

# All That Jazz

**James Falzone is an acclaimed jazz virtuoso. He's also got serious teaching chops.**

By **Jim DeRogatis**

*Jim DeRogatis is a full-time lecturer in the Professional Writing program in the Department of English at Columbia and the co-host of "Sound Opinions," originating at WBEZ and distributed nationally on Public Radio via PRX. He blogs daily about popular music at [Vocalo.org](http://Vocalo.org). DeRogatis spent fifteen years as the rock critic at the Chicago Sun-Times, and he is the author of several books.*

**"John Coltrane said that every artist needs to believe that he is the center of the universe," Falzone says. "That sounds silly, but he means that if you don't think what you're doing is important, then why keep doing it?"**

**As world-renowned musician,** composer, and educator James Falzone sees it, Columbia's First-Year Seminar program provides students with the tools to ask "the big questions about what it means to be thoughtful and educated human beings."

The required first-year classroom is one of the rare places where students from all of Columbia's far-flung undergraduate programs and fields of interest come together, and to the extent that the arts are part of it—via projects, rigorous analysis, thinking, and writing—its goal is to prompt students to examine who they are and what they value most in life.

"John Coltrane said that every artist needs to believe that he is the center of the universe," Falzone says. "That sounds silly, but he means that if you don't think what you're doing is important, then why keep doing it? It's complicated and frustrating; there are easier ways to make a living. But I want to celebrate that and instill that sense in students," no matter what subjects they are studying.

With Coltrane's mantra in mind, Falzone, who is a full-time lecturer in the First-Year Seminar program, teaches his students to question who they are, think about what they have to say, and then help them find a way say it. "I think that's where any kind of creative person needs to spend time: on concepts of the self," he says.

These are big questions and ambitious endeavors indeed, but Falzone is uniquely positioned to guide his students through them. Raised in the Chicago suburb of Norridge, he discovered the clarinet at an early age, and then devoted his life to mastering it. "I had a good public school music teacher," he says, "but there is no magical story. I don't think I even heard it; she was just showing us flashcards and I thought, 'That clarinet looks cool; I like the combination of colors!'"

Encouraged by his uncle, Hollywood composer and jazz saxophonist James Di Pasquale, and a legendary local music teacher, jazz great Rich Corporongo, Falzone stuck with the clarinet through high school into his undergraduate studies at Northern Illinois University and on to the prestigious New England Conservatory. After graduating, he opted out of

following many of his peers to New York and returned to the Chicago area.

Starting as an adjunct and eventually becoming a lecturer, Falzone taught a variety of music theory courses at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, and served as a visiting scholar at the U.S. Naval War College before coming to Columbia in 2008 to join the First-Year Seminar program, then called New Millennium Studies, in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Falzone thrives on what he calls "the energy of creative people" at Columbia, and he loves the challenges and rewards of teaching in the First-Year Seminar program. "We believe the process of making something creative, even for the non-artist, is part of looking at concepts of the self," he says. "And for an eighteen-year-old student, that can be a truly revelatory time."

While Falzone is dedicated to his role as a full-time lecturer at the college, his career as a musician is central to his professional life. He gigs around the globe as both a solo improviser and with a variety of well-known, avant-garde jazz ensembles; he composes for orchestras and choirs; and he was recently nominated as Clarinetist of the Year by the Association of Jazz Journalists. He also runs his own independent record label, Allos Documents.

Add all this to raising three young children, whom he home schools with his wife Deanne in Oak Park, and you have to wonder: How does this forty-year-old multitasker juggle it all?

Falzone laughs. "I wake up at four in the morning to practice my instrument," he says. "I'm someone who teaches all day, goes home to play with the kids and eat dinner, plays a gig at the Hideout from 10:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m., ... and then gets [back] to the classroom at 9 a.m. But I refuse to back that off. All of those things are vital to who I am as a human being, and it's just a matter of devoting myself to these things. I spend time on my craft."

He adds, "I've come to see my teaching as another side to my artistry. It is a creative act to teach, and the two of them feed off of each other. I know I would be foolish to stop one or to lessen [my efforts toward] one because the other would suffer. They've become Siamese twins." ♦