

KALISPELL – Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte on Wednesday toured the Flathead Valley Reentry Facility, which has been operating for just over six months and graduated its first residents into the community this spring.

"By helping offenders find employment, access resources, and reconnect with their families, this center is giving Montanans a better opportunity to successfully rebuild their lives and contribute to their communities," Gianforte said in a statement about his visit. "Together, we're promoting a safer community by providing our returning citizens with the support they need."

The reentry facility, also known as a "prerelease center," is the first one owned and operated by the state Department of Corrections, and filled a much-needed hole of service in northwestern Montana.

"Kalispell was one of the places where we did not have a pre-release facility up here, but there was demand for it," Department of Corrections Director Eric Strauss said during the tour. "We like to get people released from prison, going to pre-release as close to their community as possible. That reintegration in their community is an important part of the rehabilitation process. So having one here for the community and for people who want to return was important to us."

Across Montana, the state currently contracts with five nonprofit organizations to provide four prerelease centers that serve female offenders and seven prerelease centers that serve male offenders.

But northwest Montana, which comprises three of the state's top-10 most populous counties, didn't have one until last October.

Fifteen years ago the state tried to locate a facility in the Flathead Valley, but met with staunch opposition from local residents.

Please see **GOVERNOR**, Page A2

Hearing set on Miller Creek feral horses

DAVID ERICKSON
david.erickson@missoulian.com

The Missoula County commissioners are scheduling a public hearing and are seeking comment about what to do about the band of feral horses that roam around the upper Miller Creek area in the south part of town.

The horses have been the subject of a fairly vigorous debate among many area residents and members of the community, especially in the past year after a truck was totaled after hitting a stallion. The animal later had to be shot by an area resident who volunteered to do it.

Some people on social media want the horses removed from the area, saying they pose a safety risk, while others want them left alone.

Missoula County has set up a website about the issue, with a form for providing comments, at MissoulaCountyVoice.com. The public hearing will be at 2 p.m. on Thursday, June 11, in the Sophie Moiese Room at the Missoula County Courthouse.

"Many residents value the horses and want to see them documented and monitored," the county's website states. "Others express concerns about safety, property damage, and disease transmission. Local agricultural producers worry about the spread of disease and other impacts on domestic horses and business operations."

One of the main issues is that feral horses are considered abandoned livestock, not wildlife. That means they are not under the authority of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Please see **HORSES**, Page A2

Aaberg

From A1

Along with the piano, he played drums and organ in a garage rock band that he and his brother started while in high school. He also played in symphonies across Montana before heading off to college, Sweetgrass Music stated.

Aaberg earned a Leonard Bernstein Scholarship and Harvard National Scholarship at Harvard College, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in music.

He moved to San Francisco to make pop and rock records. He played solo and in small combos in blues clubs until joining the Elvin Bishop Group in 1973. He first appeared on the national scene as keyboardist with The Elvin Bishop Band. He toured with the band for four years and played on several of their albums, Sweetgrass stated.

Aaberg also toured with Peter Gabriel and recorded with the

Doobie Brothers, Kenny Rogers and Vince Gill.

He began composing his own music seriously in 1985. Shortly after, he signed with Windham Hill Records and released the solo album “High Plains,” which garnered him international acclaim, according to Sweetgrass Music. It was a solo piano suite that brought elements of blues, bluegrass, rock and new age music to his meditative compositions.

His second album, “Live from Montana,” earned Aaberg a Grammy nomination for Best New Age Album in 2002. It was recorded in the Chester High School gymnasium, where Aaberg played basketball years earlier.

Aaberg founded Sweetgrass Music in 1974 in Oakland, California. He named it after the hills north of his Montana hometown. In 2002, he moved back to Chester with his family.

A 2014 article in the Great Falls Tribune by Marc Stergionis noted



ELIZA WILEY, INDEPENDENT RECORD

The Cascade String Quartet, accompanied by Philip Aaberg, the pianist, and Alan Gemberling on trombone, rehearse for their 2014 performance at the Myrna Loy Center as the part of the inaugural Big Sky Alive! festival.

he composed his music in a converted grain bin attached to his house.

Aaberg lived in Helena since

2016.

Aaberg had played with the Boston Pops, participated in the Marlboro Chamber Music

Festival, premiered contemporary compositions with the Paul Drescher Ensemble, and performed on more than 200 albums and on PBS’ “All-American Jazz,” which also earned him an Emmy nomination.

Another Emmy nomination followed in 2008 for his soundtrack for “Class C: The Only Game in Town,” produced by Montana PBS.

More than 400 comments on the Sweetgrass Music Facebook page praised Aaberg.

“A Montana Treasure gone but not forgotten,” Eddy White posted.

