

JazzWax

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Interview: Denny Zeitlin (Part 2)

Denny Zeitlin's early trio albums for Columbia Records keep getting better with age. The recordings between 1963 and 1966 are sensitive, pulsating and lyrical. They also beg comparison to Bill Evans' recordings of the same period. Both pianists could slip into an ecstatic state at the drop of a hat while performing, and both made strong use of dramatic intros, pedal tones and swinging treble-clef lines.



But where Evans' early 1960s recordings bear years of experience, maturity and premeditated structure, Denny's work is more inspirational and free-flowing. Bill, of course, had a lighter, more gentle touch in the early 1960s. But Denny sounds a bit less emotionally repressed and more willing to have fun and take risks. Think Fred Astaire v. Gene Kelly.



But that's where comparisons end. Denny never was an Evans clone and always viewed himself as an individualist with a singular sound and approach. When you speak with Denny today, what you notice immediately is his basso voice and surprising lack of pretension.

Before our conversation, I had assumed that someone who could play piano with that level of intensity and run a successful psychiatric practice would surely over-think everything and reveal a superiority complex.

I was wrong on both counts. Denny was charming and unassuming, instantly warming to a stranger and rewarding curiosity with candid responses—pausing from time to time to ask questions of his questioner.



In Part 2 of my interview with Denny, the legendary pianist talks about the skepticism he faced from medical school professors and jazz musicians in the early 1960s, his initial recording with flutist Jeremy Steig, his subsequent trio recordings for Columbia Records, and his encounters with Bill Evans:

JazzWax: You're a medical doctor and a jazz musician. Has this duality been a burden as well as a blessing?

Denny Zeitlin: When I was in med school in the early 1960s and first started to record, there were a few professors at Johns Hopkins who raised an eyebrow. "What is this fellow's commitment to medicine if he's out there recording for Columbia Records?" they asked. It took them getting to know me and learning how committed I was to being the best doctor and psychiatrist I could be before they modified that opinion.



JW: Did you face similar skepticism on the jazz side?

DZ: Sure. There was a tendency initially on the part of some musicians to think that I was dabbling at music, that I was really a doctor who fooled around on the piano. They doubted my seriousness and commitment. Others thought I hadn't paid my dues. There were even a few critics in the beginning who assumed I was a dilettante of some sort. But once musicians and critics got to know me and my music, those concerns evaporated.



JW: You must have had to work twice as hard to overcome both impressions.

DZ: I don't think I had much internal pressure to prove to people that I was serious. Maybe there was some of that. I felt deeply involved in both fields since I was a child, and all I wanted was the opportunity to pursue them. When I was growing up I had a head start in music, but was soon talking to my psychiatrist uncle about his work and was fascinated by what psychiatry sounded like. By third grade I was practicing psychotherapy on the playground.

JW: How so?

DZ: Kids would come up to me and talk to me about things going on in their family. I was fascinated and wanted to listen and be helpful. It felt wonderful to be able to say something to somebody to help them feel better.

I was fortunate that my parents never said, “Well Denny, it’s time for you to decide what you’re going to pursue because you know you can’t do both of these things.” Nobody ever said that to me in my family.

JW: What is it about you that makes people want to tell you things?

DZ: I think I have a natural capacity for empathy and I’m tremendously curious about people and I really feel wonderful if I can be helpful.

JW: Why did Columbia producer John Hammond team you with flutist Jeremy Steig for your first album in 1963?

DZ: I think John [pictured] just wanted me to get my feet wet in the studio, and that Jeremy and I would be a good mix.



JW: Did Hammond’s jaw drop when he heard you play?

DZ: He loved the album. And I loved that session. It was essentially a blowing date. I think Jeremy and I got together for an hour or so the day before we recorded just to talk about the tunes we’d play and go over some ideas about them. Then we got together with [bassist] Ben Tucker and [drummer] Ben Riley for the first time in the studio and started recording.

JW: Steig is like a factory whistle on there, and you sound like you’re egging him on.



DZ: I guess I was just trying to support whatever he was trying to do, and he was very frank about his raw emotional approach to playing. He said to me, “Sometimes I just like to have a tantrum out there.” I said, “Cool. We’ll do that” [laughs].

JW: When did you write *Quiet Now*, which Bill Evans has recorded many times?

DZ: In college, I believe. I can’t recall a specific triggering event. When I wrote it, the piece seemed to be expressing yearning and loss—a kind of requiem. But there are many nuances of feeling that musicians have found in the composition. Suzi Stern, for example, makes it a tender love song with her great lyrics. The first public performance was for a dramatic show my fraternity was in—Zeta Beta Tau at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

JW: How well did you know Bill Evans?

