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## Catching Up With Our California Alums

by Gillian Ellis

It's possible to have a career in the performing arts right here in Michigan as many of our faculty and alumni do. But others feel their destinies are waiting for them in the brighter lights of the big cities. Chicago and New York call to many, especially our theatre graduates. And others head west, to California. Recently we decided to catch up with some of our California alumni, many of whom stay in contact with each other, forming a kind of informal Oakland family west. Here are the first two of their stories.

**Phil Metzler** graduated from OU in 2001 with a B.A. in Music Composition. At the time he was working in a Media Play store, but a friend who was already performing in Los Angeles encouraged him to move west, and just a few months after completing his degree he did. His employer gave him a transfer and he arrived in California as the retail manager of a Sam Goody store. But his real ambition was always a career in music.

Today Phil has that career. He plays keyboard in the band **Just Off Turner**, which is well known in the city, playing such venues as the Viper Room and the House of Blues. They have also toured both across the country and around Europe. They have provided soundtracks for shows on ABC, MTV, E! and Oxygen and appeared on both MTV and VH1. Read more about the band and listen to their [music on their website](#).

Phil has been with the band since 2005. "It's been a really good ride," he says, but one he almost missed. He explains he was playing guitar at the Saddle Ranch on Sunset in Hollywood, a well-known cowboy-themed bar and restaurant, when the bartender, also the lead singer in Just Off Turner, asked him if he knew a keyboard player. "I was kind of jaded at that time. People were always asking me to jam with them." So initially he told the bartender he would "ask around." Luckily one of Phil's friends spoke up. "You play keyboards!" he said.

Just Off Turner has been "a perfect fit" says Phil, who also composes for the band in collaboration with the other musicians. But Phil also works another job. He says, "There has to be a change in the business model before even successful bands can live off their music." Phil works for the FX channel as a television ratings analyst and runs some focus groups for them. The groups play a role in helping decide which shows get picked-up.

Phil also records and produces other artists. It all seems a long way from Armada, Michigan, which is where Phil grew up and went to high school. Recalling his time at OU he says, "I give credit to some amazing professors. Their passion and guidance really encouraged me. He mentions **Robert Facko** and **Lettie Alston**, but says probably the most influential OU professor in his development was **Karl Boelter**, who was his instrumental composition instructor for many years. "Their confidence in me was very important to me," Phil says.

**Kelly Kula**, who was known as **Kelly Plucinski** when she attended OU, also believes that confidence is the key to success. She graduated in 2004 with a B.A. in Theatre Performance, and in the fall of that year she says she was ready to "go after my passion." She drove across country to California with her mother, to share an apartment with the only person she knew in Los Angeles, a girl she had attended high school with in Williamsburg, Michigan near Traverse City.

"It can be overwhelming," says Kelly, "but you have to have confidence in yourself. There are 10,000 actors trying to do the same thing you are, but you are unique. There is a casting director looking for me." Asked about her experience at OU, Kelly says that theatre professor **Kerro Knox** stands out for her as someone who helped her build confidence. "He really helped me figure out that I was talented and I had something to contribute," she recalls.





Kelly did some theatre work when she first arrived in LA but she soon discovered that casting people want to be able “to click on a link and see your work.” They want accessible film. She did a lot of student and independent movies to get those clips. She also did lots of extra work for movies and television when she first arrived in town. “It doesn’t pay much,” she says, “but it is a good training tool.” She feels that just to be on a professional set is a valuable experience.

Kelly still takes acting classes and in order to pay for those and her other day-to-day expenses, she also works “survival jobs” like waitressing. Those jobs are nighttime jobs which allow her the flexibility to attend auditions, which are mostly during the day.

And the auditions have paid off. Her first paid gig was on the History Channel’s film *Last Stand of the 300* in which she played a Spartan warrior. It was a full week of work and a truly memorable experience. You can see a full list of Kelly’s credits [on her website](#). At the moment, she is playing a role as a recurring villain in a web series called *Heroine Legend*. You can find this by typing the name into any search engine. It is a pay-to-view series, but the producers hope it will be picked up and distributed through a regular television channel.

When we spoke it was pilot season in LA and Kelly had just recently had her very first pre-read for a part in a television pilot. If she was to get the part she could be a season regular in a major production. She was excited because just to get in for the pre-read was a big deal. Kelly has promised to keep us posted. Watch this space.

*Photos: Top right: Phil Metzler, photo by Erik Thureson for Lightbox 57.  
Lower left: Kelly Kula, photo by Bader Howar.*

#### SUMMARY

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