



Sharik Hasan

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I did not choose music, but rather, music chose me.

This may sound trite but being a full time musician was not a path I had considered, or was even able to conceive of. Once steeped in it, it was the only thing that gave me a true sense of enjoyment and fulfillment. This became more apparent during my final year as an undergraduate at Oberlin College, in the US, where I was majoring in English Literature and Mathematics.

However, this love of music is certainly not something that materialised all of a sudden out of thin air, as I can trace its presence in my life back as far as I can remember. I recall my early childhood, when my parents would put on their favourite albums and radio stations whether at home or in the car, in addition to taking me to attend Western and Indian classical music concerts. My mother, a painter by métier, was a keen pianist as well, continuing to fill the house with cascading musical passages from Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Debussy that she played on our old inherited upright. The fact that there was



already a piano around was crucial, for it was something I – as a five-year-old – was instinctively drawn to, inspiring wonder and excitement. Shortly after seeing my natural affinity to the instrument, my parents arranged for me to take lessons with a teacher, and thus began my formal training.

Over the years I had a number of teachers in India and abroad, including stints at the Bangalore School of Music and Longy School of Music in Boston. All this was, of course, side-by-side with my regular academics, schoolwork, and sports – just another extra-curricular activity that I participated during weekends. In fact, I also started learning the sitar but could not find the time, or perhaps the discipline, to do justice to both instruments and so stuck to piano. By the time I was in high school, I was barely practising even the piano, being disillusioned by the seemingly relentless routine of playing only in order to prepare for the next round of Royal School of Music and Trinity College examinations, as if it were some sort of rat race to reach grade 8 the soonest. Around 12th standard, I quit music altogether, neither going for lessons nor playing for nearly a year.

It was during this period that I was able to purge myself of all the negative elements that had somehow crept into my relationship with music: the pressures of passing examinations with distinction and surpassing ones fellow pupils, in conjunction with a string of moody and impatient teachers, made sitting at the piano more of an obligation, an unpleasant chore. I immersed myself in other aspects



of school life such as socialising, classes, sports, interschool tournaments, board exams, and applying to colleges.

One day, I found a few of my friends in the music room at school singing a popular song while trying to figure out the chords on guitar. I went over to the piano and began to play along, suggesting the correct chords, much to everyone's surprise and delight. That afternoon, in that casual setting, playing music stirred the dormant, yet distantly familiar feelings of carefree enjoyment – perhaps for the first time since my first attempts at pottering on the instrument as a toddler. I felt a thrilling sense of liberation at being able to creatively engage with what I was doing, a sense of relevance at being able to participate in it with other people and make a valuable contribution. It seemed like some of the skills I had acquired during those years of study were paying off and serving a useful purpose after all.

When the time came to choose a college, I knew it had to be one that had some kind of musical environment with good facilities and access to pianos, though my focus was of course in arts and sciences. Oberlin College seemed an ideal fit, being a top liberal arts college that shared its campus with one of the best music conservatories in the country. Upon arriving there, I was shocked to see that some of my fellow-freshmen and dorm mates had, unlike me, come to study primarily music. It never occurred to me that one could possibly major in classical violin or jazz piano and make that your career, for until that point music for me, like for so many others growing up in India, was a respectable hobby – but no more than that.

To be fair though, my parents were extremely open-minded and flexible when it came to my career prospects, encouraging me to pursue whatever my interest lay in. However, I found a variety of subjects appealing. On the one hand, I had taken avidly to the sciences like my father, an astrophysicist, and on the

other, I was equally at home in the arts (my mother's domain), demonstrating a proclivity for literature and writing. As a result I ended up taking undergraduate classes in mathematics and physics in parallel with those in English literature and creative writing.

The other significant discovery I made at Oberlin was one that would, unbeknownst to me at the time, alter the course of my life irrevocably. This was the art form known as jazz music. It exposed me to a new world of rhythms, improvisation, creativity and spontaneity and its best, and an energetic and highly dynamic interaction between musicians that included the audience too. There's something intensely compelling about seeing all of this unfold before your eyes in real time, and that was what happened my first day of college as I walked into the freshman dormitory. I was at once captivated by the resonating sounds of a piano from down the hall, being played like I had never heard before. Needless to say, I followed the strangely novel yet infectious melodies to their source: a fellow-freshman, probably seventeen like me, skinny and altogether unassuming in appearance with reddish curly hair, hunched meekly over the keyboard, eyes closed and face contorted into a look of anguish as he hummed along and grunted with what he played. But there was certainly nothing meek about his piano playing – this was a man possessed, completely oblivious of his surroundings. I asked him later what piece he was playing, to which he replied that he was simply making it up as he went along! I was dumbfounded.

