

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
JAZZ REVIEW

Pianist Denny Zeitlin plunges into the unfamiliar

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Can a jazz pianist be forward-looking and nostalgic at the same time? Can his music sound warmly romantic and lushly Impressionistic and bracingly dissonant all at once?

Yes it can, if the pianist is Denny Zeitlin, who returned to his former hometown over the weekend, leading his trio in a deeply satisfying performance. Though some moments of Zeitlin's first show Friday night at Club Blujazz veered dangerously close to cocktail pianism – those frilly little figures high up on the keyboard have got to go – for the most part Zeitlin's work proved unconventional in thought and uncommonly imaginative in execution.

For starters, Zeitlin builds an improvisation in idiosyncratic ways. He might open with a series of chords that seemingly drift nowhere before eventually quoting a snippet of a tune, then transform it in volatile, unexpected ways. He might shift from thunderous octaves to delicate single-note lines to fluid arpeggios at the drop of a sixteenth note, then pause for a moment to take it all in. The man simply does not follow the (unwritten) rules of mainstream jazz improvisation, and his music sounds all the more original for it.

The sometimes misty, sometimes craggy chords that opened his engagement gave scant clue that he was launching Cole Porter's "I Love You" But the thematic material was far less important than what he did with it, the pianist coaxing from Porter's tune jagged melodic lines, pungent tone clusters and wildly irregular phrases. Porter himself would not have recognized portions of the piece, but he might have been delighted by how far Zeitlin ran with it.

Not just Zeitlin, but also bassist Buster Williams and drummer Matt Wilson, who have been playing with the pianist for years and shrewdly anticipated his moves. The very live acoustics of the new Club Blujazz gave Williams and Wilson sonically enhanced roles. And though Williams sometimes was overamplified, there was no resisting the ultra-fat quality of his tone or the lyric urgency of his lines. Wilson, too, played with more presence and emotional commitment than usual, ratcheting up the intensity level when Zeitlin needed it.

Together, this trio functioned as a single organism on "Wishing on the Moon," which inspired in Zeitlin his most sensitive ballad playing of the night. In John Coltrane's "Mr. P.C.," a longtime staple of the Zeitlin repertory, the pianist growled lower in the keyboard – and for a longer period of time – than most of his peers would dare. The crashing chords and rhythmic tension between his hands gave the performance a heroic quality that, fortunately, did not veer into bombast.

All of which set the stage for the most ambitious piece of the set, Zeitlin's "Slickrock," an epic tone poem that portrays the terrors and joys of biking through treacherous terrain. If the journey went on a bit too long this time around, if Wilson's numbingly repetitive thumping toward the end of the piece became difficult to bear, one still had to admire Zeitlin and friends for reviving this daring work.

When was the last time, after all, that you heard a jazz composition quoting the "Dies Irae," while ominous tones hovered around it?

Only an iconoclastic thinker like Zeitlin would come up with such an essay, and only he would offer it to an audience happily sipping cocktails all the while.

He's one of a kind.

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