

Pianist Zeitlin marks first album's 50th anniversary

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Denny Zeitlin scoring "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" in 1978. Photo by Josephine Zeitlin. (Josephine Zeitlin)

It's just over 50 years ago that Denny Zeitlin sat down at the piano in the Columbia 30th Street Studio in Manhattan, a converted church where Glenn Gould had recorded Bach's "Goldberg Variations," where Miles Davis had recorded "Kind of Blue." It was Zeitlin's first recording session. He was 25, closing in on his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University -- a busy man, getting ready to launch dual careers as jazz pianist and psychiatrist.

"It was pure excitement that I felt" as the Oct. 23, 1963, session began, says Zeitlin, who, at 75, is still a busy man, still practicing psychiatry, still performing, as he will Friday night, solo, in Oakland.



Denny Zeitlin scoring "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" in 1978. Photo by Josephine Zeitlin. (Josephine Zeitlin)

"I was quite relaxed, because it wasn't going to be a session where I would sight-read a whole bunch of complex stuff; we were going to play tunes that I knew," he continues. "And the drummer was Ben Riley, who was playing with Thelonious Monk at the time, and the bassist was Ben Tucker, a marvelous player. So from the start the vibe was so good, so right, and the producer, John Hammond, turned out to be this wonderfully ebullient man; there was this little boy in him, he loved jazz so much."

A 50th anniversary edition of the album, "Flute Fever," led by flutist Jeremy Steig (also a newcomer in 1963), is being released this month, the session's first time on CD. Credited with discovering Billie Holiday and Bob Dylan, Hammond used it to introduce Zeitlin to Columbia Records. He would go on to record four acoustic trio albums for the label -- and one can hear why.

On tunes including "So What" (introduced by Davis on "Kind of Blue"), the pianist's playing is a model of structure and fluency, intelligence and intuition. He responds and shapes in dialogue with his musical environment. One hears the same qualities in his latest album, "Both/And," a solo electro-acoustic disc released over the summer -- a sort of 50-year bookend to "Flute Fever" -- on which Zeitlin "extends the multi-keyboard genre-integrating explorations I was involved with back in 1968-78," as he puts it.

This year is filled with landmarks for Zeitlin: It has been 50 years since "Flute Fever," the first of his dozens of recordings (including "Invasion of the Body Snatchers; he scored the 1978 movie remake); and 60 years since he began playing professionally, in 1953, when he was 15 and formed his own trio. And he's thinking ahead to Friday's solo show at Piedmont Piano Company in Oakland, then to a new live trio album in 2014, as well as a new duo project.

He is reflecting on all this in his office at the UC San Francisco Medical Center, where he has maintained his private psychiatric practice since 1968. (He also has a practice at his Marin home). A professor on the clinical faculty at UCSF Medical School since '68, Zeitlin dresses as if it were still the late '60s and he were about to jump onto a bandstand: black leather pants, silk psychedelic-patterned shirt, boots.



Denny Zeitlin playing multiple keyboards. Photo by Josephine Zeitlin. (Josephine Zeitlin)

Discussing his two careers, Zeitlin mines a common vocabulary: Notions of "immersion," "exploration" and "adventure" pepper his comments, along with "energy" and "the deepest kind of communication." In working with a patient, he says, he looks to uncover patterns of "psychological difficulties. The challenge is, can I connect with them, so that we can become internal psychological explorers?" he says. He aims for a collaboration where he sets his own self-boundaries aside as he enters into the patient's psychological world.

In psychiatry, this is an example of what's been described as the merger state. Musicians often call it "the zone," a place where the members of a band are so attuned to one another that the music seems to happen independently of them. Example: Lately, Zeitlin has resumed his collaboration with Sonoma-based drummer George Marsh, with whom he often worked in the '60s and '70s.

He is "one of the great drummers of the world," Zeitlin says, "with a marvelous sense of time and structure and fantasy and adventure, so when we play together, just the two of us, it feels like we're mutual explorers going into new territory. We begin from ground zero, no preconceptions. I slide into my cockpit of keyboards, hit the 'record' button, and we go off on a trip."

For Zeitlin, the trip began in Chicago, where his father was a radiologist, his mother a speech pathologist. Both played piano, and Zeitlin remembers sitting in their laps, plashing at piano keys. His classical studies began at 6 or 7. Then, in eighth grade, a teacher turned him on to jazz pianist George Shearing, "and I felt that I was catapulted into that music; I was waiting for it all my life."

Through his undergraduate years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and his medical school years at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Zeitlin played jazz at night with whoever was in the neighborhood: guitarist Wes Montgomery, saxophonists Joe Farrell and Gary Bartz, the best of the best. After moving to the Bay Area in 1964 for his internship at San Francisco General Hospital, he grabbed a regular Monday night spot for his trio at the Trident club in Sausalito, where, one night in 1967 life changed again. Through the doors walked Josephine Shady, a San Jose State psychology major. Zeitlin remembers looking up from the keyboard and thinking, "This is going to be the shortest set I've ever played."

They've been married 44 years. And while Zeitlin has navigated his two careers, she has become a landscape designer and independent film actress -- as well as "my most discerning musical critic," he says. She is "the most creative person I've ever known, with the capacity to constantly take a fresh look at the world. And she is the finest chef I've ever encountered -- the dishes she creates are like Coltrane solos," he says, offering a jazz musician's highest compliment. "They are never exactly repeated."

Every night, they grab a bottle of wine, he says, "and the celebration begins."