

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON GOODMAN

BY ALAIN DROUOT

WHEN CHICAGO CLARINETIST/COMPOSER/arranger James Falzone received a phone call from Neil Tesser, the Chicago Jazz Festival Programming Committee Chairman, about doing a Benny Goodman tribute he was a bit taken aback. “As a clarinetist, that’s like sacred ground, you don’t touch that music,” he said. “I am not planning to do a retrospective of his work. I have chosen a few songs that I have arranged in different ways than the Goodman arrangements. In some cases, we will do them fairly straight forward although with a modern sensibility. I have also re-harmonized ‘Memories of You,’ a ballad Goodman did a lot. It’s been tough because I don’t want to be disrespectful. I have so much love for that music, but at the same time I don’t want to just play ‘the good old ones.’”

Born and raised in Chicago, and a former student of saxophonist Rich Corpolongo, Falzone only left the city to go study at the New England Conservatory. Returning to his hometown after a few years on the East Coast seems to have paid off. “I find [Chicago’s] environment and particularly right now the community very stimulating,” he said. “There is nothing I can think of that I cannot find a way to make happen.”

Ironically, his festival “assignment” as Falzone likes to call it could not have come at a better time. The debut CD by his quartet Klang, *Tea Music* (Allos Documents), will be released on August 25. The band consists of bass player Jason Roebke, drummer Tim Daisy, and vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz, and the clarinet/vibes combination establishes a connection with Benny Goodman who enjoyed a close collaboration with

Lionel Hampton. “The idea of having clarinet and vibes is to have a great sound from an arranger/composer standpoint because the blending of the two instruments is very interesting,” said Falzone. For the festival performance, the clarinetist also plans to add guitarist Dave Miller to Klang and cast him as Charlie Christian.

When musicians are commissioned to write a composition or asked to pay tribute to a jazz legend the results can be disappointing because not enough time or thought is being put into the project. This could not be further from the truth as far as Falzone is concerned. What strikes most is the dedication with which he delved into his assignment. During his research, he decided to read Goodman’s biography *Swing, Swing,*

Swing The Life & Times of Benny Goodman (W. W. Norton) written by Ross Firestone where he found many insights on Goodman’s life and ideas. “Goodman found himself in a very interesting place about midway through his life: he was criticizing bebop, but at the same time there was a resurgence of an interest in very old jazz styles like those of George Lewis or Kid Ory,” said Falzone. “And the people reviving those earlier styles were criticizing Goodman because he was too modern and ruining the music. I find this vicious cycle of who’s ruining jazz to be very

boring. I just see a continuum of great music.”

Another sign that Falzone was the right choice for this project is that he does not believe that the life of the pieces he intends to present at the festival will end there. “I hope that I can take some of the tunes I have arranged or composed (such as my versions of ‘Memories of You’ or ‘AC-DC Current’) and make them part of [Klang’s] playing book since we’re going to be on tour in November,” said Falzone. “And if everything goes well, we might even record them because during my research I haven’t found anybody who’s done too many creative things with this music.”

For the complete interview with James Falzone, please visit www.jazzinchicago.org.



Jason Adasiewicz, Tim Daisy, James Falzone, and Jason Roebke

PHOTO: DAVID SAMPSON