

Syncopation: Unconventional Rhythms can create Certainty in Our Lives

By Tyler Weissinger '25



Shah '18 (far right on drums) opening with Brother Guy for Dopapod at Aura in Portland, ME

Life often takes many unexpected turns, especially in our careers and pursuit of our passions. For Varun Shah, class of '18, his musical journey in particular captures what can be gained by remaining open-minded. Varun's life has been full of opportunity, passion, and serendipity. Although he majored in Computer Science and minored in Economics, Varun's connection to music remained steadfast throughout his time at Union and beyond. His experience with music began at an early age through playing traditional Indian instruments. However, it was not until age 10, when he first started playing the western drums, that the foundation was laid for a life pursuing music.



Varun Shah, '18

Despite music's importance, Varun's path to Union College wasn't shaped by his love for the art. His decision was driven by practical considerations – financial stability and the flexibility to navigate having an unclear career path. Varun was uncertain what discipline to study as he settled on what he wanted to accomplish after graduation, and initially, he considered pursuing a music minor alongside an economics major. Ultimately, Varun chose a career in computer science, fearing that turning his love for music into a job might lead him to lose the joy he found as a performer.

Throughout his time at Union, Varun's focus on his future meant music had to take a backseat. Despite this, music always remained an underlying presence in his college experience. "As much as I'm trying to run away from it or deny it, music is like following me wherever I go, it's not like I'm not necessarily at the time, at least I wasn't making active efforts to include music in my life. It was just so seamlessly happening for me," Varun explains. Varun played the drums in the jazz ensemble during his sophomore year and was a member of Zakuro-Daiko (The Union College Japanese Drumming and Global Fusion Band) throughout all four years. These activities allowed him to maintain his connection to music while focusing on his academic and career goals. But despite not being at the forefront, music remained a vital part of his identity. This took shape in other areas, as he was involved in several student bands, which enabled him to explore different musical genres and expand his experience.



**Zakuro-Daiko (The Union College Japanese Drumming and Global Fusion Band)
Spring 2018 Concert (featuring Shah left of the large black drum)**

After graduation, Varun's love for music grew, most notably during his first sold-out show when performing with friends. "I remember this very specific moment being on stage, just thinking like, yeah, like this is it. Like this is making me so happy in a way that I'm not able to describe. I want to keep doing this," he recalls. That moment, in particular, solidified his desire to continue pursuing music, however possible.

This exploration continued, with Varun balancing his career at Hitachi Vantara as a software engineer, with his passion for music. Having moved to Boston, he was able to immerse himself in the rich local music scene, forming connections with fellow musicians and even hosting open mics. These events, often held in his basement, provided a creative space for people to collaborate and jam. "From those jams, two or three bands have formed,

and I feel really happy that it's growing," Varun says, noting how the community he's helped build has continued to thrive.

Recently, Varun started using social media to promote his bands, leveraging platforms like Instagram to connect with other musicians and fans. "So much of being in the music industry now is DIY. I don't need a record label or a manager to get gigs—I've developed the connections myself," he says. His entrepreneurial approach to music is helping him thrive in an industry that's increasingly driven by personal branding and self-promotion.

One of Varun's proudest moments came when his jam band, Brother Guy, opened for the nationally touring band Dopapod- a group he had admired since college. What made the opportunity special was not just the performance itself, but how it came about: through years of genuine connection with the band rather than standard networking. "It was surreal," Varun says. "We'd gone from being fans in the crowd to sharing the stage with them."



Varun Shah, James Dawson, and Walker Barnes in the audience after opening for Dopapod

The experience reinforced his belief in persistence and authenticity through music. Furthermore, it demonstrates the power music has in building community and creating opportunities that might otherwise feel out of reach.

Looking ahead, Varun plans to keep music at the center of his life, finding balance with his career. His journey is a testament to allowing oneself to follow our passions and the unpredictable ways that opportunities can unfold.