

Denny Zeitlin, MD: Practice Makes Perfect

Between his psychiatry practice and lecture presentation the busy pianist still has time to release a new solo disc on MAXJAZZ.

By Ken Dryden

Prompted by a late Wednesday evening phone call, after a long day treating psychiatric patients and teaching trainees, Dr. Denny Zeitlin worked feverishly to meet a difficult deadline to complete his ambitious piano/synthesizer suite “Solo Voyage.” His close friend of 50 years, Bill Young, lay dying of cancer in Chicago. Laboring throughout the night in his home studio, Zeitlin sought to create “music to aid reflection; to quietly inspire him, to perhaps offer something transcendent. Most of all, I wanted to ease his final journey, a solo voyage in the company of loving family and friends.” By Thursday, the twenty-nine minute suite was completed and expedited to Young’s home, arriving Friday morning. It was 18 months later that Zeitlin decided to include this suite along with a group of acoustic piano pieces in a MaxJazz CD *Solo Voyage* released in June of this year.

Zeitlin’s *Solo Voyage* became his first major project since his 1978 soundtrack for *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to incorporate synthesizers. He worked on the suite over a two-week period, with the basic piano tracks completed prior to his learning of Young’s deteriorating condition. “I thought I had more time, so I was working on it piecemeal, woven into the fabric of the rest of my life. It was that evening’s call that threw me into a flurry; fortunately the suite called for restrained use of synthesizer to preserve the intimacy of the acoustic piano. I didn’t have to complete a symphonic orchestration. I stayed up all night and finished it. I think that sometimes people’s best work occurs under a certain degree of pressure. The time constraints, the urgency, and my love for Bill, all brought about a spurt of very creative work, and left me with the feeling that I had created an intensely personal message. I FedExed it to arrive by Friday morning; the CD-R arrived in time for Bill to hear it and be very touched by it.” The pianist, who teaches at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center, had already planned to fly into Chicago that very day, though Young slipped into his final coma prior to Zeitlin’s arrival. “My final goodbye to him was musical.”

Zeitlin gave no thought to releasing this very personal project until he was working on a solo piano CD for Maxjazz in 2004. After completing several tracks, he realized that the “Solo Voyage” suite would fit in rather well with the acoustic selections. He initially hesitated, since he thought of it as a personal goodbye to Young, then realized that his friend would have been delighted to have the piece commercially available. The question then arose about discussing the origin of the work. Would some buyers be turned off that it was written for a man who was dying? Fortunately, many friends encouraged him to share the background of its creation.

Zeitlin’s choice of material for the solo piano portion of the disc was more varied: “I’ve always loved Monk and Wayne Shorter; they have been really important to me. I like very much taking pieces and reworking them, to find a personal way to approach them. Basically ‘Bemsha Swing’ is a one-phrase piece, but it’s full of possibilities, and felt wide open. The soloing on it is very free; I stick with the bars of the form, but I’m not

in any way being slavish to the changes either of the original piece or the way I re-harmonized it for the statement of the head. I think 'Miyako' is one of the most gorgeous tunes that Wayne has ever written. I've always wanted to record it and was glad to get this chance."

"Cascade" is an original that has been a part of Zeitlin's repertoire for some time, but this is its first recording. There are many surprising twists within this brisk post-bop piece. The extended solo piano version of Zeitlin's ballad "Quiet Now" is even more melancholy than earlier recordings, though the composer states, "It always had, for me, aspects of a kind of requiem. I did like the idea of having some really extended space to work with 'Quiet Now.' I hadn't taken it off the shelf for over a decade, until just a few years ago, when I started playing it with Buster Williams and Matt Wilson (his current trio). When I chose to record it as a solo piece for this project, I decided I was really going to stretch out on it and just see what developed. There is a classical feel for much of it, and then finally, a sense of pulse begins to generate for the first time in my solo when I get to the bridge and I start cycling it with a subtle 'two' feeling. I think it unfolded in a very organic way." He continues, "Free improvisation as a solo piano activity is the very first thing musically that I ever did in my life, as a toddler, sitting at the piano and just beginning to pick out my own music. That's always been close to my heart over the years and when I thought about doing this solo piano project, I wanted to have at least one free improvisation piece that wasn't related to anything else, not even to being an interlude between other pieces. I just let ProTools roll, until I heard one that I really liked. I had no idea what to call it for a couple of weeks, then I realized that calling it 'Walking, Prancing, Marching, Dancing,' would loosely describe four feelings that the piece moves through."

