

JOEL STYZENS: RELAX YOUR EARS

"Everything I was working toward all my life, how I identified myself—suddenly it was all up in the air.... It was so bad at first, I was hearing sounds distorted in my left ear, crackling, and my ears were so sensitive sometimes I could barely go outside. I didn't know if I could ever play drums again, or even music."

—Dallas Observer, May 20, 2009 Jesse Hughey, quoting Joel Styzens in "A Cure for Tinnitus at UTD?"

One year after completing his degree in percussion and moving to Chicago, Joel Styzens had established a strong presence as a drummer in the local jazz and rock scenes and landed a teaching position at Chicago's renowned Old Town School of Folk Music. In late January 2006, he woke up with the pitch of A-sharp ringing in his ears. Ordinary sounds such as conversations, cars driving past, and clattering dishes registered as painful and startling. Tinnitus and hyperacusis—ringing of the ears and extreme sound sensitivity—threatened to take away his life's work and passion.

Styzens gave up his drumming career, but he refused to give up music. He sought several experimental therapies and began composing for acoustic guitar. In 2009, on his label A-Sharp Records, Styzens released his first album, *Relax Your Ears*, which earned numerous awards, including: Editor's Pick & 5/5 Stars from CD Baby in 2009, Top Seller and Best Classical Pick from CD Baby in 2010, and the featured music selection from Chicago's O'Hare International Airport in 2011.

The compositions on *Relax Your Ears* employ varied and unusual tunings. "I hear all these full, resonant sounds and chords that I just can't find in standard tuning, or typical alternate tunings. I had to find a way to make them," says Styzens. "I tune and place my fingers on the fretboard until the right sounds appear."

His intuitive experimentation led to a collaborative partnership with Chicago Symphony Orchestra cellist Katinka Kleijn, who is prominently featured on the album and whose soaring melodies add a level of depth and emotional intensity. Guitar and cello carries throughout, but saxophone gives a jazz flavor to songs like "Take Anything." Cajon adds a world music flair to songs like "7 8 6," which shows off Styzens' percussionist sensibilities through shifting time signatures. Despite a diversity of instrumentation and textures, the resulting album is unified like movements of a symphony or moments of a film score, combining soothing aspects of New Age music with the compelling energy of Classical Crossover.

Currently, Styzens is working on his much anticipated second album, *Resonance*, due to be released in the spring of 2012. It features cellist Sophie Webber from Oxford, England as well the addition of pieces for hammered dulcimer and arrangements for string-quintet. "The music on *Resonance* has a very uplifting and new exciting energy," says Styzens. "It maintains the space, breath, and balance I focused on achieving with my first album, but has the addition of more layers of lush strings and heightened dynamic and texture contrasts – creating a greater sense of depth, power, and forward motion."

Four years after his hearing conditions changed his life, Styzens has no intention of focusing on the negative. Tinnitus and hyperacusis have allowed him to uncover new musical passions, composing and playing acoustic guitar. "Composing my own music is more fulfilling than anything I've ever done—it comes from a very deep place."

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