

James Falzone ▶ *Subtle Infusions*

Clarinetist and composer James Falzone contemplated moving to New York after graduate school at Boston's New England Conservatory, or perhaps Europe, as he felt a strong affinity with the European creative music scene. But he opted to return to the Chicago area he had left behind.

He describes that decision as one of the most fruitful of his life. Since the improvised and experimental music community in Chicago had grown so exponentially in the last 10 years, it was the perfect place for him to be.

Falzone feasted in the academic environment of NEC, taking courses in Medieval music, Indian ragas and Turkish traditions, klezmer with Hankus Netsky's ensemble, even a class zoning in on Billie Holiday. He now teaches an interdisciplinary seminar at Chicago's Columbia College that has as much to do with the visual arts and literature as music.

From the outset his music has been self-produced, most recently on what he dubs his Allos Documents label. *Lamentations* (2010) features his Allos Musica trio (allos is the Greek word for "other") comprising oud player Ronnie Malley and percussionist Tim Mulvenna. The group digs deep into Arabic modes. One is a Muwashah (a courtly lovesong from Andalusia), another written by oud player Issa Boulos, but the rest of the 18 tracks are conceived by Falzone himself as laments, "a musical/poetic genre that has transcended cultures and time," as he puts it.

When Falzone was in Boston seeking out the music of Egyptian singer Oum Kalsoum, whom he likens to Holiday, 9/11 struck. Since he had such respect and awe for the culture America seemed to be retreating from, *Lamentations* is in part his reaction of frustration and sorrow to the ethnic slants of the conflict.

A gentle soul, Falzone is something of a hippie by his own admission, who home-birthed and home-schools his kids and bakes his own bread. His 2009 release *Tea Music* with the quartet Klang (vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz, bassist Jason Roebke, drummer Tim Daisy) makes references to varieties of the benign beverage he would sip while composing (he gave up coffee for a while due to migraine headaches). Song titles like "No Milk," "G.F.O.P." (Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe) and "China Black" have scant relevance to the superb Jimmy Giuffre-inspired music on the CD but bespeak Falzone's gourmet palate and hypersensitivity to the clarinet's timbral and tonal niceties, for which he developed an ear, aged 11, when his clarinetist uncle gave him *The Jimmy Giuffre Clarinet LP*.

Such nuance was evident in a spontaneous meeting with Austrian electronics musician



MICHAEL JACKSON

Christof Kurzmann at Chicago's Cultural Center last November. Thrown together with Kurzmann by curators of the Umbrella Festival, Falzone was forced to negotiate terms with a laptop musician for the first time. "You have two experienced musicians in a slightly awkward moment. It presents a wonderful balance between being yourself and being a receptacle," said Falzone. Both Falzone and Kurzmann generated a sweat during their duo and Falzone drew on a host of resources, including microtones, altissimo shrieks, didgeroo-like growls, as well as judicious use of low volume and space.

Not central to the vein of heavier-blowing horns that followed Ken Vandermark on the Chicago scene, Falzone is nonetheless a virtuoso and a brilliant strategist whose concepts can be through-composed. Though he wouldn't accept the term as a branding model, he identifies himself as a "third stream" exponent (to borrow Gunther Schuller's jazz/classical bridging term) and has found musicians, such as cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm, who can match his vision. Lonberg-Holm and Falzone are featured on *Aerial Age* with Daisy's group Vox Arcana, the first release on Allos Documents not under Falzone's name. The chamber-like osmosis is astonishingly good, only possible given the subtle vibrations and proximity of empathetic, versatile talent (the next record from Klang, incidentally, will include tunes associated with Benny Goodman—continuing Falzone's fascination with the blend between vibraphone and clarinet). It's like sharing the environment endemic to one of Falzone's esoteric teas: "There's this Jasmine Oolong tea from Taiwan where the tea leaves dry merely in the presence of the jasmine, absorbing its aroma."
—Michael Jackson

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