The psychological issues involved in creating and performing music is a subject that has intrigued Zeitlin for many years. His lecture-demonstration *Unlocking the Creative Impulse: The Psychology of Improvisation* enables him to wear both hats at once (as psychiatrist and jazz pianist/composer), and is offered to music schools, jazz festival and clinics; psychiatry and psychology departments; scientific symposia on creativity; and lay audiences. He describes the challenge and journey involved when someone is attempting to pursue his or her creative impulse: "Where does it take them psychologically and what are the obstacles and challenges along the way?"

His main thesis in this talk, which is also a demonstration at the piano with musical illustrations, states "that at the moment of creation, the highest level occurs if the practitioner is able to fuse and integrate two very different disciplines simultaneously. The more obvious is the western-oriented discipline: knowing your craft (regardless of your field) and having done your homework, practiced and technically being able to call on whatever resources you need. But equally important is the more eastern or ecstatic tradition, which has existed through the whole history of man, pan-culturally, that has had as the common denominator the pursuit of the loss of the positional sense of the self, or being outside of one's self—to be able to become pure activity, and lose self-consciousness."

"When a creative person is able to bring together both traditions at the same time and ignite it with a creative spark, in my view, that's when the highest forms of creativity occur. I try to describe ways in which people attempt to nurture and foster the kinds of psychological states that will usher in that kind of creative experience. I talk about

psychological issues; problems, blocks and beliefs which get in people's way of allowing themselves access to that territory. It's an event that I've enjoyed doing and plan to continue to do, often incorporating the talk during stops on a jazz tour."

Denny Zeitlin's dual career as a psychiatrist and jazz musician dates from his early childhood interests—the result of his parents' involvement in the two fields. Born in Chicago in 1938, his earliest musical memories, from the age of two, were of "sitting in the lap of whichever parent was playing and putting my little hands on their hands and going along for the ride, kinesthetically as they played." Shortly thereafter, he began picking out melodies and improvising. They waited a few years until he asked for formal classical training, which continued through his grade school years. Zeitlin's discovery of jazz in eighth grade so galvanized him that he set aside his classical piano lessons, although he remained fascinated with 20th century classical music. By the second grade, Zeitlin was already informally practicing a form of psychiatry as he listened to his classmates' problems and helped them to find answers. It wasn't long before he realized that he wanted to combine careers in medicine and music.

Billy Taylor was one of his earliest mentors. "When I was fifteen, I had been going to Chicago to hear Billy Taylor's trio. My parents invited them to our home for dinner. My fledgling trio played for them and they played for us. It was a great experience for me, because I admired Billy tremendously. He took a special interest in my playing, encouraged me throughout my career and at various points in his own career. When he was a disc jockey, he would play my recordings. When he was on CBS Sunday Morning, he did a piece on me. He was one of the first people to tell me, 'Hey...you want to be a doctor, you want to be a musician, you want to do both? There's no reason why you can't.' It was a tremendous encouragement to me at that point in my teenaged life."

At the University of Illinois, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1960 as a philosophy major, taking courses which "enriched my thinking about life, existence, relationships, the nature of truth and how can you ever know anything, all of which has had a lasting impact." He also completed pre-med coursework and found time to study music theory and composition too. Prior to entering medical school, he traveled to Europe with a friend, getting a chance to sit in with bassist Oscar Pettiford, and to visit and play for Bud Powell. Encouraged by their feedback, he continued on his dual career path, returning to enroll at Johns Hopkins Medical School, where he earned his M.D. in 1964. During those years, he played frequently with Gary Bartz and Billy Hart at a local jazz club.

While on a psychiatric fellowship in New York City during his third year of medical school, Zeitlin studied with composer and theoretician George Russell, who further encouraged his dual career. Bill Evans also reassured the young musician. "When I finished my first trio album, *Cathexis*, I recalled that Bill Evans had been played *Flute Fever* [by the Jeremy Steig Quartet where Zeitlin made his recording debut] during a blindfold test and said something very complimentary about me. So I called Bill and asked if he could critique it and make any suggestions. He said, 'By all means, bring it over.' His response: 'Man, I just love this music. Just do your thing. Don't let anybody ever tell you what to play. Just play your music and let it unfold.' I was very touched by this, and throughout his career he was always very encouraging to me. I was particularly flattered that he took such a liking to 'Quiet Now.' He recorded it numerous times and kept it in his nightly repertoire for fifteen years."

