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JAZZ DOCTOR'S MUSICAL MEDICINE



Denny Zeitlin: “I can taste and smell the music. All the notes have colors. When I begin to have that, I know we’re getting somewhere.”

The doctor is in: Denny Zeitlin, jazz pianist by night, is also Dr. Dennis J. Zeitlin, psychiatrist, by day.

Along with his private practice in Kentfield, Zeitlin, 66, is an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the UCSF School of Medicine. And he just finished "Slickrock," one of more than 30 CDs he's released. It features the stellar, empathetic rhythm section of bassist Buster Williams and drummer Matt Wilson, with whom Zeitlin will play Monday at Yoshi's in Oakland.

Zeitlin's medical career has mirrored his musical life. He was drawn to both at an early age, attracted to psychiatry by conversations with his uncle, also a psychiatrist.

"I was fascinated by him," Zeitlin recalls. "By the time I was in third grade, I was practicing psychotherapy without a license on the playground. Kids would come up and talk to me about their problems. I had a conviction that I was going to be involved with psychiatry and with the piano."

Tall and gracefully slender, with trim gray-white hair and beard, Zeitlin is entertaining a visitor in the small, comfortable sitting room of the Kentfield home he shares with Josephine, his wife of 35 years. An adjacent room contains Zeitlin's studio, complete with grand piano, electronic keyboards and digital recording equipment.

Raised in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park, Zeitlin was leading a high school jazz trio and hanging around Chicago jazz clubs at 15, gaining knowledge and encouragement from local greats like pianist Billy Taylor.

"I was tall, so in a dark room, with a fake ID, I could pass," he recalls with a laugh. "I started just hanging out."

At 25, while in New York for a psychiatry fellowship at Columbia University, Zeitlin recorded his first album, "Cathexis," in 1963. Three additional albums quickly followed, and by 1967, Zeitlin was established as a multifaceted pianist, able to combine the melodic nuances and swing of mainstream jazz with impressionistic and atonal components of the burgeoning new wave. Zeitlin was not yet 30. In the meantime, he had moved to San Francisco in 1964 to serve his internship and then his residency at UCSF.

In the '70s, a foray into electronic music led to Zeitlin's electronic-acoustic score for the 1978 remake of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." After that, Zeitlin returned to his acoustic roots, where he has mostly remained.

Released on the MaxJazz label, "Slickrock" shows Zeitlin to be in unrelentingly powerful form, his approach as varied as ever, alternately thundering, funky and sensitive, and full of delightfully surprising twists and turns.

His trio includes Williams, a veteran bassist who's performed with an exhaustive list of the greats of jazz, including Miles Davis, Art Blakey and Wynton Marsalis; and Wilson, voted the No. 1 rising drummer by the Down Beat critics' poll in 2003 and 2004.

"I have absolute trust in them musically," Zeitlin says. "Matt can go in all the directions I like to go. His playing is so exuberant, yet so solid. And Buster has incredible radar ears. We constantly delight each other. We'll look at each other -- how did we both hit that note at the same time? His sound, the power and drive of his pulse, is quite unique. The chemistry among us makes it easy to get into a state where I just forget where I am. It's delicious. When I'm playing my best, I begin to have synesthetic experiences where I can taste and smell the music. All the notes have colors. When I begin to have that, I know we're getting somewhere."

Among the major influences in his life, Zeitlin includes composer-arranger George Russell, who mentored Zeitlin in improvisation and helped solidify Zeitlin's belief in his own musical instincts. Famed pianist Bill Evans is in his pantheon, too. Emboldened by positive comments Evans had made about his playing, Zeitlin sent Evans a copy of his first LP. Evans became an ardent supporter, recording Zeitlin's composition "Quiet Now" several times, and performing it regularly.

"He told me, 'This is your music,' " Zeitlin recalls, " 'Don't let anybody tell you how to play.' That was absolutely crucial to my development."

And then there was George Shearing.

"Here was this guy who obviously had all these classical chops, and he was playing this music that had this rhythm and drive and pulse, and he's clearly making up music as he goes."

Zeitlin leans forward eagerly, face aglow, sharing this memory with such detail and warmth that he could easily be describing an occurrence only days gone by. But he's recalling a moment more than half a century ago, when, as a young classical piano student, he had his first close encounter with jazz, courtesy of his middle-school music teacher and a 10-inch LP titled "You're Hearing George Shearing."

"It was like I'd been waiting all my life for this drama to impact me," Zeitlin says. "I felt like I'd been shot out of a cannon."

While Zeitlin's musical career may be higher profile than his psychiatric work, he makes it clear, emphatically, that psychiatry is no less important in his life.

"Sometimes people imagine that I'm a psychiatrist because I can make a good living, which allows me to do what I really like, which is music," he says. "That misses the whole point, which is that I have equal passion for both."

The connections between the two pursuits are clear to him.

"In each setting, communication is utterly paramount," he says. "There has to be a depth of empathy that allows you to really inhabit the other person's world. It comes out as a collaborative journey in both settings."

Jerry Karp
