



# JAMES FALZONE

BY CLIFFORD ALLEN

Chicago-based clarinetist James Falzone, a stalwart figure on the Windy City's improvisation scene for the better part of 15 years, would be intriguing enough on the basis of his varied output—he currently leads three different units in addition to a host of sideman and solo appearances—but being an improvising composer requires only a fraction of the responsibility to which Falzone has committed himself. Born in Chicago (Sep. 1st, 1971), he has been on the faculty of Columbia College for seven years, teaching jazz history, liberal arts courses, theory, composition and clarinet. As he put it in a recent email exchange, “At this point in my life I see a synthesis of the many activities I’m involved in. Teaching and artistry intermingle in instructive and surprising ways. Teaching jazz history to a room full of college students, many of whom have very little interaction with or knowledge of the music, reminds me how deep and vast the subject truly is. We’re doing some things traditionally—going through texts and touching upon the important epochs and people in the music—but also overturning some tables by bringing in many guests.” In addition to formal college coursework, Falzone also teaches improvisation and composition privately and in master class settings.

From a philosophical perspective, Falzone approaches teaching as a “way of knowing. To paraphrase Saint Augustine, it is the teacher. Studying music involves much more than I can say, but the basis is the self. I do think of this as serious business. My study of music, from my first trials and errors as a 10-year-old with a clarinet in my hands to advanced academic study, has formed my understanding of the world and my place in it.” Falzone began with lessons from Chicago reedplayer Rich Corpolongo (who recorded the *Sonic Blast* LP with fellow reedplayer Joe Daley in 1983) and at the New England Conservatory under pianist Ran Blake, but his education in the field has been collaborative—indeed much more than ‘Continuing Ed’. These cohorts have included drummers Tim Daisy and Tim Mulvenna, vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz, trombonist Jeb Bishop, bassist Jason Roebke, oud player Ronnie Malley and accordion player Jeremiah McLane. But Falzone didn’t just jump into the deep end—“When I moved back to my hometown after several years in Boston, I spent a fair amount of time just listening and trying to understand the sonic landscape of the community, figuring out who I shared some common language with. I have always tried to keep a few different projects going at once, representing different sides of my interests, to open up a sort of dialogue with myself.”

It may not be surprising that Falzone’s musical landscape is equally self-directed and curious; while improvisation may be paramount in how he engages with the world, his work also includes Arabic, French and Jewish traditional music as well as contemporary chamber music and jazz. His latest group is an all-reed sextet of Ken Vandermark, Ben Goldberg, Jason Stein, Ned Rothenberg and Keefe Jackson called Renga

Ensemble (full disclosure: this writer penned the liners for their forthcoming disc *The Room Is*) and blurs open music and composition by focusing on individual players’ personalities and their interactions within and without a set of structures. “Timbre is important but so is bringing together very individual voices and creating music that alternately celebrates and frustrates that individuality. I made a list of players who had a deep connection to the clarinet and who had singular voices as improvisers. Most of them had never worked together before [a few had never even met] and we had a beautiful week in Chicago rehearsing, performing and recording.” *KLANG*, a quartet with Adasiewicz, Roebke and Daisy, falls somewhere in between the axes of taut composition, gently-swinging rigor and freedom espoused by Perry Robinson, Jimmy Giuffre and Teddy Charles. A New York performance in late 2012 with Bishop’s trombone in for Adasiewicz’ vibraphone carried a different weight and, while utterly contemporary in its approach, leaned in the direction of early ‘60s Loft jazz.

The change that an individual voice brings to a work and an experience is no accident—“My pieces are not finished until I bring them before my ensembles and always the ensemble members are people I have a serious connection with,” Falzone says. “To put this a bit more metaphorically, when I compose for Renga, at the top of the page I don’t write ‘Baritone Saxophone’, I write ‘Ken Vandermark’. It makes all the difference.” Furthermore, for Falzone “improvisation is at the center of who I am and I think of it as a compositional tool, a way of organizing material. Even when I’m making fully composed music I use improvisation as a means to generate my ideas. It’s the way I work and the way that, circling back to Saint Augustine, I know. My favorite way of working is when the composed and the improvised coalesce and the line between the two becomes permeable. Part of the reason this is so important to me is that I think of improvisation as existential—it mirrors life. We exist in simultaneous dialogue with the known (the composed) and the unknown (the improvised) and I’m interested in music that reflects a sense of this mystery.”

While experiencing what isn’t knowable beforehand is necessary for creation, Falzone moves ahead with necessary conviction. In addition to being an educator, instrumentalist and composer, he runs the Allos Documents label, curating between-the-lines releases of his music and those whose work reflects similar values. “Growing up, my parents always had their own businesses and an entrepreneurial spirit has been with me since before I understood what that meant. When I began to think about how I wanted to articulate my career, or, perhaps said more accurately, the way I improvised within a developing situation, it was clear my parents’ D.I.Y. mentality was fully intact.” Nobody is going to experience things for you, but Falzone’s work and life are fine models for a few ways of doing things ethically and creatively. ❖

For more information, visit [allosmusica.org](http://allosmusica.org). Falzone’s Renga Ensemble is at Roulette Mar. 4th. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- James Falzone/Allos Musica—*The Sign and The Thing Signified* (Allos Documents, 2005)
- Jorrit Dijkstra’s The Flatlands Ensemble—*Maatjes* (Clean Feed, 2008)
- Frank Rosaly—*Cicada Music* (Delmark, 2008/2011)
- VOX ARCANA—*Aerial Age* (Allos Documents, 2010)
- KLANG—*Brooklyn Lines... Chicago Spaces* (Allos Documents, 2012)
- James Falzone’s Renga Ensemble—*The Room Is* (Allos Documents, 2013)

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