

Living the dream: interview with mark d'ambrosio, professional drummer

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Mark D'ambrosio is Albuquerque's most sought after drummer. Teaching 45 students a week and playing in front hundreds of fans with his band " Duke City Saints", he is what every young drummer hopes to be, a professional musician. Mr. D'ambrosio has been my teacher for 2 years now and he's currently living my dream. I made the decision to interview him to see what type of mountains hes had to climb through out his life to get where he is today. Mr. D'ambrosio was born in Los Angeles, California on November 1, 1969.

As a graduate from one of the world's best school of contemporary music school " Musicians Institute", he definitely has one of the best educations under his belt. With 30 years of experience on playing drums. Mr. D'ambrosio is not only an incredible player, but he's also a great teacher. He's like a fountain of knowledge, releasing stories after stories about where the music came from and to personal stories on how that music affected him as a musician. It's safe to say that he's a guru of drumming. Oscar Gamboa: How old were you when you started playing music?

Why did you pick the drums? Mark D'ambrosio: I had become enthralled with Rock music around the age of 12 and the drums stood out more than any other instrument. I started playing drums when I was 14. I asked for drums for my birthday, so my folks gave me a pair of sticks, practice pad and a private drum lessons with a professional jazz drummer named H. B " Swede" Meredith. The purchase of a drum set had to wait; not because their being a lack of finances, but because I think my parents had grown weary of me trying to find my niche in activities that went nowhere, like BMX racing.

I really wanted to race BMX, but my skills were sub-par. My dad had invested hundreds of dollars and time into encouraging me and then one day I gave up the enthusiasm to do it. So, when I asked for drums, I am sure they thought “ Oh Brother! ” It took about 4 months for me (and my teacher) to convince my folks to invest in a set. OG: What inspired you to become a musician?

MD: My teacher, Swede, had so much love for his craft, so many stories, so much passion for music. That was contagious. At the ripe old age of 15, I had realized that I had zero interest in pursuing “ mainstream” academics, I ad (and still do) absolutely no interest in sports, and I was beginning to receive compliments from family, friends and strangers about my musical abilities. Aside from Swede being influential in my desire to be a professional musician, I also was an enormous fan of the band Rush, in particular drummer Neil Peart. I lived, breathed and ate their music, memorized interviews and looked to them as my role models. Rush have always held a high standard of playing /writing music and successfully avoided all of the rock and roll cliches.

I wanted to be just like them. OG: As you were growing up what was your favorite type of music? How has your taste of music changed compared to now? MD: The first time I heard the “ Moving Pictures” album from Rush, I was hooked. I also liked the heavier rock at this time, such as Iron Maiden and Ozzy Osborne. As I began to study music, both privately with Swede and school band, I fell in love with jazz-going through the back door -the electric

jazz of the 80's, then the 70's fusion of the 1970's, the bop era of the 50's & 60's and finally swing & Dixieland.

While attending Musician's Institute, I had the privilege to be instructed by jazz masters Joe Pocar, (L. A. session great and father of the late Jeff Pocar from Toto) and Chuck Flores (played with Woody Herman). I was also exposed to world patterns such as Latin/Afro Cuban and became fascinated with all of these great styles. My tastes have not changed. I try to be open to all styles. OG: What do you find to be the most difficult thing about being a drummer? MD: As a drummer, I am challenged and humbled by the responsibility to literally "conduct" a band.

Even when I play with an orchestra, or symphony, other musicians have told me that they are relying on me just as much-if not more -than the visual conducting of the maestro. We have so much on our shoulders, both tempo and feel. Because of the literal heartbeat drummers provide, we are criticized and scrutinized more than any other instrument in an ensemble. I also try to bring as much melody into my playing-being sensitive to follow passages played by another instrument(s). We also have the most gear to lug around town...basically; drummers are the Marines of the band!

OG: What's the hardest thing you've had to do as a musician, any tough choices? MD: Well, there were a few times as a young player where I was playing with very talented musicians who were experimenting and/or using drugs. I was in a band in the early 90's that had so much potential. We were becoming known in the L. A area. Both Ray Manzerek (The Doors) and Dave Stewart (The Eurhythmics) wanted to produce our first CD-should we land a

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record deal. The moral was deteriorating and the drugs were front and center. I was no angel myself, but I had enough sense to abandon the band.

To this day I still wonder what would have happened. The drug use and indecision led them to eventually fall apart not long after I left. OG: Do you have any favorite memories that you could share? MD: No major memory stands out, only many small ones. Scenarios like watching a young student blossom into a mature player, playing a recording session and nailing the tunes in one take, playing a gig where I had to sight-read charts and making minimal/no mistakes. Having my first gig at the age of 19 with musicians who were 15 years older than me and only having 2 weeks to learn 60 songs.

Hopefully, my favorite memories are still ahead of me! OG: What's the best advice you can give to a young a musician pursuing music as a career? MD: Get as much education as you can (college and private lessons.) Play with as many people as you possible can. Be open- minded. Stay humble and remember that you cannot master all styles and there will always be someone better than you. Be able to take constructive criticism and learn the difference between someone criticizing you because they want to help you vs. someone who does not like you or is jealous.

And most importantly, stay prepared, and focused because as Neil Peart says: “ you are only as good as your last gig” OG: I read an article in Rolling Stones Magazine not too long ago and it says that making a living out of music is one of the hardest careers out there now days. I know you're well off as a musician now, but with statements like that, what kept you driving towards making drumming your career? MD: Well it definitely wasn't easy for

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me at the beginning, but I just had such a passion for drumming. My love for performing in front of people and my love for being able to see my students grow as musicians is what kept me going.

When people would come up to me at compliment me on my playing after I played a show on stage, or when I would see my students struggling on a piece of music and being there to finally see them get it right, that to me is worth more than all the money in the world. OG: Is there anything else you'd like to say? MD: It sure helps to have a supportive family. My wife Sonya and parents have been the biggest ingredient to me being a professional musician. OG: Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to do this!

MD: Your welcome buddy! As a drummer this interview definitely gave me so much inspiration to become a better musician. What really got engraved into my heart was seeing how passionate he is about what he's doing by saying "My love for performing in front of people and my love for being able to see my students grow as musicians is what kept me going". Hearing words like that is what's going to push me towards my career. If the journey for him was difficult I know it's going to be for me also, but if he can make it I know I can too. We both may have come from different generations but we both share the same passion for drums.