“His soul is as alive as his music,” R. Kevin McGuire said. “Prayers for all his family and friends.”

Phil Drake is a former editor and reporter at the Helena Independent Record. He can be reached at 406-231-9021 or phildrakem@charter.net.



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Feral horses roam the hillside in the Miller Creek area of Missoula in October of 2025.

Horses

From A1

“It is not clear under state law which agency, if any, has jurisdiction to manage feral horses in Montana,” the website states.

After discussing the issue with the Montana Department of Livestock, Missoula County officials convened agency representatives with subject matter expertise in land and livestock management, ecology and law enforcement.

“Horses can weigh up to 1,500 lbs., creating significant hazards on roadways,” the website continues. “Stallions may be aggressive and territorial, especially near homes. Horse bites are extremely

strong, capable of crushing bone without breaking the skin. Dogs and horses do not mix well, protective instincts around foals increase risk to both animals.”

Feral horses have been roaming Missoula County for more than a century, with accounts of them as far back as the early 1900s. Some were released by rodeo grounds owners.

Decades ago, there were rodeos held at the KO Rodeo Grounds by Oral Zumwalt, Bud Lake and others, and rodeo horses got released over time. Ranchers in the area also let some go over the years. Private landowners have periodically conducted roundups, with the most recent one in 2023. Those horses were sold to buyers interested in

their rodeo stock lineage.

The county says that horses require about 35 acres per head for sustainable grazing, but development pressures are reducing the available range. Populations can double every four to five years, and several bands exist in the Miller Creek area. Apparently, one of the main complicating factors is that the horses are primarily on private land, meaning no government agencies have clear jurisdiction.

Feral horses can spread disease to domestic horses, and there are logistical considerations around how to contain and vaccinate feral horses.

David Erickson is the business reporter for the Missoulian.

Governor

From A1

There was also opposition to the new Flathead Valley Reentry Center, which had a rocky road to existence.

In 2023 the state legislature appropriated \$7.1 million for the facility, and the department proposed a 90-bed prerelease center on the edge of Kalispell city limits at the site of a former hotel in Evergreen.

Corrections officials initially presented the proposal to the Flathead County Commission in 2024, and two of the three commissioners, along with the county jail commander, expressed support for the facility.

But the county’s Board of Adjustment denied a necessary permit for the facility, leading to a lawsuit from the state. An agreement was reached in spring of 2025, paving the way for the former hotel to be repurposed.

Flathead County Commissioner Pam Holmquist, who represents Evergreen, was the lone vote against the facility, citing negative feedback from residents near the proposed facility.

The Montana Department of Corrections operates a new reentry facility to integrate former inmates to their community. (Micah Drew/Daily Montanan)

Jim Sanderson, the facility’s director, said in the six months since they opened the doors, he has received “zero complaints.”

“And I encourage complaints. We want to be very, very good neighbors,” Sanderson told the Daily Montanan. “We intentionally identified the number one risk to the facility initially was public perception. We had a series of open houses before we opened. We had three complete days of open houses that the public was invited to, which were very well attended, and a lot of naysayers kind of understood that this isn’t what they assumed it would be.”

In the facility, which currently has 38 residents, offenders live at the center, and adhere to strict schedules, drug testing protocol and work requirements.

Residents will work in “everything from food service to construction to anything that we can find,” Strauss said. “Ideally we have people working towards a career.”

Within the facility, which retains its Montana hotel decor, replete with wooden furniture and multiple big game mounts on the walls, there are multiple rooms for residents to spend their free time watching TV, or playing pool or board games.

A large solarium off the lobby offers natural light, even during the thunderstorms that rolled through the Flathead on Wednesday, and every free bit of space in the facility offers a place to be comfortable and interact with other residents.

“It’s intentionally positive,” Sanderson said. “We’re trying to



MICAH DREW, DAILY MONTANAN

Gov. Greg Gianforte visited the Flathead Valley Reentry Center, a new state-run facility, on May 20, 2026.

create that type of a positive culture, because resident offenders, that’s what we call the inmates, ... a big hurdle for them is they’re used to an overwhelmingly negative interaction when you’re locked up in a jail or locked up in prison.”

One recent graduate of the program, Jason Williamson, said the program was beneficial to him for getting back to the routines of regular life.

“When I first got here, I didn’t know what to expect, really,” Williamson told Gianforte. “And then, so it turned out to be a deal of learning, getting back to a schedule, you know, getting back to a new work program ... so it was

a really good program.”

Gianforte also spoke to a current resident who had been in the facility for about three months, and is originally from the Flathead Indian Reservation.

He told the governor that it’s been “very beneficial to keep my family together, because distance is definitely problematic,” and by being in the Flathead facility he’s been able to see his family regularly, including his young daughter.

