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Jonny Fung | A Thinker in the World of Music

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(<https://www.facebook.com/SolFusionBand>)By Miranda Stryker

“I’m only getting one record, but definitely no more than three,” says Jonny Fung, beaming at the gospel and R&B vinyl section at Manifest Discs. Holding up a Jesse Johnson record, he exclaims, “Oh man, do you know who this is? This is D’Angelo’s guitarist right now. I opened for them in Aruba with Anthony [Hamilton]! It was so sick, I gotta get this!”

Charlotte-raised Fung has evolved from playing local venues and bars with friends as a youngun’ of the local rock scene to becoming a well-rounded, full-time professional musician. Fung is now recording with Grammy-winning producer Cedric Thompson, touring with neo-soul artists Tamia and Anthony Hamilton, and making his own way in the R&B and gospel world. Lately he has been prepping for an upcoming live recording with gospel artist John P. Kee as well as headlining Charlotte’s uptown New Years Eve celebration, First Night, with the band Sol Fusion.

But Fung has never been your typical “artist,” and his path has been one of passion and dedication, one that’s been full of surprises.

Growing up, Fung was a short, skinny nerd who was socially awkward. He was a good student and had friends but was an introvert by nature. Generally, he just felt more comfortable keeping to himself—off stage, that is. At Providence High School, he played a lot of heavy, progressive rock because that’s what he liked. To add to his role as the shy, smart dude that shreds heavy metal guitar, “I had longer hair than anyone! It literally touched my waist,” he says, laughing and conceding that this may have magnified his social awkwardness.

For Fung, playing his guitar was a means to “get the demons out,” something he needed as much as he loved. On stage, his other personality would emerge: the guitarist flinging his hair around, playing his instrument behind his head, making crazy stank faces, and taking his shirt off, among other show antics not exactly characteristic of a typical introvert. He loved the attention and couldn’t get enough.

From a young age, Fung has always had an intense curiosity for figuring out exactly how things worked. It’s a trait he probably inherited from his engineer father, Raymond Fung. Music was the first thing that fascinated Jonny and gave him the urge to understand every aspect of it, probably subconsciously influenced by his mother Jill Fung, a concert cellist. Aside from his first clarinet at age seven, he took piano lessons for a couple of years until receiving a guitar for Christmas at age 10.

There wasn’t a particular band or music type that made him want to play—like any other 10-year-old boy he thought it would be “neat.” Not long afterward, though, he was taking composition and improvisation lessons with critically acclaimed Charlotte-based jazz pianist and composer, Claire Ritter. From then on he was completely hooked. In high school, he would doodle compositions during class. Every day after school he would go home, and while other kids were on AIM, riding bikes, or melting their brains with video games, Fung would practice for hours at a time.

Ritter had a major impact on Fung, ranging from his playing to his organization and thinking. “I’m definitely a neat freak, and probably because of Claire,” he says. “I just loved the way she had file cabinets with all the sheet music in it organized and labeled. And all of her pencils were in the same place every time.”

He studied with Ritter for a little over four years, and though he refuses the prodigy label, Ritter says Fung was one of her creative prodigies. “As a young student, Jonathan had a quiet, introspective disposition,” says Ritter. “He was intrigued with color and sound, multiple instruments, and was a natural performer, and I knew early that he had the aptitude to be a professional musician/composer.” From his original compositions to the titles he gave them, he was a unique talent with a sharp ear.

Ritter had him learning the compositions of legendary jazz composer Thelonious Monk when he was in fifth grade, an artist she believed to be a sturdy foundation for young musicians to learn about “spice chords” and phrasing. That influence must have really stuck because Fung and his now-wife, Tara, even named their puppy after him.

Still, like most pragmatic college graduates, Fung didn't think he could make a living just playing music. So he spent his first few months out of school as an administrative assistant at a local cemetery. But he'd apparently discovered the key to taking music from a hobby to a vocation.

"A lot of kids get enraptured with the 'coolness' of the scene," he says with a newfound wisdom referring to the local Charlotte rock scene. He remembered seeing Scapegoat, an early millennium Charlotte hard rock band, releasing their album *These Cards We're Dealt* in 2004 at Tremont Music Hall, and thinking they were the coolest dudes in the whole world. But with age and experience and an ever-increasing knowledge of music, Fung realized there was so much more to it than just being the coolest dude in the room, and that instead he could be the best. The more he practiced and learned, the more he realized how much more there was to learn and practice. Fung began keeping practice logs—up to about 1,200 pages at this point—to document his thoughts and what he's been working on for later reflection and future interests.

The way Fung thinks about music is different from other musicians that talk about the emotions they feel when playing or writing. He speaks about it more methodically and mathematically, and about the pieces and parts of it—the fascination of its construction. Philosopher and educator Cornell West once said, "I am a jazz man in the world of ideas." Fung says, "I consider myself a thinker in the world of music."

The music he was deciding to play became less about what he liked to play and what was cool, and more about what he should be playing to make himself the best musician he could be. This mentality was instilled in him by his parents with the "no matter what you choose to do, strive to be the best at it" pep talk. They have always been fully supportive of him, and set good examples with a solid work ethic and passions, never forcing things on him but instead allowing it to come naturally.

Though Fung—his hair now short and quaffed slightly to one side—dedicated so much to learning everything he could about his craft, he still attended UNC-Chapel Hill as a political science major fully intending to get a day job with his degree. But he continued practicing adamantly and playing jazz around Chapel Hill throughout his college years. He came home most weekends to play in local soul rock band Lucky Five with his best friends. When he graduated in May 2011 and moved back to Charlotte, he continued playing jazz at spots around town, like The Mill in NoDa. Through demonstrations of his skill and passion during these performances, he made acquaintances with another side of the scene—the R&B and gospel side.

He began exploring that side of the music scene and got a job playing guitar at Forest Hill church in Charlotte. Soon after making acquaintances with the producer Cedric Thompson, he got asked to record on a couple of new friends' tracks and eventually found himself playing Maya Angelou's 85th birthday party in Winston-Salem. There, he rubbed shoulders with the likes of Oprah Winfrey and Common, and later D'Angelo and Pino Palladino, among others. Before he knew it, he no longer needed his office job to sustain himself—so he quit the cemetery gig.

As his next phase in his musical career journey, this guitarist hopes to become a producer. He's also been doing some composing, which Ritter was elated to hear. Knowing how coveted the producer position is, he has already begun messing around regularly with producing tools on his own compositions.

In keeping with his mathematical music thinking, Fung left Manifest with five records because he likes odd numbers. He probably went home to shred over them immediately.

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