

Q & A with Eric Wheeler about His Career

Your Crystal Ball

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

After traveling to London and Paris at age 14 for a school band trip, I decided that “I could get used to this.” From that point on, and although I wasn’t getting paid yet, I considered myself to be a professional musician.

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

Yes, absolutely! I’ve always enjoyed traveling, meeting new people, performing for large crowds, and learning about different cultures. Music has certainly afforded me these opportunities!

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)?

At 21 years old I was playing a trio gig at a restaurant in D.C. with saxophonist Marshall Keys and drummer McClenty Hunter. In the middle of what I thought was an incredible solo, Marshall calmly whispers into my ear: “Hey, take a deep breath and try playing less sixteenth notes.” Somewhat embarrassed and feeling out of control, it was at that moment that I decided that everything didn’t have to always be so flashy and busy; so I went home and practiced soloing at medium tempos for hours utilizing space and absolutely no sixteenth notes. This concept is something that I incorporate into my practice sessions to this day.

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

In 1998, at age 15, I saw Roy Hargrove perform with his big band at the Marciac Jazz Festival in France. This was my first time seeing Roy live, and I even met him backstage after the show. I was totally blown away by his musicianship, his personality, his stage presence, and most importantly, how easily and natural music came to him. I thought to myself, “This is the most talented musician I’ve ever seen and heard in my life”; and prior to this show I had only heard about him and had yet listened to him. Once I returned to the States, I immediately went to Tower Records, purchased all of Roy’s albums, and listened to them religiously.

Preparation

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

Yes indeed! I’m proud to say that I had really great teachers and mentors throughout my formal years. Some of these include schoolteachers, peers, and old jazz musicians who cursed me out on gigs for missing the changes.

—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?

Well, I wish someone had told me how difficult it is for a working musician do his/her taxes!

Likes and Dislikes

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

The best part is traveling and performing with musicians that inspired me during my formal years, and then sharing this gained knowledge with young aspiring musicians. I’m very passionate about keeping this music alive!

—What’s the worst part?

I’m very thankful that I’ve been able to make a living performing music, so I can honestly say that there is no worst part of my music-related-career.

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.)

- Cheryl Wheeler - My mother has always been my biggest influence simply for being the most positive, loving, and supportive person in my life!
- Carolyn Kellock - My high school bass instructor was a no-nonsense teacher who always kept great records and held me fully accountable for work.
- Davey Yarborough - My very first jazz who teacher introduced to me the history and fundamentals of jazz, which would no doubt help to prepare me for a professional career.
- Jeff Weisner, another one of my high school bass instructors who was relatively young and a member of the National Symphony Orchestra. This experience was very influential to me as he was only about ten years older than me at the time and had established himself as one the best bass players in the D.C. area. His expertise at such a young age made my musical dreams and goals seem much more attainable.

—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).

I’ve had a few friends and family discourage me from pursuing a career in music. Their main issue with entering the music business was the financial instability that I may experience. My response was always “Well, if I’m passionate and hardworking, I’ll be one of the best at what I do; and money won’t be an issue!”

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, *Kind of Blue* (Columbia)
- John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* (Impulse)
- A Tribe Called Quest, *The Low End Theory* (Jive)

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

- Roy Hargrove, *Ear Food* (Universal)
- Charlie Parker, *Charlie Parker With Strings* (Verve)
- Jay Z, *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse* (Roc-A-Fella)

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? Make sure that you have a true sense of passion and love for whatever musical path that you decide to take.

Make sure you spend your time wisely, practice religiously, save your money even if there is nothing to save for, and be on a relentless journey to better yourself every single day.

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

Develop a strong work ethic; don't be afraid to take chances; and don't let your ego get in the way of your progress!