“To be able to hold her and hug her and everything like that, to have that contact ... we need that in life,” he told the governor. “If I was over there in Billings or something, we wouldn’t be able to do

that.”

According to DOC, approximately 88 percent of the residents at the new facility were sentenced from Flathead, Lake, and Lincoln counties. A current DOC dashboard shows that 13% of the state-wide pre-release population – 138 individuals – were sentenced in Kalispell region courts.

Strauss and Sanderson said the facility is adding residents every week and will continue ramping toward the 90-person capacity as they continue working through the hurdles of operating the first state-run facility.

“We’re going to fill it up,” Strauss said. “There’s a need. The system is still overwhelmed in terms of secure beds. So we’re working with our community partners to provide treatment, and trying to figure out good community placements for individuals, and then proving that this type of environment works.”

Daily Montanan is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity. Daily Montanan maintains editorial independence. Contact Editor Darrell Ehrlick for questions: info@daily-montanan.com.

Micah writes about Montana’s environment and state and local politics. He’s been known to run long distances around the Flathead Valley and Glacier National Park where he lives, works and plays.

Independent Record

HOW TO REACH US
2222 Washington St., Helena, MT 59602
Phone: 406-447-4000 • Fax: 406-447-4052

SUBSCRIBER CUSTOMER SERVICE

- Front Desk: 406-447-4000
- To subscribe: 406-447-4010
- Missed papers: 406-447-4010

CUSTOMER SERVICE HOURS:

Monday through Friday: 6:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

NEWS

- Work hours: 406-447-4086
- Fax: 406-447-4052
- News Tips: editor@helenair.com
- Sports: 406-447-4037

ADVERTISING

- Retail Display: (406) 447-4098
- Classified: https://helenair.com/place_an_ad
- Commercial Printing: 406-447-4012
- Obituaries: 406-447-4043
- Legals: lelegal@column.us

MANAGEMENT STAFF

- Director of Operations Lee MT Anita Fasbender: 406-447-4012
- Regional Sales Director, Erica Yakawich: 406-447-4042
- Advertising Director - Helena/Butte, Jenean Kujawa: 406-496-5591

COPYRIGHT 2026 INDEPENDENT RECORD.

“ALL RIGHT RESERVED.”
Reproduction, reuse or transmittal in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or an information storage and retrieval system is prohibited without permission in writing from the Independent Record.

IDENTIFICATION

The Independent Record (USPS: 261300), a Lee Enterprises, Incorporated, Newspaper – Majority shareholder, David Hoffmann, Hoffmann Media Group and is published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 2222 N WASHINGTON ST, HELENA,

MT 59602. Periodicals Postage Paid at Helena, MT. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 500 E 3RD ST, DAVENPORT, IA 52801.

PRICING

Independent Record is a Lee Enterprises, Incorporated, Newspaper – Majority shareholder, David Hoffmann, Hoffmann Media Group and is published online daily, and three days per week in print (Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays), except for New Year’s Day, Martin Luther King Jr.’s Day, Presidents Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas when it is only published online. The subscription price includes all applicable sales tax. Print subscriptions will be charged an additional fee for the convenience of having the paper delivered. You will be notified of the amount and frequency of any delivery charge at the time you register for a Print subscription. All delivery charges are subject to change. Former subscribers who register for a new subscription will be charged any balance due on their prior subscription in addition to the amount due for the new subscription. To avoid delivery charges, call 1-877-509-6397 to arrange pickup of your paper at a local distribution center. A nonrefundable account setup fee will be charged to qualifying new starts. We reserve the right to change your subscription rate at any time. Contact 1-877-509-6397 or visit helenair.com/services to manage your subscription.

SUBSCRIPTION OFFERS

All subscription offers available at helenair.com, including those advertised through our email promotions, on-site messaging, social media, and any external means of promotion, are valid for new subscribers only. You must not have been a subscriber in the past thirty (30) days to register for a new subscription offer. Former subscribers who register for a new subscription will be charged any balance due on their prior subscription in addition to the amount due for the new subscription. You understand that delivery and billing will continue beyond the initial order period unless you cancel your subscription as detailed in the Cancellation paragraph. Rates may change after introductory offer period. There is a non-refundable one-time account set up fee of \$6.99 for all new subscribers.

NEWS+ SUBSCRIPTIONS

Both existing and new subscribers have the option of upgrading to a News+ Subscription, which offers Ad-Free unlimited digital access to helenair.com on any device, including our mobile app. By “Ad-Free,” we mean News+ subscribers’ reading experience on our Site will be free from disruption by internet-only advertising (such as banner, pop-up or search-related advertisements).

