

## Don Falcone



### Poetry And Melting Euphoria By Jack Gold-Molina (October 2014)

Producer and multi-instrumentalist Don Falcone was a poet before relocating to San Francisco from Pennsylvania in the early 1980's. Since then he has made a point of diversifying his musical endeavors, getting involved in projects with styles ranging from punk, to psychedelic rock, to electronica, and contributing tracks for television programs on the History Channel, A&E, and the Discovery Channel. As well as working with such bands as Melting Euphoria, Clearlight, and Astralfish, he founded the space rock collective Spirits Burning in the mid 1980's originally as a rock and roll band. He then resurrected it in the mid 1990's, inviting musicians locally as well as internationally to contribute, and since has worked extensively with members of the Gong and Hawkwind families among others, with more than a dozen highly acclaimed CD releases.

Perfect Sound Forever: How did you get started playing music?

Don Falcone: In grade school, there was a cool music class where everyone was given a recorder, and we spent a bit of time on the basics. I also had a year of piano lessons. In high school, I answered a call to learn trombone. They were kind of desperate. The marching band was down to one trombonist and he was the starting linebacker on the football team. I ended up being in marching band and orchestra for the next seven years. Also during high school, I became friends with a tuba player who was an ambassador for bass guitar. She often talked about the coolness of playing bass and coached me through my first bass lessons. The timing was perfect. I was discovering rock music. It also led to me playing challenging bass parts in a number of college plays.

PSF: Who were your early musical influences?

DF: Early on, it was clear that I liked instrumentals and unexpected sounds, and wanted to emulate some of what I heard. Think spaghetti western soundtracks, mystery movie soundtracks. So I would stick close pins and pieces of paper on the strings of our living room piano, and pound away. As I got into the Ventures, and then rock, the instrument that grabbed my attention was the organ. Loved the weaving organ in Jethro Tull concept albums, courtesy of John Evan. Loved the growl of Deep Purple's Jon Lord, and the heavier side of Tony Banks on the *Genesis Live* album. Then I started to get into odd twiddlies and soundscapes by various synth-oriented artists and bands: Vangelis, Eno, Tangerine Dream, Hawkwind, Clearlight. However, I was still primarily a bassist. Going back and listening to Hawkwind's *Space Ritual* recently, I was surprised by how much I was influenced by the Lemmy period of Hawkwind. For a brief time, I used a Phase 90, and got a thick sound like Adrian Shaw got on the Hawkwind *PXR5* album. I also wrote a couple of songs using a Big Muff distortion box, experimenting with a sound that I first heard on a couple of Nazareth songs, featuring bassist Pete Agnew. Those boxes even defined my early keyboard sound. I was in a couple of bands where I would add the Phase 90 and Big Muff to a string ensemble.

PSF: How did you establish your own musical voice, your own creative musical style and approach?

DF: Maybe adding a Phase 90 and Big Muff to a string ensemble? I did like the idea of an intense explosion when it was time for a solo, or friendly growl. Whenever I hear a question about one's musical voice, I think of Frances Mayes, my advisor when I was working on my Masters in English at San Francisco State University, and who went on to write *Under the Tuscan Sun*. One day in class, someone asked "Is it important to find your voice?" Frances answered: "Yes, it is important to find your voices." I've never forgotten that response. I love the implication that we are plural beings, and should be plural artists. So, how did I establish my musical voices? I definitely wanted to play, sing, and sound like I cared. When I hear (or feel that) in other artists, I'm more likely to be moved. So, I tried to write songs, create parts, pick sounds that worked towards that goal. Additionally, I wanted to represent a sense of creativity, trying something new, hearing something new. For example, at the time I first heard Ennio Morricone and say, *Once Upon A Time In The West*, I didn't understand that a key ingredient to a soundtrack is sound design. The soundtrack can be the music, the natural sounds, and even the lack of sounds, all of which feed into the whole. It's something that is now firmly in the back of my mind, and weaved into some of my music output. As a lyricist, there was a natural plurality. While I did write some personal songs, or snuck in some personal moments, I often tried to approach songs like I was someone else. I also developed lyrics from different creative mindsets. Sometimes I went with my poetry voice (what I was studying at school), sometimes a more traditional song style (rhymes, catchy phrases), and other times a more tribal approach, via chants and mantras. Then, after initially writing songs for me to sing, or another male vocalist, Spirits Burning began a run of female vocalists. I suddenly had to reconsider the voice I was using. Sometimes, that meant being a bit more androgynous.

PSF: Can you talk about some of your early musical projects and some of the artists and musicians that you worked with?

DF: When I came to San Francisco in 1980, I was primarily a bass player. I did briefly play string ensemble in a punk band that I helped name. I suggested Noh Poetry and they went with No Poetry. The lead singer was Meg Chinn (later of Pigface). The Spirits Burning of that decade had various line-ups, including some musicians who returned years later when Spirits Burning was resurrected. Guitarists Joe Diehl and Jerry Jeter, singers Catherine Foreman and Tracy Williams. Into the '90's, I was in a number of ambient bands and projects on Silent Records, alongside label head Kim Cascone. Thessalonians and Spice Barons were the high points. Thessalonians also included tabla player Larry Thrasher (later of Psychic TV). Around the same time, I was in the original Melting Euphoria. We were a trio. I played keys, read poetry, sang. I had previously played with the bassist in a space-prog band called Red Rain. In fact, the first Melting Euphoria album was re-released in 2013 by Gonzo Multimedia, and it includes two Red Rain songs as bonus tracks. In the mid-'90's, I started a solo project, Spaceship Eyes. It began as a synth project, and moved towards experimental drum 'n' bass when I got signed to Cleopatra Records. Harvey Bainbridge of Hawkwind guested on one track, and Freaky Chakra did a remix. I had a couple of tracks in the *Better Living Through Circuitry* rave movie, including the opening number. Right before Spirits Burning resurrected, I co-produced and played on the first Trap album, which featured many members of Cartoon and PFS.

