

BRIGHTLIGHTS

[Omar Thomas ('06)]

A harmonious career

BY TYLER MCAVOY ('12)

At an early age, Omar Thomas ('06) knew that music would be intertwined with his life like the notes on a score, and he was smart enough to follow his passion.

His love of music, coupled with courage and talent, has crescendoed into a successful career. His adventure has included stints in jazz, pop and rock, to now teaching at one of the most lauded music institutions in the nation. Thomas shares his musical passions with students at Boston's Berklee College of Music, where he is assistant professor of harmony.

Thomas says his Madison Experience was a focal point in shaping his love of music. "JMU's School of Music wasn't just about the music. The JMU experience is about growing. It's about surviving growing pains and being at a school that gives you the freedom to have growing pains."

Like many aspiring musicians, Thomas participated in his high-school marching band. Though already musically inclined, he felt a certain affinity with the sound and feel of a big band. "I'm a huge advocate of talking about not how music sounds but how it *feels*, to instantly make that connection," says Thomas.

In stomp the Marching Royal Dukes.

"I remember listening to a recording of the Marching Royal Dukes when I was a freshman in high school, and I immediately knew I had to check out JMU," Thomas recalls. "JMU was the only school I applied to, and I'm happy I got in."

Thomas started his undergraduate work at JMU with a degree in music education in mind. He wanted to become a high-school band director, but as he began to grow and experience more music at JMU, he found a new path.

"I discovered another side of myself at JMU," he says. "I found that I needed to create and compose original music." As an undergraduate, Thomas wrote original music for the big band genre utilizing techniques and theories he learned in class. The more he learned, the better his compositions became. He is currently using his



Berklee College Professor of Harmony Omar Thomas ('06) enjoys relating his own musical experiences to his students. Thomas also directs the 18-piece Omar Thomas Large Ensemble.

undergrad compositions as the base for more developed professional work.

"I discovered my affinity, my love and my talent for composition," says Thomas. "I didn't have nearly as much confidence in my writing ability as I do now. As a freshman, I couldn't have dreamed of composing the music I'm composing today."

After graduation, Thomas went to the New England Conservatory in Boston to earn a master's in musical education. Between studies he tended bar at a local restaurant that hosted a weekly jazz brunch. The band's bass player worked at Berklee, and suggested that Thomas look for a job opening there.

Thomas discovered the assistant director of harmony position and an opportunity

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to help students understand chords and melodies in completely different ways.

"The job description was so perfect for me that I freaked out a little bit," says Thomas. "After I calmed down, I realized that if I didn't apply, I'd be the dumbest person on Earth."

After a rigorous selection process in 2008, Thomas, then 24, was offered and accepted the position.

Thomas says that any musician with enough passion can reach any goal they endeavor. He relates his experiences to his students at Berklee. "I let students know that I understand what they're going through and do my best to help them succeed."

In addition to his faculty duties at Berklee, Thomas is a rising star in the composing world. He is currently in the studio with his big band, the Omar Thomas Large Ensemble, recording the group's first album, *I Am*. The 18-piece band regularly performs in the Boston area, and many of the tracks on the album, including the title track, are compositions Thomas started writing at JMU.

Thomas says he is dedicating the album to Chuck Dotas, professor of music in JMU's School of Music, and to the JMU Jazz Ensemble for their hand in molding him into the musician he is. "JMU and all of my influences fuel me to do what I'm doing, and I want to make them all proud." **M**