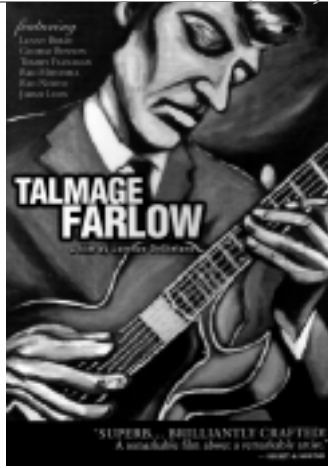


Film Review Talmage Farlow

A Film by Lorenzo DeStefano
Productions A-Propos
59 minutes

By **Tony Mottola**
Jersey Jazz Editor



Lorenzo DeStefano's fine documentary portrait of master jazz guitarist Tal Farlow is much like its subject — at once modest and masterful.

Originally released in 1981 and now re-mastered on DVD, *Talmage Farlow* forgoes narration to allow the guitarist's fascinating story to unfold naturally through languid camera shots, still photographs, news clips and gig advertisements, and in the words of the film's participants, including George Benson, Jimmy Lyon, Red Norvo, Farlow and others.

Tal Farlow arrived on New York's jazz scene in the late 1940s, a tall, handsome, soft-spoken young southerner. His self-effacing manner belied a prodigious talent and in short order, through his work in the bands of Buddy DeFranco and Artie Shaw and in the landmark Red Norvo Trio with Charles Mingus, Farlow established himself as one of the era's top guitarists. His innovative style, original harmonic sense, unique tone and quicksilver riffs earned him accolades and a shelf full of music awards, including from *Down Beat* as "New Star" of 1954 and as the magazine's guitar poll winner in 1956 and 1957.

Then suddenly, at the peak of his powers in 1958, Farlow departed the jazz world and essentially went missing. "Whatever Happened to Tal Farlow?" and "Won't You Come Home, Tal Farlow?" asked headlines of the day's music press.

Talmage Farlow answers the questions and solves the mystery. Tal Farlow was no enigma, as he was sometimes viewed. He was, rather, a man with a clear sense of himself and of how he wanted to live his life, and viewing DeStefano's sensitive film it's hard to dispute the choices he made.

At one point in the film Farlow talks about the demands of performing jazz at a high level and the toll it takes, noting how many great players were dead by the age of 35. Approaching that age in his own life he opted out and relocated to Sea Bright on the Jersey shore where he resumed his previous career as a sign painter.

DeStefano shows us scenes of Farlow fishing off his riverfront dock and plying his trade as a sign maker. In one vignette we see his famously large hands slowly and painstakingly lettering "Fat Chance" on a boat's stern while on the sound track those same hands blaze through a lightning quick "Have You Met Miss Jones." The pairing of sound and image effectively juxtaposes the two very different but equally artistic sides of this unusual man.

But Farlow never really left music behind, playing frequently in New Jersey, for example as seen jamming with guitarist Lenny Breaux, first on his dock and later in a local club.

Comeback? "I didn't leave. I've been playing. Things I do just don't get reported," Farlow insists.

"If he just plays in his own music room he's still playing. I hate that word, comeback. With Tal it just doesn't mean anything," adds Red Norvo.

The film travels back and forth between Sea Bright and Manhattan where the guitarist records and rehearses with bassist Red Mitchell and pianist Tommy Flanagan in an airy penthouse studio. While playing, a gentle smile never leaves his face, clearly showing the great joy Farlow found in his music.

The documentary culminates with a performance by the trio at New York's Public Theater where the guitarist is introduced by impresario Joe Papp: "The mastery of an instrument transcends time. A master guitarist, a lovable man who loves his instrument — Tal Farlow." (A CD of the performance is available at www.TalFarlowFilm.com.)

Musical highlights of the DVD include "Autumn in New York," "Fascinating Rhythm" (a favorite tune of Farlow's), "I Love You," "Flamingo," "Jordu" and "I Hear A Rhapsody."

Guitarists and jazz fans will understandably delight in this film, but it is a story about a way of life as much as it is about music. Tal Farlow found a delicate balance between artistic excellence and simple peace of mind, and the path he chose to follow is to be much admired. So is DeStefano's film. **JJ**

The documentary will air on New Jersey Networks NJN Classics series next fall. We'll note the airdates in these pages when the schedule is announced.



In the Penthouse: Red Mitchell, Tommy Flanagan and Tal Farlow.