PSF: How did the original version of your band Spirits Burning come together in the 1980's?

DF: After I moved to San Francisco in 1980, I started jamming with musicians in a garage, close to Golden Gate Park. We eventually called ourselves Kameleon. This was the predecessor of Spirits Burning. We did original pieces, some of which later got incorporated into the modern Spirits Burning, and a couple of covers, like King Crimson's "21st Century Schizoid Man." As things became more serious, we rented out the same practice room that No Poetry had used. The studio complex was a very fertile place to play. Neighbor bands included Until December, Consolidated, The Beatnigs, Broun Fellinis, Mrs. Green, and Faith No More. For Kameleon, I was the primary songwriter, played bass, occasional keys, and initially did half the vocals, and then almost all of the vocals when guitarist/vocalist Jerry Jeter left and Joe Diehl entered.

By late 1985, there was a cadence of things that led to renaming the band Spirits Burning. I wrote a song called "Spirits Burning" and it immediately felt like a good band name, and we were in the middle of another guitarist change, with Jerry returning. Plus, Kameleon was too close to The Chameleons, and it was becoming clear that lots of people didn't know that we wanted Kameleon pronounced the same as chameleon. These things happen. Finally, my move from bassist to full-time keyboardist was almost complete. This led to a change in the types of songs I was writing, and the overall sound.

PSF: What inspired you to redefine Spirits Burning in the mid-1990's?

DF: At some point during the Spaceship Eyes run, I got some offers to do covers of rock songs for tribute CD's. It really wasn't what Spaceship Eyes was doing, so I resurrected Spirits Burning. Next up, came an offer to play live, opening for Belgium prog band Present. I ended up creating a setlist that mixed Spaceship Eyes material, the rock covers, and some instrumentals from the early Kameleon and Spirits Burning. For the gig, we named ourselves Spirits Burning vs. Spaceship Eyes. Soon after that, I decided to do the first full-length Spirits Burning album, bringing in guest musicians to make it special.

PSF: Was it your original goal to seek out international players to record with? How did that come about?

DF: The original thought was to bring together musicians to celebrate space rock, regardless of their location. Many of the initial musicians recorded their parts at my home studio. A number of friends and co-workers lived nearby (like Cartoon/Trap drummer Gary Parra, and multi-instrumentalist Purjah). Plus, I started inviting people who lived nearby that I didn't know, like Mushroom drummer Pat Thomas. In fact, the San Francisco Bay area was a strong enough destination point that I could meet with and record Daevid Allen each time he visited the city. In terms of the long-distance side of things, I wanted to consider all angles. I started inviting musicians from other parts of the U.S. (like drummer Paul Williams of Quarkspace, who I had met at a Strange Daze fest), and then I started to reach out further, for example, to the UK (and people like Trev Thoms, and then Porcupine Tree's Stephen Wilson). This was pre-Facebook, even pre-Myspace. Making contact often meant deeper searches, and then sending an invite, and hoping to stir the person's interest. There was also a domino effect, not necessarily planned. By inviting one person, it might lead to interest from one of their friends. For example, I also met Roger Neville-Neil (and Thom the World Poet) at Strange Daze, and Roger eventually put me in touch with Jill Calvert who gave me some of Bob Calvert's poetry performances for use in new songs.

PSF: Can you talk about what the experience has been like in organizing and producing albums with this band?

DF: Different hats to wear, different roles to play. I like the variety. It keeps things fresh. At heart, I'm a musician first. I still enjoy playing keyboards, bass, percussion, or any other sound that lets me be part of the band sound. It's also a role where I'm free to experiment and develop new sounds. I still like writing music, starting a song, and leading things forward. I find it just as interesting to have someone else start a song and see where it leads. I enjoy reaching out to people and trying to intrigue them with the concept. It's a special feeling when people say 'yes.' It's a special feeling when their parts arrive and I add them to the master session, and the piece continues to bloom. I've grown to love mixing and producing. This is very different from where I was in the '80's, when I tended to lean on engineers for demo recordings. It's an interesting challenge to put myself in the shoes or sandals of each musician and consider what makes them shine, or sound cool, in the context of the piece.

PSF: What inspires you to do it, and what do you think you gain from it on a creative level?

DF: Over the years, I've found enjoyment, enlightenment, and a sense of wonder in listening to music created by many musicians. We all know the feeling we get when we are turned on by a song. It might be haunting, calming, killer, or bring on a tear. Spirits Burning is an opportunity to celebrate those feelings, and create new special moments. Spirits Burning is also a dream come true, in the sense that I often get to work with musicians that I've admired over the years. On a creative level, it's a vehicle where I can try many things, and continue to grow as a musician, producer, and engineer. It's definitely helped to have co-conspirators like Bridget (Wishart) over the last half-decade, where we can work together towards a common goal. I continually learn from her and other crew members. I'd also like to think that I've helped some of those crew members try something new too.

PSF: What do you recommend for artists and musicians who would like to pursue this kind of recording and production work?

DF: Find a comfortable speed in developing your skills and understanding the tools and process. Consider approaching each song, or a collection of songs in a different way, in the same way you might try a different song key, tempo, or style. For example, do some MIDI-based pieces to develop your chops with virtual instruments. Do some songs using a workstation's automation controls. Do some songs touching rarely-used plug-ins. Take a moment to experiment with reshaping sounds. Just as important, connect with other musicians. Collaborate. Be willing to learn from what others can teach you. See where it takes you.

Also see [Falcone's website](#)



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