A Music Teacher's Battle with Tinnitus and Hyperacusis

Daniel Born, ATA Director of Research & Special Projects

Joel Styzens, a Chicago musician and teacher at the renowned Old Town School of Folk Music, was diagnosed with tinnitus and hyperacusis over three years ago – a reality that essentially ended his career as a professional drummer. But that didn't stop him from developing a refined approach to his music and his dedication to teaching.

A Passion Becomes a Problem

Life changing experiences caused irreparable damage to Joel's hearing: childhood ear infections; practicing drums for up to four hours a day; performing on stage with rock and jazz bands six nights a week; and teaching music by day. "I had a life of nonstop sound from 1999 to 2005," says Joel. "I woke up one Sunday morning with a loud ringing in my head and ears." His tinnitus was accompanied by hyperacusis, an intense sensitivity to everyday sounds. He was 24 years old.

Cellist Katinka Kleijn and Joel Styzens

"In the beginning, I felt all alone with this, but then went through a process of acceptance," explains Joel. "I changed my negative emotional response to these problems into a more positive one. I started to focus on moving forward with my life, concentrating more on the present and figuring out how to keep my passion for music alive."

Creating Songs of Healing

Joel met with audiologist Jill Meltzer, Au.D., who explained that his audiogram indicated a high-frequency hearing loss and that the tone he hears is *A-sharp.* Under Meltzer's supervision, he began a treatment program called Neuromonics, a form of sound therapy. "I used the Neuromonics device for over two years, every day for two to three hours. It was something to go to for relief. My comfort level increased."

"I have some ideas, like restaurants and music venues that dedicate one night a month to being extra quiet so people with tinnitus and hyperacusis can go out and socialize again," says Joel. "I'd also like to start a tinnitus support group here in the Chicago area."

To maximize his treatment process, Joel had to phase out the majority of his live drumming from his musical repertoire. He switched to acoustic guitar and began the slow, synchronous process of healing and constructing a new album of relaxing, spiritually elevating songs. He joined forces with Chicago Symphony Orchestra cellist, Katinka Kleijn, and a host of music friends to create *Relax Your Ears* (available at www.ata.org/store). "Writing the new music for the album was a form of therapy for me. If it wasn't for my hearing issues, *Relax Your Ears* would not exist," says Joel.

Joel Styzens' Life Today

"The sound of traffic horns, dishes clanking, alarms or squeaking car brakes makes me want to jump out of my skin," says Joel. To manage this, he wears custom-molded musician's earplugs – with an interchangeable filter that allows him to fine tune the level of protection – during loud events and while practicing and performing. He also masks Chicago's city sounds and the high-pitch, ringing background noise in his head with in-ear, adjustable white noise generators.

Joel still teaches percussion but now uses electronic drums played at lower volumes than conventional ones. He is also moving toward teaching acoustic guitar and piano.

Changing the World, One Idea at a Time

"I have some ideas, like restaurants and music venues that dedicate one night a month to being extra quiet so people with tinnitus and hyperacusis can go out and socialize again," says Joel. "I'd also like to start a tinnitus support group here in the Chicago area." He spreads tinnitus awareness on his new Web site, www.relax-your-ears.com, and through his record label, A-Sharp Records.

"I feel like I can do something positive to provide hope and to inspire and help people with tinnitus and hyperacusis. There are so many things I want to accomplish and I feel like I am just getting started. I get a good number of e-mails from people around the world telling me how my message and music have inspired them. I feel like this is what I am supposed to be doing with my life."