

The Chicago Musical Examiner

By Neil Tesser

Tao Tunes by Flippomusic

And now, in the category of “Bet you didn’t see *that* one coming,” I give you the new album by Chicago pianist, composer, and now vocalist Dave Flippo.

Flippo has been fooling around at the intersection of jazz and various world musics for some time now, resulting in two albums of “global jazz” under the oddly cartoonish name Flippomusic (which, let’s face it, sounds like it should be the official muzak of Bikini Bottom). Those albums had plenty to recommend them musically. And it turns out that they also helped facilitate Flippo’s interest in the verses of the Tao Te Ching – the foundation-stone of Taoism, one of the world’s oldest and most widely-practiced religious philosophies.

Flippo has studied the *Tao Te Ching* for years. (“Tao” means “path” or “the way.”) He has absorbed its weightless yet weighty lessons, and since 2004 he has been crafting his own lyrics to express its underlying philosophical tenets. From that effort now comes Tao Tunes (Opplif Records), an absolutely unexpected, and unexpectedly successful, setting of 17 lessons from the *Tao Te Ching*. (Flippo will mark the album’s release tonight, Dec. 6, at Jerry’s, the improbably hip sandwich shop at 1938 W. Division near Damen.)

Actually, to call *Tao Tunes* “unexpected” barely scratches the surface of the yoga mat. The rise of Herman Cain was “unexpected”: *Tao Tunes* operates on another frequency altogether.

Tailoring a sensible range of jazz idioms to fit the lessons of various verses, Flippo has constructed a tuneful program that certainly stands up musically. Much credit goes to the work of his longtime collaborators – Dan Hesler (sax and flute), Donn De Santo (bass), and Heath Chappell (drums) – plus judicious guest contributions from a handful of high-profile Chicago artists, including guitarist Neal Alger, cellist Larry Gray, and globetrotting percussionist Hamid Drake.

But despite the strong musicianship and solid solos, notably from reedman Hesler, Flippo sets his sights on different game with this disc. Here, the message is the music.

Other jazz artists have occasionally gone with “serious” messages. Perhaps the most notable recent example was pianist Horace Silver’s widely decried “United States of Mind” albums in the 70s, which sought to convey similar enlightenment – lessons on the virtues of vegetarianism, meditation, anger management, and the like – in a hard-bop setting. But other than attempts to set liturgical texts to music, I can’t think of anyone who’s so diligently turned his musical idiom to the service of much heavier religious philosophy as Flippo does here. The fact that it works is almost a bonus.

For example, take Flippo’s adaptation of Chapter 11 from the *Tao Te Ching*, which speaks to the value of empty space – i.e., the idea that what is missing often holds more value than what is present. (This concept, a bedrock of most eastern philosophies, is also entirely and famously essential to improvisation: consider Miles Davis’s often-mentioned contention that “what you don’t play” is more important than what one *does* play.)

One translation from the ancient Chinese presents the start of this verse as the following:

*Thirty spokes join in one hub
In its emptiness, there is the function of a vehicle
Mix clay to create a container
In its emptiness, there is the function of a container*

Flippo’s adaptation preserves the sense but Americanizes the language to get the message ready for his music:

*There’s thirty spokes on the hub of a wheel,
But it’s the hole in the middle that is useful.
A lump of clay can be shaped into a bowl,
But it’s the space deep inside that is useful – so useful.*

The *Tao Te Ching* brims with similarly trippy wisdom and counter-intuitive metaphors. Chapter 36 speaks of paradox: “If you want to shrink something, you must first allow it to expand. . . .,” it reads; “This is called the subtle perception of the way things are.” Flippo again modernizes the text, expands the original two stanzas to five, and sets it against a hard-driving four-four beat:

*That which shrinks must be full.
That which falls must be sturdy.
That which falls must first be raised.
Before one gets, there must be giving. . . .*

*This is how the world behaves,
The simple truth of how it goes,
Two opposites create a whole,
And everywhere a paradox.*

Not your usual jazz-album lyrics. And not your usual jazz vocals: Flippo himself handles almost all the singing, and his pipes are efficient but nothing special. In fact, your first reaction (like mine) may well be a mix of skepticism and confusion. Intonation is not the issue – Flippo hits the notes, with an ardent sincerity – but his voice has little of what we’ve come to expect in terms of polish, sheen, or texture.

However, these are lyrics that do not call for a more practiced vocal approach; nor would such an approach necessarily benefit the music. Often, the words often have a slightly clunky meter; the imagery bends to classic allegory; and the syntax, placed in the service of philosophical advice and moral judgment, has a self-consciously handmade quality, handsome without embellishment. Flippo’s voice offers a perfect correlative.

A fine example is the song “Sick” (drawn from Chapter 71 of the *Tao Te Ching*). The music’s modal melody skips to a middle-eastern lope, accented by Hamid Drake on *dumbek*, embracing Flippo’s quite idiosyncratic lyric:

*To see your ignorance is wisdom.
To think you know it all is sick.
So then if one is sick of sickness,
Then one’s no longer sick.
The sage is sick of his sickness.
He acts to fix his sickness.
And when he’s licked his sickness.
The sage is no longer sick.*

Lyrics like this don’t function the way a torch song or ballad or pop vehicle might; the words would sound ridiculous if given a “professional” treatment. This music isn’t about show biz; the more you listen, the clearer it becomes that Flippo’s untrained timbre benefits the lyrics in ways that no jazz diva or slick crooner could match.

While I’m obviously open to the literal fusion of music and philosophy that Flippo has undertaken here, neither did the prospect of such a project fill me with glee; or anticipatory hope; or, for that matter, confidence – too many such attempts have fallen so fearsomely flat. But whether it’s the craftsmanship of the writing, or the surprising appeal of Flippo’s vocals, or the strength of the *Tao Te Ching* itself, *Tao Tunes* has definitely left its mark on my sensibilities. And a few of its earworms, against all odds, have burrowed deep into my right brain.

Flippomusic hits tonight at Jerry’s around 9:15, as part of a twin bill that begins at 8 with a set from Jazzinformation (the excellent quartet led by saxist Jim Gailloro, which also plays each Monday just down the street, at Smoke Daddy’s). The path is clear.