

Q & A with Emre Kartari about His Career

Your Crystal Ball

—From approximately what age did you think: “I’m going to be a musician for my career”?

When I was 12, my uncle Hamit taught me my first rock beat. I fell in love with the drums instantly. I still have the same feeling every time I sit behind the drums. I never wanted to do anything else.

—Has your career taken the path you had envisioned back then?

I had never envisioned a certain path but just tried to do my very best in every situation I found myself in.

Musical Impact

—Can you briefly describe a live performance you performed in that marked a turning point in your younger musical life (say, under age 25)?

For my junior recital at VCU, I performed a Dave Holland composition with (professors) John D’earth and Howard Curtis. We played as a trio: Howard played the bass lines on the timpani. We hadn’t rehearsed it before the performance. That was a very intense musical experience for me, which eventually led to doing two recordings with John and Howard, the second one featuring saxophonist David Liebman.

—Can you briefly describe a live performance you observed as an audience member that marked a turning point in your younger musical life?

While I was in high school, I saw the pianist (and VCU alumnus) Loston Harris and his trio in Reston, Virginia. He was playing at a club ten minutes away from where we lived. That was the first time I saw a jazz group live and up close. They were playing music influenced by Ahmad Jamal. I didn’t know what was going on, but rhythmically it was just so funky and infectious!

Years later, while I was a freshman at VCU, I saw Prof. Skip Gailes, with Sean Moran, alumnus Randall Pharr, and Prof. Howard Curtis at the old Bogart’s room. They were playing “Moanin’” and were just giving everything to the music: full commitment. As soon as I got home, I wrote a letter to Howard, thanking him for the music. That was another turning point for me.

Preparation

—Do you feel as though your formal musical studies provided you an anchor for your current career?

Yes, absolutely. It was invaluable, not just with my musical training but also with my academic career. In fact, my connections with VCU faculty propelled my career forward. When I was living in Istanbul, the American Embassy asked me to put a group together the last minute to do a series of concerts and masterclasses for a diplomatic tour. I asked Prof. Skip Gailes to join us. During the tour, they were so impressed with our sincerity with the music and commitment to teaching that I gained their trust to have a green light to fund whatever project I could dream of. That trust continues to this day.

—Can you remember the one or two most surprising things about being in your career that no one told you, that you had to learn on your own?

I never knew that I would develop such enriching friendships over the years through this career. In the beginning I thought it was only about becoming a better musician. I was wrong! I have a life-long bond with some of my teachers, students, and colleagues, which I value deeply.

Likes and Dislikes

—What's the best part of your current, music-related career?

There are several best parts; it's hard to write about just one. One of them is sitting behind the drum set and making music with friends. I can't imagine a more satisfying job experience. I had a gig recently with Adam Larrabee and Randall Pharr and was laughing so hard I could barely play.

The other is to getting to know your students and watching them grow. When I was teaching in Turkey, we developed a successful drum studio. You can watch their videos from my YouTube channel. Watching your students getting into practicing and making music is an inspiring experience.

The last best part is being the perpetual student. I'm still practicing, researching, and trying to get to know my drums and music. I'm still studying with my teachers and learning from them.

—What's the worst part?

Everything that is not mentioned above! Working out all of the logistics and the budget of an international project. I've done several large projects now. Thankfully we are all still alive.

Ups and Downs

—Name up to five people who inspired and/or made a pronounced difference in achieving your musical goals—and in a brief phrase, tell why for each. (We'll take for granted that you have to leave out many, many other deserving names.)

- My uncle, Hamit Kartari, who was a very natural musician, a multi-instrumentalist. He introduced me to the drums, became my first teacher, and encouraged me to become a musician. It's so important to have a support from at least one family member when you are starting out!
- Skip Gailes. I learned so much from him as a student at VCU, on gigs, and later as a teacher-in-training in Turkey. He came to Turkey as a Fulbright Scholar to help me set up the program. We put in 12-hour workdays for three months. I grew as a human being; and I think he had a great time, too.
- Howard Curtis, my teacher from VCU and my teacher to this day. I'm currently working on my D.M.A., and he is my advisor. Howard, in my opinion, is not only one of the best drum set players in the world but really an important educator who put the jazz drum set in the academic world. I'm lucky to have him as a friend.
- My students in Turkey. I know this breaks the rules, since I'm going way over five people. But these students are the direct result of all of the hard work we put in together as a team with VCU and the American Embassy. They will always be an inspiration.

—Don't name—but loosely describe—how one or more persons discouraged you from being a musician (or from entering your current music-related career).

There will always be people who will discourage you from being a musician—mostly with good intentions—to do something safer and something they can understand. Those people will also never get to experience things I mentioned above.

Favorite Recordings

—**Name up to three, single-CD recordings that you think everyone on earth should own.**

(Artist, Title, Label would be great....)

- Miles Davis, *Miles Smiles* (Columbia)
- Count Basie, *The Complete Atomic Basie* (Columbia)
- Duke Ellington, *Such Sweet Thunder* (Columbia/Legacy)

—**Name up to three more that simply provide you great personal listening pleasure every time you hear them.**

- Michael Jackson, *Thriller* (Epic Records)
- Glenn Gould, *Bach, Goldberg Variations* (the second recording, 1981)
- Led Zeppelin, *Physical Graffiti* (Swan Song Records)

Parting Thoughts

—**If you could give only one sentence of advice to a high school or college student considering a career in music, what would you say?**

Work hard, but enjoy every minute of it.

—**And what's the best way someone school-age could prepare to do what you currently do?**

Besides practicing as much as you can, observe your teachers! What else are they bringing to the table besides their musicianship? How do you feel after leaving their classroom? You will be teaching as much as you are performing; so be ready!