

Q & A with Toby Whitaker about His Career

Your Crystal Ball

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

Music was always an important part of my life, but I don’t think I considered it for a career until just before college. I just came to the realization that there wasn’t anything else that I’d be happy doing for the rest of my life.

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

I think as a trombonist, I didn’t have any aspirations for fame and fortune. My goals have pretty much consistently been to always be improving on my horn, to compose frequently, to have my compositions performed, and to somehow make a living doing it. Every year brings new opportunities and challenges, but I feel like I’m constantly growing as a musician; so...so far, so good.

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)?

I performed with Richmond-based Bio Ritmo at the Central Park SummerStage in New York City, opening up for the legendary salsa group Sonora Ponceña. It was the first time I had played in front of thousands of people, and it opened my eyes to what opportunities were available despite not living in a bigger city like New York.

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

Seeing the Village Vanguard Orchestra for the first time blew me away and really set the bar for me as far as knowing what was possible in a big band setting.

Preparation

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

Absolutely. While I’m sure it can be done, I doubt I would be performing professionally today had it not been for my time at VCU. In addition to the performance standard it made me set for myself, I also attained skills in arranging that have proven indispensable throughout my career.

—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 suppose one realization I came to on my own was the importance of forming non-musical relationships with the musicians you want to be performing with. No matter how well you play, if people don’t want to hang out with you when the gig is over, there is a high probability you won’t be their first call. The best way I have found to accomplish this is by being present on the scene when you are not performing and supporting others whenever possible.

Likes and Dislikes

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

Being able to make a living doing something that you love is a luxury not allotted to most people. I can't imagine myself doing anything else at this point.

—***What's the worst part?***

Taxes.

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 high school band director, George Sadler, not only helped me to cultivate my initial love of the trombone but also gave me the confidence to pursue music despite my lack of experience. While at VCU, Doug Richards showed me what level of commitment and passion was necessary to survive in this business. At Rutgers University, Conrad Herwig provided me with valuable insights on the art of brass playing, as well as the difficulties of a sustained career in music. Also, more generically, every musician I've performed with has taught me something, for better or worse.

—***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 been very lucky as far as the support I've received from family, friends, and mentors throughout my life. You definitely can have your fair share of difficult times while trying to survive as a musician. These are the times when you are most susceptible to discouragement and despair. In my experience, these feelings increase exponentially when you surround yourself with disgruntled or otherwise negative colleagues. Surround yourself with positive influences to increase your chances for long-term success.

Favorite Recordings

—***Name up to three, single-CD recordings that you think everyone on earth should own. (Artist, Title, Label would be great....)***

- Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, *Queen's Suite* (from *The Ellington Suites: The Queen's Suite/The Goutelas Suite/The Uwis Suite*; Pablo/Original Jazz Classics)
- Glenn Gould, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations* (CBS Masterworks)
- John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* (Impulse/Verve)

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

- J.J. Johnson, *J.J. Inc.* (Sony)
- Gil Evans, *The Individualism of Gil Evans* (Verve)
- Anything by Billie Holiday.

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?***

Be sure that you love what you are doing, and never stop working on your craft.

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

In addition to honing your technical proficiency as a performer or composer, it is important to truly immerse yourself in as much music as possible. Open yourself up to music from all over the world; and when you find something that really sticks with you, investigate further and figure out the ingredients that make that music unique. Also, you will encounter a lot of people in your field that are exceptional at what they do. Don't let this discourage you. Learn as much as you can from them, and then figure out what your strengths are; and focus on that. The only way to feel true fulfillment as a professional musician is to never stop being a student.