

## 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 treatments and 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 Editor's Pick and 5/5 Stars from CD Baby and 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Indie International Songwriting Contest.

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.

Styzens continues to cope with the effects of the tinnitus and hyperacusis, but they have improved gradually with therapy, including a new treatment called Neuromonics, which employs customized white noise and music that interacts with the auditory system. Such experimental therapies have inspired Styzens to compose experimental music as a form of personal therapy. His latest compositions employ painful trigger sounds as instruments. For example, washing dishes hurts, so one of his musical sketches utilizes metal and glass objects such as household plates, glasses, pots, and pans. Using ear-plugs when he plays, Styzens draws on his background as a percussionist to

reclaim sounds that have had negative associations for him, turning them into positive and intriguing tunes.

Styzens intends to use A-Sharp Records as a forum where musicians with hearing ailments can connect, collaborate on recordings, and give each other support, using the label's website to raise awareness about hearing conservation. According to the American Tinnitus Association, over 50 million Americans suffer from tinnitus. Supportive networks, as well as widespread public education on the condition and its prevention, are increasingly necessary in a high-volume world.

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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