We became friends and he agreed to teach me for a small fee. Our lessons would turn into weekly jam sessions in which he guided me through my first tentative forays into the world of blues and jazz improvisation. Experiencing the thrilling sensation of being in the moment even once is enough to seek it out again and again, and here at Oberlin I found myself in the midst of an environment with no dearth of opportunities to hear live music being performed at an extraordinary level by visiting masters and stu-



dents alike. These experiences would in turn inspire me to go back and play with renewed passion and vitality, triggering a musical renaissance within.

After my third year, I took a semester off to return to India during which period I happened to participate in an open mic of sorts, at the end of a concert, at a popular Bangalore club. The owner at once booked me to do a concert there the following week – my first real gig – which in turn led to more gigs and soon I was performing all over India with my own band as well as accompanying well known names on the scene. This did a lot for my confidence, but it was also a revelation to see that I could do something purely for the love of it, be recognised and appreciated for it, and earn money too! It was indeed feasible to do this professionally. At this point it didn't matter anymore what other things I was capable of doing well or had had potential for, as I simply couldn't see myself doing anything else.

Before I over-romanticise anything, it must be said that a career in the arts does not come without some degree of uncertainty in terms of earning a steady salary. Education isn't cheap either and one may put oneself through years of rigorous training only to learn that there isn't a sure monetary payoff, or even a correlation between skill and commercial success. Though one's fate isn't necessarily doomed to mirror the starving artist cliché (I know plenty of exceptions), the truth is that one must be smitten enough to do it despite the potential difficulties.

What continuously inspires me to keep doing what I'm doing is when I see a whole group of people gathering together in one place to share a moment that has the capacity to move and uplift ones spirit. In facilitating this, you take on the role of a cultural ambassador, so to speak, that can impact those around you and be a part of exchange between different communities, giving you a voice in society and a responsibility to affect positive change. I am always inspired and humbled when I see the great

masters who do this on a worldwide scale, giving me something to strive for and reminding me that there is no end to learning.

How can more students be empowered to explore alternative career options such as this? Well, first of all, one must tune into what ones natural inclinations and talents may be, and once aware, nurture them. This process of self-realization shouldn't be forced, but rather, allowed enough time to take place of its own accord, manifesting itself at different rates and ages in different individuals.

To be empowered you must be driven and extremely self-motivated. Know that it is possible to succeed in anything if you commit yourself wholeheartedly to it. The famous phrase, "Success always comes when preparation meets opportunity," rings true; do whatever you need to in order to best prepare yourself should an opportunity arise, but that is not to say you cannot actively seek out or even create opportunities for yourself. Try to connect with experts in the field, asking their advice and finding out as much information as possible about the prospects and steps that can be taken. It might mean having to travel in order to find a good teacher or major hub for what you want to do.

In my case, I was fortunate to have parents who supported me during my education at Oberlin, the Bill Evans Piano Academy (Paris), Berklee College of Music (Boston), and now at Manhattan School of Music (New York City) where I'm doing my masters in jazz piano and composition. I knew that in order to take what I wanted to do to the next level, I had to be in a centre for music, with a diverse community of musicians that set the bar exceedingly high. At most of these institutions I was able to get scholarships, without which such an education would not have been possible for me. There are often opportunities for scholarships at educational institutions but also look into funding from grants that might be offered in certain fields by government and private organizations.



All this requires a good deal of initiative, research, time and persistence. Almost any goal is achievable: just prepare for it as much as you can and take steps that will gradually get you closer to it, even if it takes time.

I feel deeply gratified to have been able to realize myself in some way and encouraged to see my own progress and evolution over the years, having achieved what I have so far despite the initial lack of opportunities for it, growing up in India and get-

ting a relatively late start in the game (going to show that it is never too late!). Of course, I wish I could have had the realization that this was what I wanted to do even earlier, and that more young people had the chance to do so. My hope is that, with a strong arts and music foundation at the school level, students will start to see the range of possibilities that is open to them.



SHARIK HASAN is one of the leading pianists and composers of his generation to emerge from India. He spent several years studying jazz and classical music in France and the USA while also working in Indian classical musical traditions. He was awarded scholarship to Berklee College of Music where he was selected to be part of a special honors program, the Berklee Global Jazz Institute, under the tutelage of Danilo Pérez. He has performed at venues all over the world including the Blue Note (New York), Panama Jazz Festival, and Nancy Jazz Festival (France). He can be contacted at [sharik.hasan@gmail.com](mailto:sharik.hasan@gmail.com)