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Law grad strikes a different note

First jazz musician to win arts council overseas scholarship looks forward to career on the keyboard. -ST

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By Amelia Tan

HE FAILED his Grade 8 piano examination - twice, and gave up on trying again.

But 25-year-old Chok Kerong will start a two-year course at the Manhattan School of Music in vibrant New York City next month on a National Arts Council (NAC) Arts Overseas Scholarship.

The NAC scholarship comes with \$100,000, and he is the only jazz musician here thus far to have clinched it. Since its inception in 1991, it has gone mostly to those trained in classical art forms like ballet, theatre and classical music.

It has taken a long detour for Mr Chok to get to this point, where he is headed for a master's in Music and a career on the keyboard.

As a child, he hated his piano lessons. At age 14, after having quit lessons for a year, he met Dr Eugene Dairianathan, an Associate Professor of the Visual and Performing Arts Department at the National Institute of Education, who introduced to him the works of jazz great Chick Corea.

Dr Dairianathan said that his student had asked to learn something outside classical music, 'a genre of music he could feel'.

The pain which the teenage Mr Chok associated with piano lessons melted away as he became drawn to the 'freedom for improvisation' which is characteristic of jazz.

At 17, he became the pianist in jazz bars like Harry's, jamming alongside double bassist Christy Smith and drummer Eddie Layman.

Then came that crossroads in any teenager's life - what to do after the A levels.

The Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC) student had won a scholarship at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. But he also had a place to read law at the National University of Singapore.

He picked law.

Mr Chok said of his decision: 'My parents and I discussed it and we felt that I should not short-change myself by focusing on music. We felt that a general education would give me more options later in life.'

A rational decision, perhaps, but it also left him torn because he was not about to drop music for studies. Looking back now, he admits that he was only a 'part-time' student.

He juggled his law classes with performances at the Esplanade Mosaic Music Festival, the Chijmes Jazz Festival and at various jazz clubs; he also recorded albums for artistes such as Malaysian singer Penny Tai and Singapore Idol Taufik Batisah and penned original compositions.

He skipped many classes and left himself just two to three weeks to mug for examinations.

He enjoyed the intellectual rigour of law, 'but I did not have enough time to study', he said, adding that he would never have managed without his friends who shared their notes with him.

His dad, family physician Chok Ching Chay, 62, said his son was so busy that he turned up for dinner at home only once or twice a week.

The doctor and his wife Choi Har, 55, have an older son, Kermin, 28, a structural engineer in Chicago.

Dr Chok, describing himself and his wife as 'tone deaf', said it still surprises him that his younger son is so musically inclined. His older son had piano lessons until his 10th birthday, when he asked to stop them.

Dr Chok said: 'When Kerong was younger, we thought music might be a passing fancy. Like many Asian parents, we felt that you could not make a living by playing music.'

But as their younger son grew older, it became clear that it was no 'passing fancy'. Music would always be playing in the house and his father found himself reading up on jazz 'so I can understand what he is talking about'.

Dr Chok said that Singapore's foremost jazz musician Jeremy Monteiro told him that his son was 'wasting his time doing law'.

But since he had made the choice to do it, he should finish it, his parents said. That he did, with a Second Lower honours degree.

Then came the next crossroads: Should he register for pupillage and the Practical Law Course, which would lead to his being called to the Bar?

To do so would be to play it safe, and his heart told him otherwise. Guilty that it would cost his parents \$130,000 in tuition and living expenses for him to follow his heart, he applied for the NAC Arts Overseas Scholarship.

'Some days, I wake up and I still can't believe that I got it. This serves as proof that jazz music is recognised here,' he said.

Perhaps he need not have been too surprised. Last year, Mr Tan Wee Siang, also an NUS law graduate, opened the door by winning the NAC Arts Overseas Bursary to pursue a two-year Masters in Jazz Performance degree at New York University. The bursary gives its recipients \$8,000 to \$15,000 a year.

The plum scholarship Mr Chok won comes with a condition - that he practise his craft on a full- or part-time basis for two out of five years on completion of his studies.

He said: 'I would like to come back to perform and also to teach. But now, my plan is to learn as much about jazz as possible.'

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