Ad-Free does not extend to third-party content to which News+ subscribers may be taken by clicking on a link, by reading our content on a social media platform or by listening to a podcast accessible to our Site. News+ subscribers will continue to have access to certain paid content that is traditionally part of a newspaper’s print content (such as the Classified Advertising that appears when you click on links to Buy & Sell or Marketplace), much of which is now provided by our partners on third-party websites (such as Contests, Homes, Jobs and Obituaries), as well as to advertisements in the print edition that can only be seen by clicking on the link to the E-Edition (which is a pdf of the print edition). News+ subscribers who scroll through our feed on third-party platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram or X/Twitter) will continue to see paid messages posted by those platforms.

News+ subscribers who opt in, or have opted in, to receive emailed newsletters from us will continue to receive paid content with those email messages. News+ subscribers who click on the link to Brand Ave. Studios on our Site will continue to have access to the paid content provided by that site.

AUTO-RENEWAL, CANCELLATION, REFUND, AND SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL POLICY

If you register for EZ Pay or debit banking (ACH) payments, your Digital Only or Print + Digital subscription service (your “Subscription”) will automatically renew. On the last day of your current term (your “Renewal Date”), your Subscription will automatically renew for the same length of time, at the then-current Subscription rate, which we may change in our discretion, unless you choose to cancel more than twenty

one (21) days before your Renewal Date (your “Cancellation Date”). YOU MAY CANCEL YOUR SUBSCRIPTION BY EMAILING US WITH THE SUBJECT LINE “CANCEL” AT custservice@helenair.com OR CALLING US AT 1-877-509-6397. YOU MAY ALSO BE ABLE TO CANCEL ONLINE DEPENDING ON YOUR SUBSCRIPTION – PLEASE CHECK YOUR SETTINGS IN YOUR ACCOUNT DASHBOARD TO SEE IF THIS OPTION IS AVAILABLE TO YOU.

Prior to the Cancellation Date, we will send you a notice reminding you about the renewal of your Subscription. Subscribers who prefer to receive paper renewal notices in the mail will be charged \$9.99 for each renewal notice; this fee is waived for subscribers who sign up to receive their renewal notices via email. If you wish to receive renewal notices via email, please contact us at custservice@helenair.com or call 1-877-509-6397.

IF YOU DO NOT AFFIRMATIVELY CANCEL YOUR SUBSCRIPTION BEFORE YOUR CANCELLATION DATE, YOU WILL BE CHARGED FOR AN ADDITIONAL TERM FOR THE SUBSCRIPTION YOU INITIALLY SELECTED AT THE RATES IN EFFECT AT THE TIME OF RENEWAL.

If you have provided us with a valid credit card number or an alternate payment method saved in your account, and you have not cancelled by your Cancellation Date, your Subscription will be automatically processed up to fourteen (14) days in advance of your Renewal Date, and the payment method you provided to us at or after the time of your initial Subscription purchase will be charged. For current subscribers who convert to EZ Pay, any balance due will be charged to the payment method on file at the time of the switch.

We reserve the right to change your Subscription rate at the next renewal period. If you are not satisfied with your Subscription rate or service, you may cancel your Subscription at any time. No refunds will be returned if remainder of the Subscription term is under thirty (30) days. The refund amount of any balance over \$35.00 will be returned minus an early termination fee of \$35.00. No refunds for Digital Only Subscriptions are provided.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

If you register for a subscription plan, you are subject to the Auto-Renewal, Cancellation, Refund and Paper Renewal Policy described above, as well as the additional terms and conditions set forth below.

Print subscribers get the benefit of newspaper home delivery and digital access. Print delivery is limited to our designated delivery area only. If your delivery address is outside our designated area, you will be notified during the registration process that you are not eligible for print delivery.

All Digital Only and Print + Digital Subscriptions include unlimited digital access, but there may be links to content on other websites owned by our parent company that can be accessed only through an additional paywall. In such cases, your Subscription to content behind a separate paywall will be governed by any additional terms that are associated therewith. To access these benefits, you must first provide your email address, register with helenair.com/services, and activate your account online. To activate your digital account visit helenair.com/activate.

Certain Digital subscription offers may include delivery of one or more complimentary Print issues of our publication. The type and frequency of any complimentary Print delivery will be disclosed to you at the time of registration and will not incur a delivery charge. Only users within our designated delivery area are eligible to receive a complimentary Print issue. You may cancel the complimentary Print issue at any time.

You can manage your account at helenair.com/services.

VACATION POLICY

Vacation holds may be placed on print delivery. Vacation holds up to thirty (30) days will continue to bill at regular rate while full digital access is maintained. Extended vacations of thirty-one (31) days or more will not incur charges and all Subscription benefits will be suspended during that time.