

## Denny Zeitlin - acoustic-electronic again

Lee Hildebrand

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Denny Zeitlin is appearing at the Piedmont Piano Co. in Oakland on Saturday. Photo: Ho

Four decades ago, when [Denny Zeitlin](#) first began combining acoustic piano and electronic keyboards on recordings and in live performances, it would take him six hours to unplug and tear down his bank of synthesizers in the studio of his Kentfield home, transport them to a Bay Area club or concert hall and put them all back together again. He describes the setup as looking like a 747 cockpit.

Undoing the rig and getting it back home took another six. Zeitlin, a psychiatrist by day and musician on some nights and weekends, repeated the process frequently during his 10 years at the helm of a trio with bassist [Mel Graves](#) and drummer [George Marsh](#).

The Chicago-born pianist and composer put electronics largely behind him after scoring the soundtrack for the hit 1978 remake of the 1956 science fiction classic "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." In recent months, however, he returned to the acoustic-electronic realm by recording an album of original music in the studio next to the home office where he sees many of his patients. He sees others at UCSF, where he came as an intern in 1964 and has long served as a clinical professor of psychiatry.

## **50<sup>th</sup> anniversary**

Currently in the mixing stage of production, the CD is planned for release in June or July in celebration of Zeitlin's 50th anniversary as a recording artist. The equipment he used on it was far less bulky and much less expensive than what he worked with in the 1970s.

"Now there are synthesizers that live in computers that have a hundred times more capability than the Synclavier had for a tiny fraction of the cost," Zeitlin, 74, explains. He refers to an instrument he once coveted but never owned because of its \$100,000 price tag.

"It's all in the context of utilizing all the multi-timbral possibilities that are available now," he says of the upcoming CD. "It's been a very exciting experience to just sit down here in the studio with no particular pressure and just let myself go wherever the music seems to want to go. I don't have to worry about the expense of recording tape. It's all digitally recorded using Pro Tools."

In recent years, between occasional performances with bassist [Buster Williams](#) and drummer Matt Wilson, Zeitlin has been focusing on solo piano recitals. He'll give a concert of popular and jazz standards, original compositions and free improvisations, including selections from his current CD, "Wherever You Are - Midnight Moods for Solo Piano," Saturday at [Piedmont Piano Co.](#) in Oakland.

Although "Midnight Moods" in the title suggest so-called easy-listening albums of yesteryear, Zeitlin reshapes such time-honored melodies as "Body and Soul," "I Hear a Rhapsody" and "You Don't Know What Love Is" on his disc through extensive improvisation and re-harmonization.

"I think if the listener is willing to meet the music halfway, he or she hopefully will be taken on a journey that's quite profound," the pianist says. "It's also an album that, if you just want to put it on and have it be part of everyday life, I think it functions very well that way because there's nothing jarring in the album. There are moments of dissonance, but they're transitory."

The music on the CD, he adds, can serve "as accompaniment to a fine meal or contemplation or making love or whatever."

In 1963, while studying at Johns Hopkins [University](#) School of Medicine, Zeitlin's saxophonist friend, Columbia recording artist Paul Winter, recommend the pianist to the company. Zeitlin was initially apprehensive about recording, however.

"I had this idea that producers tell you what you have to play," he explains. "I didn't want anybody messing with my music. I wanted to keep it pure."

### **Fortunate meeting**

Zeitlin's attitude changed when he met [John Hammond](#), a Columbia producer famous for having made [Bessie Smith](#)'s last recording, as well as firsts for [Billie Holiday](#), [Bob Dylan](#) and many others. "You can record whatever you want and use whomever you want," Zeitlin recalls Hammond telling him. Between 1963 and 1967, the pianist cut four albums for Columbia, as well as one backing flutist [Jeremy Steig](#).

"I didn't realize at the time how incredibly fortunate I was to bump into John Hammond," Zeitlin says. "He opened so many doors for me, and they (Columbia Records) had connections to "The Tonight Show" - I was on it three times - and access to festivals."

Zeitlin has somehow managed to juggle his time between medicine and music for nearly a half century. He feels that both disciplines involve "profound depth of communication."

"I have been able all these years to pursue both these directions and never have to be in the position of saying 'either or,' " he says. "I never would have been happy doing one to the exclusion of the other."

**Denny Zeitlin:** 8 p.m. Saturday. \$20. Piedmont Piano Co., 1728 San Pablo Ave., Oakland. (510) 547-8188. [www.piedmontpiano.com](http://www.piedmontpiano.com).

*Lee Hildebrand is a freelance writer. E-mail: [datebookletter@sfchronicle.com](mailto:datebookletter@sfchronicle.com)*