

JazzWax

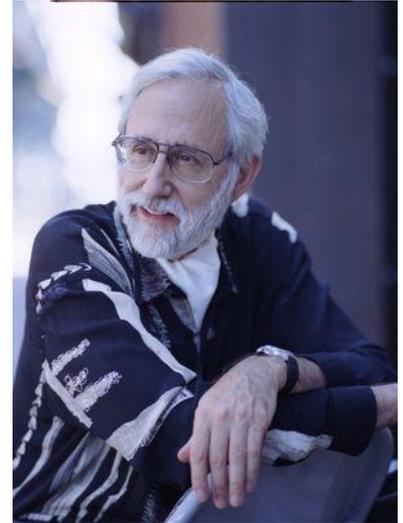
<http://www.jazzwax.com/2009/08/interview-denny-zeitlin-part-1.html>

August 03, 2009

Interview: Denny Zeitlin (Part 1)

Denny Zeitlin knows more about the jazz mind than anyone I know. Not only is Denny a brilliant jazz pianist, he's also a practicing psychiatrist.

But Denny's medical profession hardly makes him a jazz dabbler. Among his compositions is the jazz standard *Quiet Now*, and his recordings for Columbia in the early 1960s dazzled Bill Evans. His most recent album, *Denny Zeitlin Trio in Concert* (Sunnyside), demonstrates an even more perspicacious and self-reflective phase of his playing career. While Denny was recording and performing in the early 1960s, he was in medical school. Taking on both simultaneously might seem like a recipe for brain fry, but as Denny noted in our conversation, the disciplines actually fed off each other.



For years I've wanted to know what thought process a jazz musician goes through when creating music. Is the ability to create at a high level innate? Or can improvisation be taught, like technique? Is there a zone in which great jazz artists find themselves when creating? And why do some musicians take to improvisation easily while others perform stiffly and seem terrified to let go?

In Part 1 of my four-part interview with Denny, 71, the legendary pianist talks about the thought process that takes place when he plays, the creative search for his inner child, and the psychological and technical ingredients that go into improvisation:

JazzWax: Why do American audiences in general today have a hard time listening to jazz?



Denny Zeitlin: Ever since the advent of rock and roll, our culture has been veering more and more toward instant gratification. There's no longer the sense that the listener has an implied responsibility to reach out and meet the music half way or put some energy into the experience.

JW: What do you mean by energy?



[PHOTO BY ANSEL ADAMS]

DZ: By energy I mean making an effort to let go and become immersed in the music—to go with it and not control the experience in some way. When listeners are willing to suspend control, they have a chance to really experience something new. They may not always end up with something they like—but at least they'll have a chance to merge with the experience. Letting go is the first step. Engaging the capacity for intellectual curiosity and appreciation of form and levels of complexity also are important.

JW: You seem to let go pretty quickly when you perform and record.

DZ: [*Laughs*] I don't have much in the way of conscious thought when I'm playing—unless I'm grappling with intrusive thoughts, like, "Gee, what did I do with my airplane tickets? Did I leave them on the bed?" Then I try to gently usher those thoughts out of the way and just be in the music again.

JW: That seems like a pretty fast process for you.

DZ: For the most part I jump right in, and I'm gone. I always hope to be in a state where I'm not consciously involved in producing music, that I'm just experiencing the music emerging and listening to it, like the audience.



JW: To reach that state of "gone," do sounds take precedence over a formal melody?

DZ: Well, it depends. When we perform or record, my trio generally has at least a loose road map of how we will proceed through a tune—even if the road map at times says “free improvisation.” We have a general set of instructions outlining the basic chord changes and sections. But that doesn’t mean we’re slaves to them. I’m constantly pulling and stretching at the rules just because I seem to love to do that [*laughs*]. I often do a lot of re-harmonization on the go, beyond what we have down on paper.

JW: Do you look forward to resolution—returning to a song’s melody?

DZ: I’m inspired by both the sound of the moment and a sense of the potential trajectory and eventual resolution of a piece. The resolution might not involve a specific return to the song's melody.

JW: So you're emotionally open as you're playing.

DZ: Yes, I feel very receptive as improvisation develops to anything—texturally,



[PHOTO BY CHARLES PRATT]

sonically, melodically, harmonically or rhythmically. I’m searching for anything that might have meaning. It will call to me. I will instantly feel like I want to pursue something I just heard, to see where it’s going, where it’s taking us. I’m hoping I’ll surprise myself [*laughs*]. Or the musicians will surprise me.

Sometimes it will happen from what is apparently an error. It wasn't something I was planning on hearing—but all of a sudden it's there. Then hopefully, rather than castigate myself for the error, I'll accept it as an invitation. **JW:** For someone who thinks as much as you do, how do you suspend thought to create freely?

DZ: By shifting my thought process.

JW: Has this willful shuttling of intrusive thoughts always been a conscious strategy?



[PHOTO BY LOUIS FAURER]

DZ: I started out as an improviser at around age 2 or 3. I didn't have any written pages to bother me until I was about age 6, when I first asked to study classical music. So all that time, that four-year period where my parents wisely protected me from organized study, I just had a Steinway piano in the living room to do whatever I wanted to. I didn't have to think about structure or anything. I just could do my best to delight myself. I think that this initial experience with the piano was very pivotal for me.