Saxophonist Paul Winter also grew up in Chicago and had heard the pianist perform. “Paul felt that I had an innovative approach, that I had a unique musical voice. He heard a lot of both excitement and lyricism in my playing, and the balance of that was something that called to him. He felt that I was breaking new ground and that it deserved to be heard. He told me that his producer, John Hammond, was an extremely open guy. He was so exuberant about music; he had this long history of discovering major talent and the risks were minimal.” Auditioning for Hammond wasn’t likely to be stressful, since Zeitlin already had his sights set on a medical career. At the audition, Zeitlin played just two pieces for Hammond and he said, “I’d love for you to come and record for Columbia. You can play with whomever you want and record whatever you want.” The young pianist had no idea how unusual this offer was. Zeitlin believes that Hammond’s clout as an A&R man made it possible for him to have free reign as a recording artist. Hammond suggested that he get his feet wet by recording with flautist Jeremy Steig. “We hit it off well and I loved that project.”

Zeitlin has recorded over one hundred compositions, and is always developing new ones as he works in his home studio. “Even if I’m working on another tune or practicing certain ideas, I never know when the germ of a new piece will appear. I keep the microphones live using Pro Tools®; if an idea appears, I’ll go back to it and develop it on a different track. It’s often a process of aggregation of ideas in that way. I have fragments of compositions that have been orbiting for years that, hopefully, will someday find a home. Certain fragments or ideas start nagging at me; they want to be completed. I’ll make sure that the computer is on and start playing and gradually a piece begins to take shape. I’ll leave it alone for a week or two and realize that the middle section doesn’t quite work and I’ll go back and work on it some more.”

“On occasion, I have a sort of Mozartian experience when something appears de novo, virtually completed and I have to run and write it down or to play it down, so I don’t forget it. For most of us mortals, though, composition is more a function of spending enough time at the activity to harvest some ideas.” He also uses manuscript paper while traveling, sings into a portable recorder, or calls home to sing an idea onto his answering machine. Occasionally a new idea appears in the midst of a psychiatry session: “Sometimes when I am working with patients, music will start to appear in my head and it might be something new. But I have an obligation at that moment to be in the deepest connection with my patient. So I have learned to gently push that music aside and trust that during a break, it will bubble up again and I will be able to make some use or notation of it.”

Beyond the occasional cognitive conflict, Zeitlin also describes how his two careers draw on different sides of his personality: “I am a major protagonist as a performing musician and put out a lot of energy. In my other pursuit, I’m in a more receptive position, though certainly interactive, but the major protagonist in psychiatry is my patient. Using a musical analogy, I am more of an accompanist to a singer. I am trying to comp in a way to help them to sing their song, in the most deep, meaningful and soulful way. Sometimes I’m a soloist, though soloing is obviously minimal in psychotherapy.”

“Communication is paramount in both fields. It’s crucial for me to establish the deepest kind of empathic connection to my patient and to my fellow musicians and even if I’m up there by myself as a soloist, to establish a deep connection to music itself, and hopefully, the audience. It requires entering a merger state, where you do give up, temporarily and voluntarily, that positional sense of oneself and enter an ecstatic state where you are at one with that activity. In my office when I’m functioning as a psychotherapist at the highest level, I feel like I’m entering the other person’s world, feeling what he or she is talking about, totally sensing and resonating with it. If I’m playing my best with Buster and Matt, I often feel as though I’m immersed in music and not aware of who’s playing what. I’m not even that conscious of putting my hands on the keyboard; it’s just like music is emerging all around me. When that happens, it’s very delicious. And even using that word reminds me that at that level, I’m having synesthetic experiences where there’s actually some degree of crossing of sensory pathways, so that I actually find that the taste of music can be delicious and that music actually has colors, and every key of music has a different color.”

Sidebar:

Selected Discography:

Cathexis/Carnival (Sony CD 28818)

Expansion (1750 Arch LP 1758, out of print)

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Perserverance CD 3)

Time Remembers One Time Once, with Charlie Haden (ECM CD 1239)

Live at Maybeck (Concord CD 4572, out of print)

Live at the Jazz Bakery, with David Friesen (Intuition CD 3257)

As Long As There’s Music (Venus [Japan] CD 35039)

Slickrock (Maxjazz CD 209)

Solo Voyage (Maxjazz CD 213)

Denny Zeitlin’s official web site is www.dennyzeitlin.com.

Pull Quote: I am a major protagonist as a performing musician. In my other pursuit, I’m in a more receptive position, though certainly interactive, but the major protagonist in psychiatry is my patient.