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JAZZ REVIEW

Wide-Ranging Denny Zeitlin at Vine St.

Maybe it's a good thing that Denny Zeitlin is only a part-time jazz musician. The San Francisco pianist, who opened a three-night stint at the Vine St. Bar & Grill Thursday night also has a career as a full-time practicing psychiatrist.

Freed of the commercial considerations that sometimes diminish the careers of jazz musicians, Zeitlin plays with a startling intensity, focused at all times on the most probing, interior examination of his music. His work Thursday night with bassist Tom Warrington and drummer Peter Donald was strikingly reminiscent of the vanguard music of the Bill Evans quartets of the '60s.

Like Evans, Zeitlin's harmonies were filled with rich clusters and free-floating tonalities. Pieces as old and familiar as "My Funny Valentine," "All the Things You Are" and "Put Your Little Foot Out" were rejuvenated, their familiar shapes altered with colorful new aspects of harmonic light and shade.

But Zeitlin's interests have always been more iconoclastic than Evans', and his playing continued to expand on many of the more radical elements of '60s jazz as well. A solo interpretation of Zeitlin's original "Cascades," for example, was a cornucopia of ingredients that managed to blend Gershwinesque chording with dense, block clusters straight out of Cecil Taylor, and combine stride-style rhythms with floating be-bop lines.

Zeitlin's range, in fact, was so broad that his playing is difficult to describe without making it appear to be a grab bag of styles. More accurately, he is an improvisational artist whose skills are so expansive that he can integrate virtually everything he hears into the fabric of his soloing. In the best sense, in the manner that has always been true of jazz's finest improvisers, Zeitlin constantly stretches the creative envelope, measuring himself only against the infinite demands of his music.

—DON HECKMAN