JW: How so?

DZ: When I play, I'm always searching for the joyful experience I first had as a child playing music. In that kind of ecstatic space, I lose the positional state of myself. I'm not observing consciously what I'm doing. It's pure intention, pure music.

JW: So by trying to recapture the feeling of childhood, you're able to transport yourself out of concrete thought while playing.

DZ: Yes. I value that earlier experience. I have a hunger for it. Other players discover different doorways to the ecstatic state.

JW: By ecstatic state, do you mean suspension of all thought?



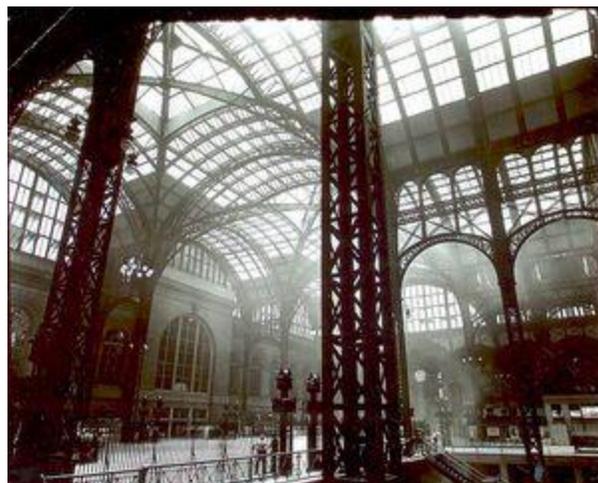
[PHOTO BY HENRY WESSEL]

DZ: No. I'm not suggesting that all one's cognitive, philosophical and structural values about music are suspended in this state. It's that somehow you find a way to trust that all your woodshedding and values will be brought to bear on your improvisation without conscious manipulation. And in this altered state of consciousness, you will be able to create something that hopefully is new and meaningful.

JW: So can creativity at a high level be taught?

DZ: There certainly are varying levels of inborn talent. But I think much of art can be taught. Art is ultimately about technique, aesthetics and an ecstatic tradition based on losing the positional sense of self.

JW: How does that work in real time?



[PHOTO BY BERENICE ABBOTT]

DZ: To create art as a jazz musician, you must bring together all of the structure you've learned: your having practiced thousands of hours learning technique

and craft. It's all of those formal things plus your philosophy about aesthetics—your sense of form and what you personally think sounds beautiful.

JW: Fascinating.

DZ: All of that comes from the typically “Western”-type traditions we've grown up with. But true art also has components associated with so-called “Eastern” traditions.

JW: What are these traditions?



[PHOTO OF LOUIS ARMSTRONG BY LISETTE MOD]

DZ: These are the ecstatic traditions that focus on merging with one's experience—truly being in the moment. All artists, from jazz musicians to performance artists to writers, need to integrate the Western and Eastern traditions, even if they don't think about this merger or have ever conceptualized it that way. I think the highest forms of creative work come when there is an integration of those Western and Eastern aspects.



[BLACK REFLECTIONS BY FRANZ KLINE]

JW: So if one is solely about Western technique, you can learn the Eastern ecstatic tradition and lose a positional sense of self?

DZ: Yes, it's entirely possible. I've known musicians whose work was perfect in every technical detail, but it sounded sterile. There was a lot of light but no heat. I also have seen people who have had difficulties mobilizing their intellectual capabilities in the moment, and their structure, development and complexity suffers. In my private practice as a psychiatrist, I have a large percentage of people in the creative arts. I have seen patients overcome their impediments and enter that more ecstatic state. I've also seen them inhabit it more when pursuing their art, infusing their art with greater emotional power and richness.

JW: Are the impediments often psychological?

DZ: Yes, they're more psychological than conceptual. People who have a lot of trouble with the issue of losing control have trouble entering an ecstatic state.

JW: Why?

DZ: They feel that if they suspend control, they'll make a mistake, or they'll never get back the control. Those are the main reasons why so many classical performers have difficulty with improvisation. They feel they've got to have structure sitting on the music stand in front of them with a printed page and the notes.

JW: But that's how they work—those are the rules of their creative process.

DZ: Of course. They're used to bringing their creativity into the re-interpretation of those actual notes, which is a totally legitimate and admirable form of creativity. But they've never had the challenge of having no notes there and

having to just come up with something. Entering such a space with zero control is often very threatening.

JW: But there are artists who function solely in the ecstatic state, without the Western element.



[PHOTO BY ROBERT FRANK]

DZ: Yes, they too may have psychological inhibitions—about practicing, allowing themselves to have original thoughts, and bringing their appreciation of aesthetics and form to bear without being overwhelmed by the intensity of the ecstatic state.

JW: Speaking of control, you performed and recorded jazz while attending medical school in the early 1960s. How did you keep from burning out?

DZ: I always found the involvement in both to be invigorating and cross-pollinating. There certainly were times when I've experienced the stress of preparing for a big exam and keeping up with the piano. It can still be tough to keep the balls juggling in the air.

JW: How did you manage that back then?

DZ: The strength of my commitment to both fields has carried me. It didn't hurt that I was able to get on with a little bit less sleep than most people.