DZ: I really didn't know Bill well. I met him right after I had recorded *Cathexis* in 1964. I called him up out of the blue because I admired his music and thought he might give me a helpful critique. I had read his comments about *Flute Fever* in a *Down Beat* blindfold test. Since he liked my playing, I figured, what the hell, I'll give the guy a call.

JW: How did Evans react?

DZ: He was absolutely welcoming. I went over to his apartment in New York with the acetate of the album. We listened to it, and he said, "Denny, the only thing I want to say to you is just keep doing your thing, man. You've got your own thing. Don't let anyone tell you what to play."

JW: Did you chat with Evans over the years?

DZ: After graduating from medical school, I moved to San Francisco for my internship and psychiatric residency, and the city became my permanent home. On occasion Bill [pictured] would come to town to play the clubs and we'd talk for only a few minutes.



I really didn't have an ongoing, in-depth relationship with him other than we both really loved each other's music. He was always a tremendous supporter. I remember there was a club in San Francisco called Keystone Korner. In the early or mid-1970s, manager Todd Barkan booked the Bill Evans Trio. Interested in hearing them, I was sitting in the audience one night. But somehow Bill [pictured] and his group were delayed. So Todd came over and asked me to play until Bill arrived.

JW: What did you do?

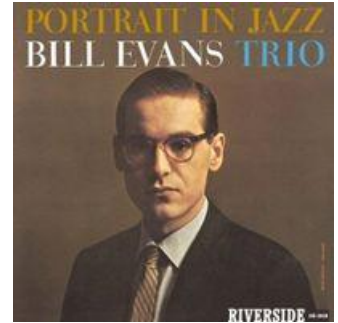
DZ: I went up and played essentially three-quarters of a set of solo music. Meanwhile Bill Evans' group quietly had come into the club, and they were just listening. After I was finished, Bill thanked me so warmly and was just so loving of what I had been doing on the piano.

JW: Do you think Evans was influenced by you?

DZ: Gee, I don't know. It's interesting, as much as I had loved Bill's work in the Riverside era—I really didn't continue to listen in detail to his work in the later period.

JW: Why not?

DZ: I don't know. Not that I didn't admire it or respect it. I just didn't find myself listening to it very much. So I'm sure there are a whole series of albums of Bill's that I've never heard.



JW: I would think Bill might have been intimidated by your playing.

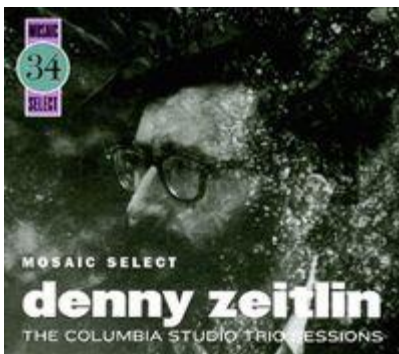
DZ: How so?

JW: You seem extremely comfortable in your own skin and let yourself go completely.

DZ: Gee, I don't know.

Tomorrow, Denny talks about one of the most stressful and taxing periods of his career—scoring the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in 1978. He also reflects further on the jazz mind.

JazzWax tracks: Denny recorded five albums for ColumbiaRecords. His first, in 1963, was as a sideman on a date led by flutist Jeremy Steig. The album, *Flute Fever*, is notoriously difficult to find.



Next came trio leadership dates. Denny recorded *Cathexis* and *Carnival* in 1964. Both are tremendous examples of a major up-and-coming and independent talent. Tracks like *Nica's Dream*, *'Round Midnight* and the breezy waltz *I-Thou* demonstrate Denny's gift for building tension and drama while improvising.

Cathexis featured Cecil McBee on bass and Freddie Waits on drums. For *Carnival*, recorded in Los Angeles, Charlie Haden (bass) and Jerry Granelli (drums) joined Denny. In 1966 Denny recorded *Zeitgeist* with Haden and Granelli. All three albums are available on the three-CD *Mosaic Select: Denny Zeitlin* box [here](#). It's superb.

[Pictured: Cecil McBee, Denny and Freddie Waits in 1964]



Between *Carnival* and *Zeitgeist*, Denny recorded *Live at the Trident* in San Francisco in 1965. The session features a series of solid originals, including *Quiet Now*, and standards such as *My Shining Hour* and *What Is This Thing Called Love*. This album was issued on CD, but it's out of print and shockingly expensive used.

JazzWax clip: Here's Denny playing his composition *Quiet Now* at the 1983 Berlin Jazz Festival...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMf-Ztg0GYM&feature=fvsr>

